

The Metamorphosis Myth as an Aggregate of the Land Myth in Martin Camaj's Volume *Legjenda* [*The Legend*]

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Abstract *The relationship between the Albanian written works and the folkloric literature and oral tradition is a well-known phenomenon. The latter are essential elements of Martin Camaj's cultural formation. In his book Legjenda [The Legend] this relationship has a decisive impact on the emotional atmosphere of his poetry. His poems take on features of the romance and the characteristics of the oral ballad; "the mythological element based on popular mythology; hyperbolism, while, in the emotional sphere, pain, grief, loneliness, murder and death, metamorphism in dead-end situations are often dominant themes" (Prendi, 2011p155). Through analyzing the poems Qokthi [The Cuckoo], Vajtorja [The Lamenting Woman], Lugu i Gjarpnit [The Serpent's Glen] dhe Ledja, which are part of his volume Legjenda [The Legend] (Rome 1964), the researcher aims to research Martin Camaj's viewpoint on the metamorphosis phenomenon, which appears as a productive tool that has been widely used to express the affirmation of the human internal energy regardless of physical (outer) appearance, the intense love for one's family members—a sister's love for her brother in the present case—as well as the personal connection to one's land and national tradition. Through analysis and interpretation of the above themes in Martin Camaj's poetry, this study aims to assess the poet's influence in the advancement and absorption of the Albanian national tradition, to evaluate such influence as the poet's effort to further promote it and, finally, to contribute to the exploration of the poetic devices (the symbolism) and the figurative language (the metaphor) found in his poetry. In addition, the paper strives to identify the main aspects that cause research in Albanian literature to move forward and be included in the general contexts of theoretical research, including the dynamic spheres of history of literature and literary theory, literary criticism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and above all research studies in the Albanian literature.*

Key words: *metamorphosis, pain, death, serpent, rock.*

1. Introduction

The relationship between the Albanian written works and the folkloric literature and oral tradition is a well-known phenomenon. The latter constitute some important elements in Martin Camaj's cultural background. In his book *Legjenda* [*The Legend*] this relationship becomes decisive in terms of the emotional atmosphere of his poetry. His poems take on features of the romance and the characteristics of the oral ballad; "the mythological element based on popular mythology; ... hyperbolism, while, in the emotional sphere, pain, grief, loneliness, murder and death, metamorphism in dead-end situations are often dominant themes" (Prendi, 2011 p 155). The metamorphosis is a ubiquitous poetical process in Camaj's poetry. His creations present it as an essential part of the Albanian national mythology and oral tradition. The etymology and meaning of the term 'metamorphosis' finds its source in the Greek and Latin languages—as a Greek verb, the term 'μεταμόρφωση' bears two meanings: 1. to take on a complete change of nature or form (synonyms: transfiguration, transmogrification); 2. to change structure (open) or appearance (synonyms: transformation, transmutation). Literary critic Frederick Ahl views metamorphoses as a connection between the two meanings of the Latin term 'elementa', involving 'physical elements' and 'alphabet letters'. He asserts that, while representing a change in material elements, the metamorphoses are a depiction of the transformation of a human into an animal or plant.

World literature, since its antiquity, recognizes works that are built upon precisely the phenomenon of metamorphosis, among which it is worth mentioning the prominent Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Other examples can be drawn from writers like Cicero, Quintiliani, Ovidi, while an appropriate example that modern literature has to offer would be Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

The Albanian literature, both in its prose and its poetry, recognizes this procedure as based on popular mythology and folk legends. Martin Camaj in his literary work makes frequent use of the metamorphosis myth by poetizing it in different ways, primarily as a transfiguration, a pure transformation, where human is transformed into bird and such metamorphosis is manifested in actions and supernatural powers. Such transformation is motivated, it has a cause, which may be pain or death. The metamorphosis in Camaj poetry occurs as a positive phenomenon. It changes a person

physically and spiritually, and it is a wish fulfilled that becomes possible by Mother Nature or the fairies. The metamorphosis usually occurs in people who are lacking something and are assisted by Mother Nature who transforms these handicaps or inabilities into supernatural gifts for physical survival in order to increase their value in front of the eyes of the public.

Camaj bases his works on popular legends, as in his poetry *Qokthi* [*The Cuckoo*] but in addition he has also created a type of legend based on popular characters and respected professions, as in his poetries *The Blind Beka*, *The Flute Player Under the Moon*, *The Lamenting Woman*, *The Serpent's Glen*, and *Ledja*. Generally speaking, the song, both in its form as a wedding song or a lament, takes a mythical function just as music, and, in most cases, the characters who embody the music in these poems do.

2. The transformation of the woman into a bird

The Cuckoo has its origins in an ancient legend that comes in several versions in different areas of Albania (depending also on the names of the characters involved). However, all these versions tell more or less the same the story. One of such version tells the story of a brother and sister in which the brother, in order to not forget his way home, took with him some ashes to mark the road, but once he decided to use corn instead. When he tried to get back home, he could not find his way because all the corn had been eaten by the birds. His sister went out to look for him, but failed to find him. Due to her extreme efforts in calling out and lamenting her brother while constantly looking for him, she was transformed into a cuckoo.

Camaj does not build his poetry in the same way as the legend does, but instead he presents it as a story told by the character himself. In this way, his poetry acquires new dramatic connotations. The human undergoes a process of metamorphosis due to extreme pain. The sister in search of her brother signifies her unification with Mother Nature just as Mother Nature joins in her pain:

*The wood felt sorry for me
The stone understood me
the valleys came to my help
and swiftly transmitted my voice
from field to field
as did the wind in the trees
but my brother did not answer* (Camaj, 1964 p 195).

The wood, the stone, the wind became her helpers and despite being the most insensitive elements of nature, they come alive from the girl's pain. The wood and the stone are elements of nature, used through the author's idiomatic phrases as a comparison of pain. The idiomatic expression "*me iu dhimb gurit dhe drunit*," which in English would sound "*causing the wood and stone feel pity on someone*", has found its place in Camaj's poetry in its full potential because it expresses the deep pain which will make such elements have feelings, thus personifying them.

In the beginning, the sister's chaos and panic is described, as well as her tears and prayers. She tries to find her missing brother, who is probably dead, in every possible way.

The sister's love for her brother is a well-known motif in the Albanian poetry having its origins in the Chronicles of the Heroes and the Albanian Ballads, as well as in the oral prose and erotic lyrics. Gjergj Eles Alia's song is a classic example, just as are the ballads of *Constantine and Doruntina*, or the dead brother's ballad. Camaj elaborates this motif in a more tragical way by expressing a sister's love through her sacrifice. Her transfiguration is in the beginning, the fulfillment of a prayer to Mother Nature, so that she could find her missing brother, and a plead for power, faith in nature and unification with the same is the fastest possible way to find her brother.

The bird, as a swift light-weighted animal and owner of the celestial spaces, is a symbol of the creature that can go everywhere and explores everything. G. Genette (*Figure 1*, 1966) while studying S. Amaint's poetry, notices that his poetry is entirely based on birds and fish. According to Genette, the human beings are "condemned" to live in the land areas, while the birds are able to traverse all three dimensions: water, earth and sky. Walking is viewed as a type of slavery, while being able to fly means freedom as well as ownership. In this sense, the metamorphosis of the human into a bird is a symbol of the freedom to achieve that which cannot be achieved otherwise, which is owning the horizons, so that the sister could be able to find her lost brother in the infinite nature. The physical transformation of the human takes place, and what remains unchanged is her voice and her human spirit.

The human voice is the sister's identity, it is the human cry to the limits of pain. Birds are not able to call for help or to express supplications. They can only chirp and their voice is the symbol of songs and of the spring. The cuckoo is the only bird which is well-known for its sad voice in its monotonous repetition of the same plaintive song and that is why the

legend depicts it as a bird originating from the transformation of a human being, while pain remains a human feature, the same as the voice that identified the character.

The cuckoo, as Camaj calls it, is the girl transformed into a bird. The motivation he provides, which comes in his poetry in the same way as it comes in a legend, starts to fade and exceed the first stage of the fulfillment of a wish only to be transformed by love and pain alone. After the transfiguration comes regret, disappointment and indecision. The human soul finds itself at a war with its own self, because of being trapped in the body of a bird. The verses which represent this dilemma have been constructed as a quite powerful antithesis. These verses come immediately after the girl feels of having lost the human perceptions, which should have been hers. As the time passes, the girl's longs for her human body, for her youth and the fact of being unmarried for the eternity, and regrets the impossibility to become a bride, a wife and a mother. After these suppressed desires, of which she is reminded by her own image conserved on the moon, the girl confesses her pain as a bird, which has a human soul sealed in it:

*It feels horrible to be a bird
a bird and a mountain bird
a sister of the night's shadows...*(Camaj, 1964 p 195).

The repetition of the word 'horrible', which in his Albanian language Camaj spells with a final 'ë' [schwa] is not random but instead shows the condition of this girl in the sound and echo of this word. The word extends its pronunciation through its final schwa sound, which is a stylema that emphasises simultaneously the prolonging of suffering and a fatal condition, because there is no going back from that situation.

Being human in this case, means to think of something that is in bad shape and slowly forget even about death, which is, just like life, an inevitable presence. But being a bird would mean to be in constant search of the human, of life, without believing in death. It means living with the hope of meeting your brother who may be alive somewhere. That is why it is better to be a bird.

In this poem, Canaj manages to exceed the legend, to poetize it as the pain of a sister for her brother, but further on he presents us with the drama of the metamorphosis and the transformation of life and death. He aims to poetize the human and the bird in a relationship between body and soul. The metamorphosis transforms a human into a bird but it preserves the human traits of love. The bird symbolizes the other life as a permanent search for hope, in order to forget the pain.

3. A metamorphosis of gifts

The metamorphosis is a transformation: "As a physical change of things that have a movable and unstable structure, the transmission of the characters' traits and the narrative figures in new forms has a wrapping, temporary function, which reveals the identity of the characters that find themselves in an eternal and permanent motion. As an act of change, this transformism truly exists in this reality by affecting the outer appearance as well as the inner nature of an object, animal, character during its physical existence. It relates to the phenomena of a metamorphosis realization and appearance a a completely new way of viewing things which derives from a change in their permanent features. The metamorphosis is the complete closure of such a process" (Lumi, 2006 p 67).

In this sense, the metamorphosis of Camaj's poem *The Cuckoo* is the physical transformation, while his poem *The Lamenting Woman* does not appear to be dealing with a transformation but with a gift which is however as much a physical transformation, as it is a spiritual one. *The Lamenting Woman* is a continuation of *The Cuckoo*. The metamorphosis effect, which was present in *The Cuckoo* now occurs in Suka, the human. The cuckoo is a symbol of the funebre song.

The gift of the cuckoo, the funebre song, turns into a metamorphosis for Suka, the ugly, separated and familyless beggar woman. The cuckoo presents her with the gift of the lament by transforming her voice and the words that Suka uses in the most emotional and touching discourse for humans. Through these words Suka, ignored by everyone, will become an important figure in the eyes of all the people. Given that the funeral ceremony, this is true also considering that one of the tributes paid to the dead in the funeral ceremony is a funebre song.

Words take on value when they are beautifully stated, and Suka possesses this gift. Her transformation has occurred in the physical trait but has transformed her also spiritually. This is the only quality she has, although it seems sad to eulogize the dead, but on the other hand it is as hard to make them rejoice with a song as is also to touch their feelings with the lament.

Evoking pain in people and making them even more sad sounds like a paradoxical gift, an irony of the fate, but this is the only gift that would suit a person like Suka;

Woman, oh woman, with a wart on your lip

*a black wart resembling a curse
[woman] who lies down on the stone
as if she were dead (Camaj, 1964 p 200).*

The metamorphosis happens without any element of surprise but instead it occurs quite naturally, just like the mere process of learning a new song. The funebre song, unlike other kinds of songs, is an improvisation. The lamenting woman may have no acquaintance at all with the dead person, and she had all the same the task to tell a lot about the deceased person. She has to tailor verses on the spot, while also rhyming them and singing them with a lamenting tone. All this is a gift of nature and there are few women who can mourn in this way. That is why the metamorphosis that occurs to Suka is important.

The cuckoo that once was a human now gives to the human a feature that makes it very unique and distinct from other birds. Suka does not physically transform into a cuckoo but her voice is identical to the cuckoo's singing voice. Thus the metamorphosis becomes more pronounced and the distinction between the cuckoo, which was a human one and the human being transformed into a cuckoo is not very big. The voice of the cuckoo in spring is bad omen for the one who hears it, because it symbolizes death. therefore Suka reminds Miri of the image of death.

The cuckoo and the human become one with one another, because the cuckoo is the symbol of loneliness and the loss of everything dear. In addition, it is the symbol of sadness and lonely life.

4. Legends about the serpent

The snake, or the serpent is one of the most important symbol in Camaj's poetry. As one of the most important symbols, it dates back to the ancient Ilyrians. "It is a totem animal and head of the Ilyrian tribe, a symbol of wisdom, evil, health, fertility, and the personification of the soul of the deceased, a protector of the family hearth and above all a htonik animal" (Stipčević, 2002 p 48). This type of symbolism has been preserved even later in the Albanian mythology. The cult of the serpent has been found even among other nations. "The cult of the serpent has occupied in different nations of the antiquity a special and very sensitive place. In ancient days, we find it especially present in the sedentary people of the Mediterranean. The ancient Sumerians of Mesopotamia and the Egyptians at the time of the construction of pyramids considered the serpent as a sacred creature with attributes from the earth's and from the underworld's divinity. Even the ancient people of Balkans, some of them less and others more have had the serpent's cult as part of their culture" (Tirta, 2004 p 146).

This cult has been transformed into a symbol, which, in Camaj's poetry, has a very significant place, considering even other poetic volumes he has authored like *Dranja's Madrigals*. Here, every poem has its own features—it creates images and connotates other meanings while creating a separate world of poetry. "The pagan serpent, the biblical serpent, the Dukagjini's serpent, the Arberesh serpent, a protector of the hearth, a protector of the tombs, the guide of the Illyrian tribe, the enticer to sin, the personification of fertility, the symbol of wisdom and evil is present and neatly braided into dozens of motives. The serpent—having been compared to writers, precursors of "Shkodra's literary circle" and to the epos of the north—is a continuation of the tradition that includes a new multi-semantic significance of the "serpent's tongue" (Petrini, 1997 p 103).

In his volume *The Legend* there are two poems with the serpent as a poetic subject: "*Lugu i gjarpnit*" [*The Serpent's Glen*] and *Ledja*.

4.1. The serpent and the sun

The first poem describes through the use of a toponym, Lugu i Gjarpnit [the Serpent's Valley], describes the land of the reptiles. Camaj evokes a scene that shows movement, freedom of the snakes in the area that they have proclaimed as their own, and on the other hand the fight of nature and the sun against them:

*In that valley among the steep slopes
The sun had engulfed everything in his rays of light
When his mother was blinded by a snake
His mother which now he hides in the darkness behind his back.
That valley has become a hell today for the reptiles.
And when they come out to enjoy the summer sun
it seems like the soil makes fun of them
and there is no difference between them and the tree roots or branches.
But two or three times in August they have watched*

As the sun takes revenge for his mother behind backs in the dark
 Watch as a cloud of eagles descends from heaven
 as a thunderclap out of the blue.
 The eagles with their wings spread like sword's edges
 and with their sharp beaks
 they cut the reared heads of the reptiles
 And they also carve their eyes out (Camaj, 1964 p 182).

This battle between the sun and the serpent is an ancient motif. According to A. Stipçeviç: "As a symbol of the underworld, of darkness and evil (especially in the Greek religion), the serpent often fights against birds (usually against the eagle) which symbolizes the light, the sun and the element of good. The motif of the serpent's war with the birds is very ancient and can be found in different stories among many cultures, starting from Mesopotamia to the Christian religion. Representations of such a war can be found in the culture of Egeus and Crete, while among the ancient Illyrians this element is only found in a belt buckle discovered in Magdalenska Gora in Slovenia" (Stipçeviç, 2002 p 59).

Camaj seems to condense this ancient mythological scenario with precision and accuracy. The symbolism which is represented in different layers, is the fight between good and evil, which is also the fight between darkness and light, between the underworld and the heavens. A fight between spaces. His poetry also provides us also with a cause for this war--vengeance. Here comes the sun whose mother has been blinded by the serpents. This may also have an explanation which Stipçeviç finds in Egyptian, but also in Ilirian culture, while the snake is the personification of the sun. "We can assume that the Ilirians considered this symbol to be no different and that the shape of many bracelets found in the Ilirian territories, whose end part was shaped in the form of a serpent's head, in addition to its practical function, also had a symbolic meaning, that is the appearance of the sun's path across the firmament" (Stipçeviç, 2002 p 60).

This indicates an inevitable connection between a mythological tradition and Camaj's poetry, which has its origins in early times and still continues to survive just as the good and the evil are separated and distinct, but they co-exist with the same measure with one another. Camaj builds revenge scenario between the world of nature which is analogous to the war that often occurs between people but also within the human self. The serpent represents a dualistic symbolism in the Albanian mythology while in Camaj poetry, especially in the present volume it is a symbol of evil and of the war, not only against one another, but also a war within the species:

*This is an unending, infinite war:
 "In the twilight, there is a tail,
 and then some blood,
 and then the silence, as every time after a fight,
 but there are still other serpents, underhood, underground,
 which grow in earnest preparation
 for future Augusts (Camaj, 1964 p 182).*

When talking about the myth of the serpent, and about the legends that surround it, time is perpetuated because good and evil would never end, just as the heaven and the earth against one another in a war of symbolism and possession of the spaces.

4.2. The incarnation into a serpent

The poem *Ledja* is one of the most striking pieces of work in this volume and at the same time the most dreadful scenario of death. This poem comes immediately after the "*Lugu i Gjarpnit*" [*The Serpent's Valley*], as if to represent a sequence of scenarios where the serpent is the symbol of the evil, of violence and death. Even the form of this poem resembles a legend. It starts with a narration of legend about a girl named Ledja and it closes with the shivering feeling of the unknown listeners when they hear about the occurrence of this legend:

*"Have you heard about Ledja?
 Someone asked the literary people.
 Have you heard about Ledja and The Fay of the Land,
 which lays on the stone and wears a serpent's skin? (Camaj, 1964 p 185).*

According to researcher K. Petriti, this poem finds its origin in a well-known legend: "In the legend 'Ledja' the girl carrying two fruit baskets (*Both of them above her head*) is going home. (*And while she was carrying them/her breasts looked like two apples*). The serpent starts to follow the girl.

“According to Skender Anamali, in a Southern Albanian village named Qesarat, a Roman statue was found which represents the local deity of prosperity: a woman with a basket on her left hand, on which a snake is coiled around the pulses” (Stipçevič, 2002 p 105).

Camaj describes this legend and concludes his poems with a tinge of truth in its reality as a legend. It seems that the death of the girls is associated with the death of the serpent, too, in the form of a suicide, as a punishment for the girl's death. We find in this legend a certain type of union between the serpent and the girl just like in the Greek myth about Leda, which also constitutes the origin source where the name was borrowed from. According to this legend, “Leda, the daughter of Tiestes and Euremida, the wife of Tindar, king of Sparta, was united to Zeus, while he was having a bath in Eurota, and the latter came to her in the form of the swan. From this union, children were born who were hatched from their eggs” (Colonna, 2005 p 206). A union between an animal and a human in Greek mythology is an acceptable form of metamorphosis.

In the Albanian mythology, as is in this case, Camaj seems to be referring to a violent union. The serpent may be understood as the metamorphosis form of the man. The legend of the man-serpent is well-known, therefore this poem may be understood as a symbol of the male desire toward the feminine element, symbolized in this poem by the milk, which is a mark of the human motherhood, but which young Ledja is impossible to produce. This seems like an inability to distinguish between a girl and a woman, because in truth this consists in lust for femininity, but a violent one. The scene is horrendous, an eternal attempt against beauty and youth. The serpent's self-punishment is simply a surreal ingredient of the animal world. Ledja, is one the names also used by Camaj in other pieces of his work and as in this poem she is a symbol of innocence, beauty and love, but also a symbol of rape.

The serpent in this poem is a symbol of evil, violence, an inevitable phenomenon that is part of the human existence, and nature. Despite his cohabiting with birds and humans, he is always against them.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of the metamorphosis is present in all the material cultures of the world nations, as well in the Albanian oral tradition and it has not been lacking the attention of the Albanian writers among which Martin Camaj's literary work. Camaj, by paying particular attention to this phenomenon in his work (both in his prose and in his poetry), has attempted to carry in his literary art the global world traditions including the Albanian national tradition and has tried to use these values as bases on which to build his own point of view, sometimes through affirmation and other times through its journey towards new horizons.

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