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Slow memory of deindustrialization in post-communist Albanian literature

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Abstract

This article discusses various ways in which post-communist Albanian literature has addressed individual and social consequences of the violent deindustrialization of Albania that started immediately after the fall of communism. Deindustrialization quickly brought an already economically inefficient Albania to the edge of devastation as many factories suddenly went bankrupt, social and political institutions collapsed, unemployment skyrocketed, and many Albanians fell deep into poverty. Despite all this, deindustrialization did not become a dominant, or even major, topic in Albanian literature, having been overshadowed by the proliferation of literary works documenting the terror of Enver Hoxha's Stalinist-type communism and expressing the traumas of that past. Thus, this article unveils this hitherto underrepresented and under-researched topic by analyzing selected Albanian poetry and prose from 2004 to 2021, highlighting two essential and recurring literary themes: shattered identity, and displacement and emigration. By discussing them we show how the slow memory of deindustrialization, a process important to almost all former communist countries in Central-Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, works in Albania.

Keywords

deindustrialization, displacement, shattered identity, emigration, etc

Introduction

The collapse of communism in 1991 found Albanians in a severe economic crisis, inflation, and widespread poverty. After the collapse of the institutions of power and the enormous socio-political chaos of the first few years of democratization, came the economic "shock therapy" designed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and adopted by the government of Sali Berisha already in 1992. In Albania, as in other Central and Eastern European countries, it consisted primarily of the rapid privatization of state-owned enterprises, and especially large industrial complexes, with the aim of

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transforming the agro-industrial country into a more service-based economy much more strongly connected to the global economy. The shock therapy precipitated a swift process of deindustrialization, a rapid fall in productivity, bringing widespread unemployment and a significant increase in emigration, especially during the first years of implementation. Despite the fact that shock therapy reforms played a crucial role in the systemic transformation of Albania, topics like deindustrialization, economic collapse, hyperinflation, social inequality and poverty, have played only a minor role in the grand narrative of post-communist Albanian literature. However, this article shows that economic and political developments in post-communist Albania, and especially deindustrialization, provided a significant social background which highly influenced the ways Albanian literature addressed the perplexed feelings, trauma, high levels of anxiety and uncertainty, the disillusionment, hopelessness and depression of the individuals who underwent that harsh transition. The above phenomena are analysed through the reflection of the trauma of the post-communist society had in Albanian novels published two decades after the fall of communism.

Two main literary topics, strongly intertwined with this background as well as with each other are shattered identity, displacement and emigration. By examining them, we consider the following question: in what ways can re-reading the post-communist Albanian literature contribute to a better understanding of the difficult process of economic transformation in post-communist Albania and what language did it develop to speak about it? In this way, we offer a valuable and original perspective on this important topic that, until now, has been largely unfamiliar to English-speaking audiences.

This article is structured as follows. The first section briefly discusses the relationship between memory and literature and shows how the article is related to the concept of slow memory. The second section provides a broader context regarding violent deindustrialization in Albania and a radical change of the literary mainstream after 1991. The third and fourth sections bring out and discuss, respectively, the issues of shattered identity, and displacement and emigration, in post-communist Albanian literature. The article closes with conclusions that show that memories of the communist past shaped Albanian literary products published after the fall of the regime. Experimenting through hybrid genres made Albanian contemporary writers blur the line between personal memories and collective history of the past, trying to heal the trauma of the totalitarian regime and the pain of a long post-communist transition.

Slow memory, literature and economic reforms

According to Wüstenberg (2023: 60) slow memory aims to "shift the focus of memory studies from their conventional interest in the dynamically changing commemorations of events and memorials to the more long-term, slow-moving processes underlying the former." In other words, slow memory advocates a shift from actor-driven to structure-driven processes. This redirects researchers' attention to studying memory discourses of various "uneventful" social transformations that, despite remaining highly dispersed, poorly visible and functioning only in the background of the symbolic realm, have an important impact on how societies function and how they remember."

Economic reforms brought fundamental changes in Albania, as they did in almost all most post-communist countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. These reforms reached their highest dynamics in 1991, bringing many negative social consequences, broad and powerful. This rapid transition so acutely experienced in Albania in the short term started with deindustrialization. This created a domino effect, as deindustrialization caused the economic downfall, which led to the collapse of all social nets. Consequently, the government's repeated failures to implement effective strategies of saving declining public services led to serious deterioration of the standards in healthcare, education and employment.

Although social consequences of neoliberal transformations were severe, and represented a long process that spanned over time and space, for a long they remained on the margins of researchers' interest, not only in Albania, but also in many other countries. Furthermore, they were not often considered a form of violence, since they do not seem to correspond well to conventional definitions of act of violence as a sudden, spectacular, and devastating event. Nevertheless, it is worth understanding them as "slow violence": a particular form of violence defined by Rob Nixon as "a violence, that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2011: 2). Deindustrialization and neo-liberal transformation framed as slow violence shifts our attention to long-term structural processes, during which social structures and institutions harm people by preventing them meeting their basic needs (Galtung, 1969: 169). Slow violence as a way of delayed destruction, has several consequences in time and space, mostly because most of time it lacks the reaction from the individuals, who fail to recognize it and hence to respond to it.

Therefore, in this chapter we look at the slow memory of violent social transformations in post-communist Albania. Moreover, we look at it through literature as a particular force that creates and shapes cultural memory. The relationship between memory and literature has been reflected upon both by memory studies (e.g. Erll, 2010; Jabłkowska and Saryusz-Wolska, 2023; Mena, 2024) and literary theory (e.g. Hirsch, 2012; Milevski and Wetenkamp, 2022; Skopljanac, 2012).

All these aforementioned studies share the conviction that while literature and memory show a great deal of core commonalities, at the same time literature is quite unique from other, more standard cultural memory media such as museum exhibitions, oral history interviews or commemorative lawmaking. As rightly noted by Erll (2010: 229–230), the most important common features between these two realms are their attachment to narrative structures which tend to be ordered according to certain genre patterns and marked by high symbolic density. From this point of view, both realms operate on imaginaries that have a similar formal structure, that is, as noticed by Mena (2024), concerned with producing or reconstructing mental images of what is physically absent in the present.

At the same time, several characteristics of literature make it a very special discourse of memory. Most importantly, these characteristics, according to Erll (2010: 233–234), include semantic complexity, ambiguous multi-perspectivity and fictionality. Therefore, it is important for a memory scholar to understand that in analyzing memory through literature we usually do not deal with the explicit, strong and direct content of social memory, but rather we track memory indirectly: either through more or less coherent narratives about the past articulated directly in literary works, or through more diffuse contents, meanings, impressions, emotions and other elements addressing the past indirectly and in more scattered ways. While in the former case, researchers analyze certain narratives about the past as they had been articulated by the authors themselves, in the former case they do primarily the fundamental work of piecing together and reconstructing the narrative(s) from available fragments. Nevertheless, in both cases a literary work creates a certain "fiction of memory" (Neumann, 2008: 333–334) which remains in a permanent relationship with the extra-literary world but definitely does not reflect it one-to-one. This makes the relationship between memory and literature relatively looser and thus more ambiguous and ambivalent than between memory and other media. On one hand, this provides opportunities to enrich the analysis by introducing greater interpretive depth, while, on the other hand, it requires researchers' caution in formulating research conclusions.

Violent deindustrialization and change of literary mainstream in post-1991 Albania

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the breakdown of the old and inefficient political institutions of the communist regime brought Albanian industry out of function to such an extent that in mid-1991

only 25% of state-owned enterprises were operational. In subsequent years, marked by the neoliberal "shock therapy," many industrial plants were destroyed. During this process, most Albanians lost their jobs, hyperinflation destroyed their savings, while the idea of belonging to any broader community eroded rapidly. In the 1990s Albania faced one of the lowest ever economic performances. Vast areas of the country, well known for their historical identity as industrial hubs, were destroyed, a major part of them were abandoned while some others went through a difficult and often non-transparent privatization. Moreover, after the collapse of industry, the government drastically reduced "social responsibility for living standards" (Figart, 2007), making poverty policies weak and ineffective, which additionally deepened income disparity and hyperinflation. According to the World Bank (1999: 8), in 1997, the poverty rate (GDP per capita) in Albania was the highest in Europe. In this way, slow violence of the neoliberal transformations nested in post-communist Albanian society, bringing as a result deep consequences in the societal fragmentation.

Importantly, the deindustrialization of post-communist Albania must be understood not only as an economical transition, but as a complex socio-political process deeply entangled with historical memory, ideological rupture and the lingering stigma of the industrial legacy of the communist era. The collapse of the socialist state, did not only dismantle factories, mines, and industrial plants, but it also caused the total erosion of the communities that were built around them. These communities were subjected to intense labor demands, during the autarkic regime of Enver Hoxha, as part of the state's drive for self-sufficiency. However, the transition to democracy, after the democratic elections of 1991 failed to give meaningful support to these communities. The sudden withdrawals of state investments, the closure of industrial plants and the mass redundancy of people contributed to widespread social disintegration. As noted by Elsie (2005: 10), in 1991 the Albanians "found themselves robbed, with shattered dreams, and with no chance to keep up with the rest of Europe. In material terms, they had been deprived of all but the barest essentials needed to stay alive."

Albanian literature of the communist era, probably the most heavily influenced by the socialist realism genre of all literatures from Eastern Bloc countries, consistently put forward the theme of the country's industrialization. For decades, the literary corpus of socialist realist writers such as Aleks Çaçi (1916–1989), Nonda Bulka (1906–1972), Shevqet Musaraj (1914–1986), Sterjo Spasse (1914–1989), Dhimitër Shuteriqi (1915–2003) and Fatmir Gjata (1922–1989), reflected the state-imposed glorification of the transformation of Albania into a self-sufficient, industrial country. Since the duty of the socialist writer was to educate, inspire, and indoctrinate the masses, the mechanical rhythm of the industrial development of the country became a central rhythm in the entire Albanian literature, and poetry in particular.

After 1991, Albanian writers finally, en masse, gave up the official topics fed by propaganda. After the collapse of the system literary works of previously condemned writers, and banned by the communist authorities were published—such as Arshi Pipa (1920–1997), Musine Kokalari (1917–1983), Kasëm Trebeshina (1926–2017), Pater Zef Pllumi (1924–2007) or Astrit Delvina (1920–1990), and Visar Zhiti (1952–), who shed light on the terror of the past: communist prisons, cruelty of security services, and oppression coming from the old regime.

During the first years of democracy, there was a high number of publications of poetical volumes, novels, testimonies and biographies, which conveyed the dramatic truth of a system that was systematically invested in the elimination of the intellectual elite. The terrible conditions of living in the political prisons[1], the difficult work in the mines, the lack of human rights, the executions without a trial, the burial in collective graves of "enemies of the people," became central topics in Albanian post-1991 literature. Publishing literary works of previously condemned writers had an important value to heal the trauma of the past (healing through writing/reading about the dramatic memories). Their literary corpus gave voice to unknown stories of persecution, imprisonment or even execution of an important part of the Albanian intellectual elite.

At the same time, some other writers deeply felt that transformations in Albania were not only a political or an economic process, but also "a social and cultural phenomenon that transforms places and identities" (Rhodes, 2013: 55–57). Deindustrialization reconfigured the memory spaces by transforming the ways that communities remembered and represented the industrial past. Moreover, "while economic struggle was at the heart of deindustrialization, a parallel struggle emerged over representation itself" (Rhodes, 2013: 57). Deindustrialization and mass privatization did not only bring job losses and lack of economic stability, it also brought questions about the ways in which loss was portrayed, understood and remembered in public discourse and cultural narratives. In this context, literature became a very important domain to enhance slow memory, because it gave voice to personal and collective pain and traumas caused by the slow violence; it made visible to the public the narratives of the affected communities. Albanian society was defragmented as a result of overlapping trauma conditions, from which two were the most evident: first it was the collective trauma persisted from the violence communist regime, and second it was the slow violence of the long transition that was completely eroding societal cohesion, destabilizing both individual and collective identities. In Albanian contemporary literature, there was a polarization of writers based on the trauma they represented, as following:

First, there were writers imprisoned during communist times who published their literary work about the violence of the dictatorship, which they witnessed personally. Some of these works were part of "convicted literature, the prohibited literary corpus of imprisoned writers, who were persecuted or deprived form their right of publication" (Kerbizi, 2017: 218). The embodied memories of poets and writers like Arshi Pipa (1920–1997), Visar Zhiti (1952–), Frederik Rreshpja (1940–2006), Zef Zorba (1920–1993) were the most important testimony of the cruelty and the violence of the communist regime.

Second, it was the literary product of poets such as Dritëro Agolli (1931–2017), Fatos Arapi (1930–2018), Xhevahir Spahiu (1945–), Natasha Lako (1948–), whose works were published during the communist times. Their poetry serves as a poignant reflection of how slow violence, the gradual erosion of meaning, hope and identity, slowly changed individuals. Unfolding quietly across the decades, the consequences of slow violence were not immediately visible, but they left deep scars on individual and collective levels. Their poetry conveyed all the disillusionment, and pain of having lived under an oppressive system which chained their freedom and framed their creativity, leaving a whole generation with the sad revelation that the best years of their lives were wasted. Their poetry became a vessel of expressing disillusionment, and the existential pain, accumulated in decades as a result of slow violence perceived during years of systematic repression and uncertain aftermath of transition.

On the other hand, writers who had emigrated from Albania, found another path of developing literary production, because they had to deal with the difficulties of life in exile. Even in this group there were major differences between writers who fled from Albania during the communist regime and those who emigrated after its fall. Albanian diaspora writers, who lived abroad before the fall of communism, produced a literary corpus that aimed at strengthening Albanian identity and deepening national awareness. They tried to strongly preserve Albanian identity, in a time when the probability of returning was very low, because the regime considered the act of escaping as treason. On the other hand, writers who emigrated after the fall of communism faced a completely different context. They were eager to leave behind the trauma of the past and start a new life in Europe. However, many found themselves pushed into marginalized spaces, and the reconstruction of their identity became a difficult process. Writers, such as Gazmend Kapllani (1967–), Ornela Vorpsi (1968–), Ardian Christian Kyçyku (1969–), Entela Tabaku Sörman (1971–), and Flogerta Krypi (1993–), wrote about challenges of living in the border, without completely belonging to either country. An important part of their literary production conveyed the idea of shattered identity, the

impossibility of settling, the pain of being uprooted, the lost dreams, and the difficulties of reconstruction of identities meanwhile in migration. The first publications from the diaspora writers who emigrated after the fall of communism, started a decade later, around 2000.

Summing up, after the fall of communism, Albanian literary production was shaped by the contribution of three main groups: first, former imprisoned writers whose publications shed light on the repression and terror of the communist past; second, writers who had maintained professional careers during communist times and continued to write and publish even after the fall of communism; third, the newly emerging writers who started to publish after the 1990s.

Even though each group is distinctive, there are unifying threads that connect them together: a reflective process of remembering and dealing continuously with the memories. However, there are differences in the way that the representatives of each category deal with memories: the writers of the first category tend to reveal and share with readers embodied memories of the past. On the other hand, two other categories refer to the slow violence, which quietly brought the fragmentation of identities during a lingering transition in Albania. Their work captured the paradoxical condition of a society, which after having achieved the long-sought freedom, felt at the edge of an institutional collapse, and moral ambiguity. In the following sections we will discuss how their literary works addressed two most important topics related to the slow violence in Albania: the shattered identity, the displacement and emigration. These two are strongly intertwined with each other since the shattered identity brings as the result the urge of displacement, while emigration emphasizes the deep crisis of lost identity and individual and social disintegration.

Shattered identity and disillusionment during the post-communist transition

After the fall of communism, literature became a very important domain through which the past was bridged. Personal memories of the past deeply resonated with the poetic vision of lyrical heroes in poetry and fictional characters in prose. According to Warnock (1987: 90) "Memory is essentially emotional in character," hence literature as a domain of emotions, indirectly became an important means of preserving memories. During the first decade of post-communist transition, the invisible traumas of affected communities were mostly represented through poetry. "Poetry, both aesthetically and quantitatively, represented the most favourite genre in post-communist Albania" (Kerbizi, 2025: 104). It was an inverted ratio compared to literature elsewhere in the world "of 50-60% poetry compared to 30-40% prose in the total number of Albanian publications" (Shehri, 2021:18). Poetry became a significant mode of representation connected to the perplexed feelings, trauma, loss and disillusionment. Because of its personal nature, it channeled personal emotions, functioning as a form of inner catharsis. Writing poetry became an important process to "enable repossession of the life narrative" (Bracegirdle 2011: 82) to find a safe space in a world that seems alien.

Meanwhile imprisoned writers shed light on the terror and suffering during the communist regime, another significant strand of literary production came from the writers who had had professional careers during communism; some of the best poems by Dritëro Agolli, Fatos Arapi, Xhevahir Spahiu, gave voice to a more internal aftermath of reality, articulating feelings of disillusionment, fragmented identity, hopelessness and lingering uncertainty.

Dritëro Agolli, the head of the League of Writers and Artists of Albania from 1973 to 1992, published the poetic volume *The late pilgrim* (2004) which was considered to be his "mea culpa." The League of Writers and Artists of Albanian played an important role in the condemnation and imprisonment of many writers during communism. Although the League was a collegial body and

its highest governing body was the Congress, still Agolli may be considered as an "implicated subject" which "occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm" (Rothberg, 2019: 1). Rothberg's idea about the *implicated subject* is rooted in the concept of Hannah Arendt (2003: 157) who highlights that there is "a vicarious responsibility for things we have not done," suggesting a moral obligation borne not from personal guilt, but from position within a violent system that causes harm. Probably, it is this moral ambiguity for writing *The late pilgrim*; the lyrical hero goes through an introspective journey, during which he faces his past and decisions he made; these decisions did not only change the course of his journey, but they also reshaped the sense of his final destination.

This poem, which gives the title to the same titled poetical volume, sets the tone for the poetic journey toward representation of the inner loss: "I have long been a pilgrim, / A traveler on the land of broken hope, / Unwillingly lost from my caravan, / on the paths worn thin by storm and sun./ I search for my caravan far and wide / its path has shifted times ago, / On the road completely lost / Lonesome, with a head scarf tied and torn (Agolli, 2004: 10). The lyrical hero feels worn down by accumulative consequences of systemic repression and broken hopes. The loneliness, loss of direction, and the estrangement from the caravan, symbolize the disintegration of self, disillusionment and inner rupture. The lyrical hero does not blame, instead a radiography of transformation is given; the loss of self, the loss of ideals, loss of the sense of final destination. The most important semantic unit is the adverb "unwillingly" denoting the slow violence which etches into the psyche bringing an erosion of hope, identity, and belonging. The lyrical hero expresses the pain of enforced separation from the comunity be belongs to, articulating a condition of existential displacement.

The same feelings of detachment and inner void, appear in the poem *The anticipation of everything*, in which Agolli expresses not only his personal feelings but also the disillusions of other people who believed in communism. The lyrical hero represents the pain of individuals who felt betrayed by the state they had served, which stole their youth, their dreams and hopes while chasing an unfulfillable illusion. Agolli expresses his sorrow that they became soldiers of a system which sowed death and harvested sufferings. Being an "implicated object" made him "contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from the regime of domination" (Rothberg, 2019: 8). This proximity to the system slowly eroded identity, through repression and compromises. This is the reason why the poem echoes the pain and trauma of affected communities: these people lost the best years of their life working tirelessly to build and strengthen a system which eventually became a system of violence and injustice. Agolli creates a vivid imagery of his personal pain, expressing the sorrow of being "an implicated subject": "Like a mouse, the sorrow gnaws at my soul" (Agolli, 2004: 25). The similitude of sorrow, highlights the existence of ongoing internal erosion that is slowly annihilating each part of his identity.

The persistence of pain becomes a corrosive force that is wearing him out. In the poem *The soul*, Agolli (2004: 29) brings the issues of fractured identity, and the sense of loss of the individual that feels that is at the edge of a crisis, after having lost everything he had. The despair of the lyrical voice is encapsulated in the lines: "It is night and the room sank in darkness / The only light faded away / Now I long for nothing / Vanished what was sacred to me." The darkness and the faded lights represent the vanishing of dreams and hopes, and the meaning of life, after the collapse of ideals. As Salverson (2010) highlights "What is lost is internalized and becomes the focus of one's psychic pain" (p. 80). This is why the phrase "vanished what was sacred to me" points to profound spiritual disillusions, a broader crisis of belief. The identity once tied to dreams and ideals, is now blurred and shattered, caught in between memory of the past and darkness of the present.

A similar feeling of pain for taking wrong paths, not individually, but as a nation, can be found in Fatos Arapi's poetry collection. He highlights the fact that the mistakes of the past, deeply affect our collective memory and identity. In the poem Gloria Victis (2014), published in the poetic

volume "Në kaq pak Tiranë" he emphasizes the idea that his generation is victim of the time in which they lived: "Because we are the great losers / The great art of loss / we have made our destiny / Because it is us, only us, who know how to make mistakes" (Arapi, 2014: 95). Arapi's poetry reflects a profound sense of introspection toward missteps and repeated failures that marked the whole generation during the past. The plural form "us," enforces the idea of a collective voice which reflects a poignant self-awareness of the dramatic burden they carry from the past: they are the masters of the "great art of loss", and each of the mistakes had made in the past, shaped their present cond.

The same perspective is clearly visible in Arapi's poem *The tragedy itself has lost its way* in which the lyrical voice is drowned in pain; the impossibility of a generation to change the destiny makes them surrender: "Tragedy, / it was leading the way. And us after it. . ./Throwing here and there parts of ourselves/ We knew we had no tomorrow (. . .)" (Arapi, 2014: 168). The awareness of having no future deepens the sense of loss, futility and hopelessness. It is again the plural form (we/us) that highlights that it is the whole generation that feels doomed, after having spent more than four decades in a totalitarian system, coexisting along, and sometimes even normalizing the repression. Living with pain, and fear, for more than 45 years made Arapi claim that the emotional recovery of people who lived under the terror of communism was difficult (and sometimes even impossible), and were aware that "There was no future" for them.

To sum up, in some important poems by Agolli and Arapi, there is implied pain and loss. The lyrical voice in Agolli's poetry often suffers numbness and detachment after the loss of what was previously meaningful in life. On the other hand, Arapi emphasizes a painful awareness about shared destiny, shared sufferings and fate of a generation bound together by the trauma of political oppression, whose consequences linger after the fall of the regime. The strong messages conveyed through metaphoric images in the poetical corpus of Agolli and Arapi, correspond well with what Ann Laura Stolen (2008) asserted: "Ruination is an act perpetrated, a condition to which, one is subject, and a cause of loss" (p. 191). Ruins are part of the previous industrial landscapes, acting at the same time as remains of a shattered human soul; the abrupt disruption of the idea of belonging makes Agolli express pain coming from the devastated self. It is thus important to clearly define that the crisis of identity, trauma, and loss, are not only related to melancholic sentiments toward the totalitarian past, but they also imply the crisis of ideals which make people feel disconnected from what they used to be in the past.

Not only poetry, but also many novels written after the 1990s represent the dramatic transformations of Albanian reality with the main focus on human loss: shattered identity, depression, pain, disillusionment and alienation. Although during the first decade after the fall of the regime, poetry was the most important genre, afterwards more novels were published. Albanian literature slowly shifted from the emotional intensity of poetry to the structural complexity of novels, making them the primary literary genre after the 2000s.

Many prominent contemporary writers of different generations, such as Ismail Kadare (1936–2024), Fatos Kongoli (1944–), Visar Zhiti (1952–), Mimoza Ahmeti (1963–), Met Dervishi (1952–) and Lea Ypi (1979–), bring to attention the strong consequences of past wounds in the present. Meanwhile imprisoned writers wrote about the structural violence during the totalitarian times (prison and internment), other contemporary writers wrote about the consequences of slow violence. The recurring alienation of characters in Albanian contemporary literature, the central role of antiheroes represent the deep continuous repression which leads to trauma, depression, and the loss of identity, as the result of the state slow violence, which is long term.

One of the most prominent writers who deals with the consequences of slow violence during communist regime is Fatos Kongoli. The novels *Kufoma* (*The Corpse*, 1995) and *Lëkura e qenit* (*Dog's skin*, 2003) represent the central role of state violence in the alienation of the individual.

Both novels offer a profound exploration of the lost identity of individuals who lived under the totalitarian system: both characters embody the consequences of a deep metamorphosis of a systematic dehumanization, representing the psychological ruins of having lived for a long time under fear, uncertainty and ideology. Festim Gurabardhi in *Kufoma* and Krist Tarapi in *Dog's skin* are aware of having lost everything; their metamorphosis of the self is so profound that they feel self-disgust. Festim Gurabardhi feels he has become a mouse, continuously fleeing to save his skin. Meanwhile Krist Tarapi feels he has been reduced into a dog's skin, devoid of dignity. Kongoli's heroes suffer from paranoia and schizophrenia, which are consequences of extreme fear of being surveyed and possibly punished during the totalitarian regime. His characters best represent the trauma and depersonalization of individuals exposed continuously to the slow violence. Even though Kongoli mostly dealt with the exposure of slow violence during the communist regime, this kind of violence continued even after the fall of the totalitarian regime, during the long post-communist transition.

Some contemporary novels represent the slow violence as a continuous process that started during communist regime and continue till the present. The novel *Free: Coming of age at the end of history* (2021) by Lea Ypi, provides a personal and philosophical reflection on the life during the regime, after the fall of it, and the impact of slow violence on the identity, freedom, and economic transformation of the country. Her autofiction novel brings to attention essential questions related to the importance of human values, specifically in the time of crisis. She slows down the act of remembering by involving the readers into the process of recalling the memories of their past. The homodiegetic narrator focuses on the swift shift from the state-centered economy to fragile private businesses; this new reality made many people feel lost because their previous social roles became obsolete. One of the most complex characters in Ypi's novel is the father, who represents the double disillusionment many Albanians had, during communist and post-communist times. First, he was a victim of the communist regime (oppression, lack of freedom and the continuous fear of the punishment); later a victim of the economic and social transformations during post-communist transition (becoming redundant), and finally he had the responsibility of managing Durres port in the time of economic crisis (hence he had to decide who would become redundant). Finding himself at the crossroads of his life, with shattered dreams and hopes, the father articulates the deep pain of being left with no choice: "I am not a machine. I wish I were a machine so someone could program me to just do it. (. . .) They're not machines. They're people. They have tears in their eyes and sweat on their brows. They would have hope too if there was any left" (Ypi, 2021: 246). The character eventually finds himself trapped in a catch-22, an unsolvable puzzle and a no-win situation, because the bitter truth is that he can do nothing to prevent his downfall.

Finally, Albanian contemporary literature, published after 2000 (a decade after the fall of the regime), started dealing more intensively with slow violence of post-communist transition, representing the defragmentation of the society and the devaluation of significant values. Similarly to other Eastern European countries, the political and economic changes brought "significant alterations in value orientations" (Musek 1995: 3), bringing an individual and collective disorientation. This new world emerging from chaos became central topics in the novel *Ëndrra e sandaleve me gurë Swarovski* (*The dream of Swarovski sandals*, 2008) by Met Dervishi (2008). Through a heterodiegetic narrator vivid pictures are presented of a world that had lost all ethical and moral values. Beneath the dazzling exterior (of Swarovski sandals) lies the bitter truth of a decaying society, where money, power, and sex flourish. Freedom, dreamt of during the communist past, gradually transformed into chaos, and the country became bedlam, a place where no laws and rules were respected. Dervishi sharply depicts the deep crisis of values in post-communist Albania: a reality in which violence, politics, money, and sex became deeply interconnected. The writer presents, as a massive mosaic, the most important moments of post-1991 Albania: the massive exodus of 1991,

the rise and fall of financial pyramids, the bad political management of the country, high levels of corruption, illegal businesses, and elaborates on their impact on alienation of human values in a context in which the individuals struggle very hard to survive. Through a dysphemistic language, Dervishi highlights the idea that the decay and ruins penetrated deep into people's psyche. Through intense evocation of taboo words the novel emphasizes frustration, sorrow, disgust, and lack of hope.

To sum up, contemporary Albanian prose writers like Fatos Kongoli, Met Dervishi, Lea Ypi, deeply explore the social impact of the communist regime and post-communist transition on psychological and moral transformations of the society. The alienation of the characters into antiheroes in Kongoli and Dervishi's novels highlights the connection between the trauma of the past and the loss of identity, and values in the present. On the other hand, Ypi's characters are often found in crossroads, with no choice. They represent the pain of many people who find their dreams shattered during the long transition that followed the collapse of communist regime.

Migration and border syndrome in recent Albanian literature

The consequences of abrupt deindustrialization, privatization of state-owned enterprises, high rates of inflation, brought mass unemployment in Albania followed by massive emigration which started during the first years after the fall of the regime. There is a strong connection between communist and post-communist transition traumas; the rising consequences of slow violence of every day fueled the eagerness of Albanians to escape, at any cost, from their homeland. They had dreamed for more than four decades of a democratic system, but shortly after the first democratic elections in 1991, the country had to face very difficult challenges connected with political and economic transitions. During this time factories were destroyed, people were made redundant, high levels of inflation increased poverty, and people felt totally hopeless. This disillusionment from the bad management of the country, together with the urge to escape the trauma of the communist past, compelled many Albanians toward emigration.

However, the representation of migration in Albanian literature increased only during the last decades, both in poetry and novels. Most diaspora writers deal with issues like emigration, identity, belonging, cultural clashes, and the resilience of people who had to leave their homeland due to impossibly bad conditions of living. As Gazmend Kapllani highlights, there are huge differences between Albanian writers who migrated during totalitarian times to those who migrated after the fall of communism: "As Albanians we have inherited the same traumas, but the difference stands in the time we deal with them. Martin Camaj and Arshi Pipa left Albania in the 1950s. Their escape from the terrorist Stalinist regime was a sign of protest against the regime, to survive physically and emotionally. When they left, the communist regime had just started its violent endeavour 'to fabricate the society,' which was also the destruction of the main structures of Albanian society. Meanwhile, when I left, the regime had successfully destroyed the society, and we could not save anything except our souls" (Kapllani, 2021: 6). Kapllani highlights the idea that the state's gradual enactment of slow violence (repression, ideology, surveillance and fear) systematically eroded the social foundations. In this ruinous landscape, the effort of protecting internal spaces became a real challenge. However, even after migration the diaspora writers found themselves discovering new layers of trauma, because exile did not help them heal, but instead provided them with a perplexed sense of being suspended between a broken past and an uncertain future.

Most important topics raised by diaspora writers and connected to migration were the trauma of being uprooted, the difficulties in the reconstruction of self in exile, displacement, and inner exile. Migration became a central part of the literary production of diaspora writers, such as Faruk Myrtaj (1936–), Gëzim Hajdari (1957–), Elvira Dones (1960–), Gazmend Kapllani (1967–), Ornela Vorpsi

(1968–), Ardian Christian Kyçyku (1969–) and Flogerta Krypi (1993–). Their literary production represents important topics which are also related to self transformations as a result of continuous pressure from the new reality they were trying to fit in with. They unfold the layers of identity reconfigured by the trauma of being detached from the roots, the irreversible feeling of being displaced from the cultural context where you belong.

In her poem *Immigrants Do not have a homeland*, Flogerta Krypi (2019) expresses the pain and the struggle of existence in an in-between space; the lyrical voice feels the drama of being caught between two worlds, (p. 20) while belonging to neither. The first is her homeland which she left after trying for many years to change (Krypi was an activist of human rights and social change from a very young age). The second one is Germany, the country she migrated to, in which she felt she did not fully belong.

Thus, Krypi's poetry expresses the existential anguish of feeling trapped between these two realities. The lyrical voice reveals a deep emotional disconnection through verses: "Immigrants do not have memories / Our heads have only ruins / a thousand stories of travelling / and again slaves of their prison" (Krypi, 2019: 20). The motif of ruins, mentioned in the previous section, appears again here, now becoming an important metaphor for fragmented identity. The "ruins" signify not only the destruction left behind in Albania, but also the inner ruins, connected with the inability to reconstruct a stable self in a foreign context. The loss of rooted identity, and the distorted memories of the past, are all part of the new heritage that emigrants have; which is expressed through images of destruction (ruins in their head) and the constant idea of movement in search of the place that they may call home. Especially for first-generation immigrants, the idea of not settling is strong, because for most of them their homeland is not only a memory of the past, but also a future dream to come back. But the projection of self without clear spatial boundaries (here and there), makes them suffer from the consequences of "being excluded from representation" (Chambers and Marinelli 2007: 20), which exposes them toward attritional violence dispersed into time.

According to Gazmend Kapllani in *Ditar i shkurtër kufijsh* (*A short border handbook*, 2016), migrant literature "suffers" from the "border syndrome" which is incurable because "border syndrome is as insidious as the hepatitis, because even dead it remains in organism, and you can never get rid of it" (Kapllani, 2016:10). Kapllani emphasizes that border syndrome is a chronic and incurable condition that deeply affects the identity of displaced individuals. The border, especially for individuals who escaped their homeland, remains a site of trauma, fear, and memory; it is not a geographical sign, but an internalized border which makes individuals feel the pressure of the continuous struggle of having multiple identities while living in between their homeland and the new country, without calling either home.

The border syndrome appears again in the novel *Incognito. Copëza nga jeta e rojeve dhe anasjelltas* (*Incognito. Pieces from the lives of the guards and vice versa*, 2016) by Ardian Christian Kyçyku. The main character of this novel, named Incognito, lives split in two realities (past and present), two different worlds (homeland during totalitarian regime and emigration country), two languages (Albanian and the foreign one), and two selves, without managing to settle down. This existential fragmentation experienced by individuals caught between two conflicting worlds is emphasized through the words of the homodiegetic narrator: "I had that feeling that you may pull the man out of migration, but you may never get migration out of the man" (Kyçyku, 2016: 14). Through a metaphoric approach, the narrator highlights the idea that migration is not only about geographical displacement of the individual, but is also an ongoing condition of self-transformation, and never a complete journey. Inner exile means living simultaneously in two chronotropic realities; people live with the memories of the past in their homeland and the everyday struggles in the present foreign context. According to Sayad, this condition is defined as an "impossible 'ubiquity.' The emigrant is destined to go on being present even when he is absent and, correlatively, to

not be totally present" (Sayad, 1999: 74). Living simultaneously in two worlds means not fully belonging to either of them. The double absence condition of emigrants defines their identity; they remain tied to their culture of origin, while at the same time they are physically and socially present in a new context that, more often than not, refuses their full inclusion.

Another important diaspora writer, Ornela Vorpsi (2005, 2007), has written two novels about the trauma related to migration and the shattered identity: *Buvez du cacao Van Houten* (*Drink Van Houten's cocoa*, 2005) and *La mano che non mordi* (*The hand that you don't bite*, 2007). They are both structured through a dichotomy: the dreams about the bright future and the harsh reality of being an immigrant. Moreover, both novels delve deeply into issues like memory, identity, and disorientation of the individuals who live with the feeling that they have lost an important part of themselves, after having moved from the homeland. Vorpsi presents the complicated and painful process of identity reconstruction in exile, through emphasizing the differences between the internal world of the migrant and the external one. According to Giada Giuntoli (2022: 63), "There is subsequently a brutal reckoning when this longing clashes with migrants' effective condition in the new country." This "brutal reckoning" becomes a central part of the narrative of Ornela Vorpsi, because her characters are often depicted in moments of deep disillusionment, caught in liminal spaces between who they used to be, who they dreamt of becoming, and who they are allowed to be in a society which renders them marginal. These novels represent a reality similar to matryoshka dolls, in which the trauma of the past is encapsulated inside a bigger structure of pain and disillusionment related with the present. The past is there with all the memories of pain and sufferings, which make an individual fragile; meanwhile the slow violence of the present, challenges the reconstruction of emigrants' identity.

On the other hand, some Albanian contemporary novels unlayered all traumas that affected Albanian society and their dramatic consequences: first, the long-lasting consequences of repression during the regime increased the likelihood that the exposed people would commit violence (Kaufman and Zigler, 1987; Widom, 1989) Second, deindustrialization, privatization and other unsuccessful reforms after the fall of the regime, brought mass unemployment and social defragmentation. As noted by Catano (2001: 195) who "valorizes" work as an act of self-making: "job loss has deep identity consequences" extended to other generations. People who were especially working in the industrial sector during communist times, were made redundant immediately after the fall of communism, when most mills and factories were destroyed. This painful process of changing the social and family status of many workers from the most important financial providers for the family to people who could barely maintain themselves, strongly affected their identity. Sons became testimonies of the disillusionments of their fathers who faced again the violence of the state which once more abruptly shaped an important part of their new identity in the post-communist reality. Growing up in poverty and feeling the life failures of their parents made them inheritors of trauma, violence and pain, because "their sons inherited their loss" (Linkon, 2014: 150). Third, the last layer of trauma is related to displacement (migration).

The novel *Yjet nuk vishen kështu* (*Stars do not dress up like that*, 2015) by Elvira Dones reveals all consequences of a long exposure of slow violence, which may completely ruin every human trait in weak souls. Through a combination between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narration, the novel represents the tragedy of a country which was exposed for many long years to violence. The novel collects the stories (most of them real) of ravished and raped Albanian girls who were promised the dream of the dazzling world, but unwillingly became prostitutes in Europe. The concept of displacement resurfaces again with heightened intensity. It does not imply only moving from homeland to another country; it represents a form of ontological displacement which marks the rupture of self as a subject and self as an object. The female body in this case did not only become the site of violence, but also a representation of symbolic ruins, which echoed the destruction of

identity not only to the victims of the violence, but also to the perpetrators. The cruel sex traffickers were the second generation of trauma; they were the "sons," who inherited the inner void of their fathers, a void which only kept expanding, transforming their psyche into total ruins. They represent the traumatic landscape in which generational violence has transformed individuals into destructive weapons, eager to annihilate life itself.

To sum up, the characters of Gazmend Kapllani, Ardian Christian Kyçyku, Ornela Vorpsi, are simultaneously living in the past and present, always carrying with them parts of their homeland, parts of their collective trauma, which mark their identity through an in-between condition. All works reflect on multi-layered trauma, fragmented identity, and the emotional dislocation caused from exile. On the other hand, Elvira Dones connects migration to generational trauma, showing how extreme poverty, displacement and broken dreams led to exploitation and violence.

Conclusions

Albania went through a violent deindustrialization process after the fall of communism. Even though deindustrialization did not become the major narrative of the literature published since the 1990s, the consequences of it deeply affected the creative corpus of the most contemporary writers.

On one hand, the slow memories of deindustrialization, manifested as shattered identities, hopelessness, futility, distorted memories of the past, and the disillusionment of the present, became important topics in the literary corpus of those writers whose literary production was consolidated during the communist times. Especially poets like Fatos Arapi, Dritëro Agolli, Natasha Lako, and others brought into surface the voice of disillusionment and pain of many people whose hopes and ideals were lost. Their lyrical heroes delved into profound reflections about the complex feelings regarding the individual and national past, expressing deliberately the need to reconstruct the self once again, slowly and steadily.

On the other hand, those writers who emigrated from Albania since the 1990s gave voice to the border syndrome, the pain of not belonging, the difficulties of living in liminal spaces and the consequences of unspoken slow violence. These topics uncovered the trauma of a violent transition which not only scattered the identity but also made people eager to flee from the homeland. Furthermore, through the literary production of such writers as Gazmend Kapllani, Ardian Christian Kyçyku, Ornela Vorpsi and Elvira Dones, the double layer of trauma was highlighted: one from the violence of the totalitarian past (chronotropic displacement becoming central part of the narration of characters' memories), and the consequences of slow violence in the unstable present (through which the emigrants were pushed toward marginalized spaces). Through personal memories, deep reflections and profound explorations, Albanian contemporary writers created the foundations of autofiction and literary representation of memory. Their literary corpus, aesthetically condenses the memories, becoming an important medium in exhibiting the multi-layered trauma of the past and present.

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Note

1. There were 146 artists and writers, accused with the highest charge as "enemies of the people"; some of them were executed, some others suffered for years in infamous communist prisons.

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