



From Customary Law to Gender Identity: Representations of Albanian Sworn Virgins in Alice Munro and Elvira Dones

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of Albanian sworn virgins in two literary works produced from different cultural contexts: Alice Munro's short story *The Albanian Virgin* (1994) and Elvira Dones' novel *Sworn Virgin* (2007). Through a comparative analysis of the protagonists Lottar/Charlotte and Hana/Mark, the study investigates how literature transforms a distinctive social institution of northern Albanian society into narratives of gender identity, personal agency, and cultural negotiation. The phenomenon of the sworn virgin emerged within the framework of the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini, a customary legal code that allowed women to assume male social roles through a lifelong vow of celibacy. Drawing on perspectives from gender studies, cultural anthropology, and comparative literature, the paper explores the ways in which Munro and Dones reinterpret this practice for different audiences and literary purposes. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between ethnographic knowledge and fictional representation. The analysis considers the influence of Edith Durham's *High Albania* on Munro's narrative and Dones' direct encounters with sworn virgins during her engagement with Albanian society.

The study argues that the sworn virgin functions simultaneously as a cultural reality and a literary metaphor through which questions of gender performance, identity formation, social constraints, and individual freedom are negotiated. By comparing the two texts, the paper demonstrates how a local cultural phenomenon acquires transnational significance and becomes a site for broader debates on gender and social norms. The findings contribute to interdisciplinary discussions on the intersection of literature, culture, and gender by highlighting how fiction reinterprets social practices and transforms them into narratives that resonate across national and cultural boundaries.

Keywords: Sworn Virgins; Gender Identity; Customary Law; Cultural Anthropology; Social Norms; Comparative Literature