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## The Fall of the Masks: Virtues and Vices in Albanian Comedy in the Early 20th Century

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the key aspects of Albanian comedy in the early 20th century and its role in reflecting and critiquing the social, cultural, and political dynamics of the time. Early Albanian comedic works utilized humor and satire to unmask societal flaws and contradictions. Despite their significance, these comedies have often been overlooked in literary studies, particularly after World War II, leading to a gap in understanding their cultural and artistic impact. A central focus of this study is the symbolic “rising of the curtain” and the “fall of the masks,” representing the exposure of societal truths through comedic characters and narratives. From a linguistic perspective, these comedies employ devices such as irony, sarcasm, and hyperbole to amplify their critiques and engage audiences. The language of comedy in these works serves as a powerful tool for unveiling hidden realities, often using witty dialogue, puns, and rhetorical questions to challenge prevailing norms and provoke critical reflection. Furthermore, the use of distancing techniques, such as breaking the fourth wall, allows actors to engage directly with the audience, fostering an interactive and reflective experience. These linguistic and theatrical strategies, deeply rooted in the traditions of satire and humor, function as both entertainment and social commentary. By deconstructing societal masks, early Albanian comedy highlights the interplay between language, performance, and social critique, offering valuable insights into the cultural and linguistic heritage of the time.

**Keywords:** Linguistic Analysis; Irony; Sarcasm; Satire; Humor; Rhetorical Devices; Theatrical History

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## 1. Introduction

In the early 20th century, Albanian comedy embarked on a transformative journey that would lay the groundwork for modern theatrical expression in the country. This period, is linked with the emergence of new narratives that explored the virtues and vices of Albanian society. These narratives often delved into the complexities of cultural and moral transformation, portraying a society caught between tradition and modernity, reality and imagination. At the moment of crossing or breaking the boundary between the natural and the supernatural, between real time and space and imagined time and space, the reader is transported beyond the limits of the familiar<sup>[1]</sup>. This sentiment mirrors the state of Albanian theater during that era—a medium breaking free from its confines, yet still searching for its identity and purpose. Despite the significant contributions of pioneering authors who laid the foundations of Albanian comedy, there has been a notable lack of scholarly research dedicated to this formative period. Critical studies on comedy and dramaturgy have been limited, partly because the dramatic genre was less cultivated, and its key figures were often excluded from contemporary critical discourse within Albanian cultural studies.

Even with changes in political regimes over the past few decades, studies focusing on the origins of Albanian comedy and the evaluation of early 20th-century texts remain sparse. This oversight has left the trailblazers of the genre underappreciated, hindering a comprehensive understanding of their impact on Albanian culture and theater. In this frame, it is crucial to understand the mechanisms that allow comedy to reveal social virtues and vices. One of the most effective tools within comedic performance is dramatic irony—a concept explored by Lavandier in the second volume of “L’ABC della drammaturgia”. Lavandier builds on Walter Kerr’s thesis<sup>[2]</sup> which suggests that comedy often emerges from a seemingly “tragic” event that is softened by distance, whether in time, space, or both. This idea of distancing aligns with the metaphorical fall of the mask, symbolizing the shift from conventional societal roles to an unfiltered exposure of human flaws through humor. As in Bergson’s theory<sup>[3]</sup> this distance creates a “momentary anesthesia of the heart,” allowing the audience to detach emotionally from the object of laughter. This detachment transforms real challenges into comical narratives, reflecting both the vices—such as vanity, greed, or hypocrisy—and the virtues—like resilience or solidarity—found

in society. A key technique for achieving this distance is the breaking of the fourth wall, where actors directly address the audience. This device, rooted in the traditions of comedy, was also utilized by early Albanian playwrights. In their works, comic characters would engage the audience, revealing intentions or mocking other figures on stage. These methods minimized emotional identification with the characters, allowing the comedy to critique real-life challenges without evoking distress. In the same way that the classic comedy exaggerates painful situations—such as falls that would be tragic in real life—Albanian comedies turned difficult social realities into moments of relief, humor and reflection.

## 2. Methodology

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach, integrating literary analysis with linguistic and performative frameworks to explore early 20th-century Albanian comedy. The research focuses on how linguistic elements and theatrical techniques combine to critique societal norms, unmask vices, and celebrate virtues. By examining key texts and performances, the study uncovers the interplay between language, humor, and social commentary in shaping the comedic genre during this formative period.

The primary method involves a close reading of selected comedic texts, analyzing their thematic and narrative structures, particularly the symbolic “fall of the masks” motif. This motif is central to the exposure of societal truths, reflecting how early Albanian comedies addressed flaws such as hypocrisy, greed, and ignorance while celebrating virtues like honesty and solidarity. The study further investigates how these texts functioned as cultural critiques, offering a mirror to Albanian society of the time.

From a linguistic perspective, the analysis focuses on rhetorical and stylistic devices such as irony, sarcasm, satire, hyperbole, and wordplay. These elements are examined for their role in heightening humor, critiquing social norms, and engaging audiences. The use of dialects and colloquial language is also explored, revealing how these linguistic choices grounded the comedy in specific cultural and regional contexts, enhancing its relatability and effectiveness as social commentary.

The study also evaluates performative and theatrical aspects of early Albanian comedy, focusing on techniques such

as breaking the fourth wall, which allows actors to directly address the audience. This approach creates an interactive and reflective experience, bridging the gap between the stage and the audience. The timing and delivery of comedic elements, along with the symbolic use of masks in performances, are analyzed to understand their impact on both humor and the underlying critique of societal norms.

Additionally, the research situates these comedic works within their historical and cultural milieu, exploring the influence of political and social changes on the themes and linguistic strategies employed by the playwrights. Comparative references to Western theories of comedy, such as those by Henri Bergson and Walter Kerr, provide a broader theoretical framework to contextualize Albanian comedic traditions within global perspectives.

### 3. Irony, Distance and Exaggeration in “*The Marriage of a Lawyer*” by Foqion Postoli

In exploring the first comedies written in Albania in the early 20th century, it is essential to understand the role of satire, irony, and humor in exposing both virtues and vices in society. Foqion Postoli’s one-act comedy “*The Marriage of a Lawyer*” serves as a prime example of how early Albanian playwrights skillfully utilized humor to reflect social realities, critique outdated traditions, and celebrate national identity. This aligns with the larger theme of the fall of the masks, symbolizing a shift from conventional norms to a space where both virtues-like sincerity and patriotism-and vices-such as vanity and opportunism-are laid bare.

Foqion Postoli was born on July 23, 1889, in the city of Korçë, Albania. He was the son of a merchant family from Korçë, originally from Frashër, where he received the foundations of his education and upbringing. He attended elementary school in his hometown, later moving to Istanbul to study commerce for two years. Afterward, he emigrated with his family to the United States, settling in Massachusetts. There, he became actively involved with the Pan-Albanian Federation of America, Vatra, and served as secretary of its Brockton branch. For a time, he also worked for the newspaper Dielli (The Sun), where he published excerpts from his novels which were later published as standalone books.

On January 4, 1919, Postoli signed a memorandum ad-

ressed to the U.S. government, sent by the Vatra Congress, which convened at Winthrop Hall, Boston. In the memorandum, Postoli, alongside other Albanian immigrants, protested the demarcation of Albania’s borders according to the 1913 Treaty of London, which ceded more than two-thirds of Albanian territories to Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro. In 1921, Postoli returned to Albania and participated in the proclamation of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania. He passed away on October 2, 1927, at the young age of 38. Despite his short life, Postoli wrote significant literary works that reflect themes of patriotism, resistance to Ottoman rule, and rightful national pride.

Postoli’s literary, political, and social contributions unfolded during the final years of the Albanian National Awakening (Rilindja) and the early years of Albania’s independence. This period was a crucial time for the national movement, culminating in the country’s independence on November 28, 1912. Although he lived through different phases of history, Postoli’s works embody the ideals of the National Awakening: love for the homeland, deep disdain for Ottoman oppressors, and pride in the country’s history. Postoli’s use of distancing techniques, such as the absurdity of the women’s proposals and the exaggeration of Albanian customs, creates emotional detachment and enables the audience to laugh without empathy. This aligns with Bergson’s theory that comedy arises when individuals struggle to adapt to social realities, exposing both flaws and strengths. The humor lies in the contrast between societal expectations and individual behavior, a technique Postoli uses not only for entertainment but also as social critique, exposing the absurdity of superficial values and outdated customs.

### 4. “*The Marriage of a Lawyer*” through the Lens of Isolationism and Contextualism

The comedy “*The Marriage of a Lawyer*” centers on Mr. Franks Peterson, an Albanian lawyer living in the United States. After winning a major court case, he gains fame, and from that point, marriage proposals pour in. Several women—a socialite, a fashion enthusiast, and a singer—pursue him for his wealth. However, Peterson, the Albanian-American lawyer, ultimately chooses Miss Lenci Livingston, a kind-hearted and simple girl, to be his wife. He wishes to start

a family with her and dreams of returning to his homeland, Drenovë, where he hopes to reunite with his beloved mother, who has long awaited his return.

The *Marriage of a Lawyer* was staged by the National Theater in Tirana in 1987 under the title *Martesa e avokatit* (The Lawyer's Marriage), directed by Fatos Haxhiraj and Andrea Malo. Notable performances included Roland Trebicka, Marjeta Ljarja, Jetmira Lubonja, Luiza Hajati, Luljeta Hoxha, and Fadil Kujofsa. The comedy was published in 1991 by the Naim Frashëri publishing house, under the editorial care of Dhori Qiriazi.

Humor is one of the most challenging aesthetic categories, yet like tragedy, it produces catharsis. Aristotle observed that comedy educates and conveys coherent messages through laughter. Characters' flaws can be highlighted humorously to inspire improvement, as is the case in this play. The *Marriage of a Lawyer* celebrates Albanian virtues, character, and identity. Peterson proudly declares: "I am Albanian; don't be deceived by my American attire. When I go to Albania, I wear long woolen breeches, gaiters, shoes with pom-poms, carry two pistols, a dagger, and a belt of bullets. Woe to anyone who crosses my path!"<sup>[4]</sup>.

The first comedic element emerges from the clash of thoughts, which creates amusing situations. Arthur Schopenhauer was the first to identify this phenomenon, positing that laughter arises from the unexpected incongruity between concept and reality<sup>[5]</sup>. Meanwhile, Thomas Hobbes argued that comedy often involves a character's downfall or humiliation, rooted in a sense of "sudden glory" over another's misfortune<sup>[6]</sup>. Kant described comedy as a lack of logic in the sequence of events<sup>[7]</sup>. Henri Bergson later refined this idea, asserting that the essence of comedy lies in the physiological or social inability of an individual to adapt harmoniously to life's conditions<sup>[8]</sup>. The play opens energetically, with six reporters scrambling to interview Boston's most successful lawyer. The concept of marriage becomes the central thread, ensnaring both the audience and the reader as they witness the humorous attempts of three women - an aristocrat, a fashionista, and a singer - to win the bachelor lawyer's heart. Each proposal becomes increasingly absurd, showcasing the women's naivety and absurdity. One of the lawyer's winning courtroom strategies reflects the comedic approach of the play: "I found the thread to unravel that knot on the fifth day of the trial, through two witnesses who shed

light on the truth of the case. The jury unanimously cleared Anna Miller of all charges, and now she enjoys her freedom like a bird in flight."<sup>[9]</sup>.

Peterson's professional triumph mirrors his personal journey, culminating in his choice to marry Lenci, with whom he vows lifelong commitment. The play's humor derives from the unraveling of expectations, culminating in the marriage proposal.

Three core conditions for comedy, as noted by Bergson<sup>[10]</sup> are met in this play:

- humor must involve human elements. For example, a landscape can be beautiful or sublime but not humorous.
- emotional detachment is essential. In a society where everyone is rational, there would be little laughter.
- comedy requires a social context. Laughter demands an audience, as people rarely laugh alone.

The comedy presents a humorous contrast between appearance and essence, old traditions and new realities. This duality reaches its peak when Peterson marries Lenci Livingston, surprising the audience with an unexpected twist: "Lenci Livingston will be the lady of this house. Tonight, we will marry. Find the Albanian priest of Boston and bring him here for the ceremony, for tomorrow we leave for Albania. Tell him to prepare all marriage certificates, and you, James, arrange our passports."<sup>[4]</sup>.

This unexpected marriage aligns with Peterson's plan to return to his ancestral homeland: "My mother has set aside two barrels of fine mulberry raki for the wedding. Lenci, my dearest, tonight we bind our lives together in marriage. Let us pray to God to bless our union. Tomorrow, we leave for Albania, to spend our honeymoon in my homeland."

The comedic essence lies in the contrast between appearance and reality, between the outdated and the modern. Outdated traditions that try to pass as current often become sources of humor. The play skillfully employs satire and humor, two primary forms of comedy. Satire exposes societal flaws that deviate from ideals, while humor highlights quirks within the social sphere of the play. At times, the comedy even reaches the level of sarcasm, as Postoli uses humor to both entertain and critique social norms.

In line with the reflections of the Italian playwright P.M. Cecchini, the comedic framework in *The Marriage of a Lawyer* aligns with his idea that: "[...] laughter is to comedy

what salt is to food; it should not be so scarce as to leave the dish tasteless, nor so abundant as to make it bitter”<sup>[11]</sup>. This balance between excess and moderation in humor is evident throughout Postoli’s play, which carefully regulates the amount of comic elements to ensure an engaging narrative that entertains without overwhelming the audience.

In *The Marriage of a Lawyer*, humor is sprinkled in measured doses, ensuring that it enriches the narrative without undermining the serious undertones that accompany certain moments. Postoli uses laughter not just for amusement, but also as a tool to reveal truths about human nature, social roles, and the absurdity of certain traditions. Each character’s quirks and vanity are exaggerated enough to amuse the audience, but not to the point of ridicule or bitterness, in keeping with Cecchini’s advice to avoid turning comedy into something distasteful.

Similarly, the character of Franks Peterson is a study in the balance of comedic excess and restraint. His over-the-top proclamation: “When I go to Albania, I wear long woolen breeches, shoes with pom-poms, and carry two pistols; woe to anyone who crosses my path!”<sup>[12]</sup> - elicits laughter, but it is also a subtle commentary on how identity and tradition can become performative and absurd when out of context. Here, the humor lies in the unexpected shift between Peterson’s Americanized demeanor and his exaggerated Albanian persona, delivering both amusement and insight. Each encounter with a potential bride injects humor into the narrative, but the pace quickens just as the audience might grow weary of repetitive scenarios. By applying Cecchini’s idea of comedic moderation, *The Marriage of a Lawyer* avoids both extremes: it neither falls into blandness by withholding humor nor becomes overly bitter through excessive satire. Instead, Postoli achieves a delicate equilibrium, using humor to reveal character flaws, subvert expectations, and reflect on the contradictions of identity and tradition. The play exemplifies how, just as salt brings out the flavor in food, measured doses of humor can elevate a narrative, enriching it with meaning without overpowering its essence.

## 5. Virtues and Vices: Dhori Koti’s Comedy “Luloja”

Dhori Koti stands as one of the most influential figures in the development of Albanian publishing and cultural

life at the beginning of the 20th century. His dedication to the Albanian language made him a key proponent of literary dissemination at a time when Albania was undergoing significant social and cultural transformations following its independence in 1912. After a brief migration to the United States in 1903, Koti returned to Albania and began working in the “Korça Printing House”, one of the first printing presses to publish in the Albanian language. His early involvement in printing enabled him to cultivate a passion for publishing literature, ultimately turning the Korça press into an important center of literary production under his direction from 1916 to 1943. During this time, Koti published more than 160 works, including both domestic and international authors. His publications, known for their minimalist design and focus on typography, reflected a philosophy that prioritized content over form, emphasizing the importance of education and the spread of knowledge. One of his most celebrated works is the two-act comedy *Luloja* (1922), which became an essential contribution to Albanian theater. Through humor and satire, Koti explored hypocrisy, deceit, and the struggle for social mobility, presenting these universal themes in a local context.

The play premiered on May 11, 1935, in Korça and was enthusiastically received by the public. It centers around Luloja, a poor con artist who pretends to be a German baron named Luis Kamësori to win the love and fortune of Guguçja, a wealthy young woman. The comedic narrative revolves around misunderstandings and absurd situations, exposing the consequences of deception. As Luloja’s lies unravel, he is shamed and rejected, illustrating that authenticity triumphs over deceit. The moral message embedded within the play aligns with the broader theme of the fall of masks, as the characters’ facades crumble, revealing their true natures. This aligns with Molière’s notion that “every man wears a mask,” which time inevitably removes to expose the truth beneath. Scholars have extensively analyzed Molière’s use of the “mask” metaphor to critique social pretenses. In *The Misanthrope*, characters often conceal their genuine feelings behind a veneer of politeness and decorum, only to have these facades eventually exposed, leading to personal and social revelations. This unmasking process underscores the play’s central moral message: that authenticity and honesty ultimately prevail over hypocrisy and deceit.

### 5.1. Deception, Equivoques and Identity in “Luloja”

Through “Luloja”, Koti critiques the superficiality of ambition and the danger of valuing appearances over substance. Luloja’s fabricated identity represents the societal pressure to climb the social ladder through dishonest means. His efforts mirror the absurdity explored in Henri Bergson’s theory of the comic, where mechanical behavior or misaligned ambitions generate humor. Koti also addresses the dangers of idealism and naivety through Guguçja, whose romantic dreams and fascination with fairy tales make her an easy target for Luloja’s deception. As Oscar Wilde noted, “We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars,”<sup>[13]</sup> a sentiment that resonates with Guguçja’s desire to escape reality. However, her disillusionment and eventual rejection of Luloja mark her journey toward self-awareness and maturity, emphasizing that authenticity and moral values outweigh superficial desires. Luloja also employs distancing techniques reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht’s epic theater, where characters’ exaggerated behaviors prevent emotional identification and encourage critical reflection. This allows the audience to observe the absurdity of social ambition objectively, promoting awareness of the folly of deceit. Characters such as Luki, the bumbling servant, add another layer of comedy by unwittingly exposing Luloja’s lies. Luki’s role reflects the tradition of comic servants in classical theater, whose naive honesty often unravels their master’s schemes.

Koti’s use of satire mirrors Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of carnival, where societal norms are inverted, and characters act out exaggerated roles to expose contradictions within their society<sup>[14]</sup>. The tension between foreign influence and local identity - a recurring theme in Albanian literature - is evident in Luloja’s attempt to adopt a European persona to gain acceptance. Koti critiques the imitation of foreign cultures and suggests that true value lies in authenticity, not in borrowed identities.

### 5.2. The Legacy of “Luloja” in Albanian Theatre

“Luloja” stands as a cornerstone of Albanian comedy, contributing to the development of theatrical and literary genres during a pivotal period in Albania’s cultural history. Its universal themes remain relevant today, particu-

larly in the context of modern media and social image culture, where the pressure to present idealized versions of oneself is widespread. The play’s emphasis on the fall of masks - both literal and figurative - encourages audiences to confront the illusions they create and value honesty and integrity. His downfall, when the truth is inevitably revealed, serves as a humorous yet profound commentary on the consequences of deceit, embodying the moral imperative that all falsehoods are destined to be uncovered.

The play’s comedic devices, such as absurd situations and misunderstandings, reflect the struggles of individuals trying to adapt to a rapidly changing world. For example, Luloja writes an incomprehensible telegram in German, further entangling himself in his lies. Characters like Luki, the bumbling servant, unknowingly expose Luloja’s deceit, adding a layer of satirical humor to the narrative. These characters mirror the traditions of Commedia dell’Arte, where humor is drawn from exaggerated behaviors and direct engagement with the audience.

Guguçja’s character represents naive idealism, a reflection of the tendency to romanticize life and escape into fantasy. Her belief in Luloja’s fabricated identity highlights the dangers of aspiring to illusions over reality. This interplay between idealism and disillusionment aligns with Bakhtin’s concept of carnivalization, where comedy temporarily inverts societal norms to expose them in their most absurd forms. Guguçja’s eventual rejection of Luloja marks her transition to maturity, underscoring the theme that authenticity and honesty are essential for meaningful relationships.

Luloja also critiques class aspirations, with Luloja’s fraudulent pursuit of wealth revealing the fragile boundaries between social classes. The play’s humor lies in the contrast between the characters’ claims and their actual conditions, reflecting a society grappling with the pressures of modernization and foreign cultural influences. Luloja’s desire to climb the social ladder mirrors broader societal tensions, where traditional values often clash with imported ideals.

Koti’s minimalist approach to theatrical aesthetics complements the themes of his work. His focus on content over form emphasizes the importance of substance over appearance, aligning with the moral underpinnings of the play. The paper and typographic designs used in his publications reflect both economic constraints and a deliberate rejection of superficiality—a stance that echoes throughout Luloja.

The fall of the mask in *Luloja*—when *Luloja*’s deception is exposed—demonstrates the inevitability of truth. The play uses humor to dismantle pretense, reminding audiences that lasting happiness can only be achieved through honesty and integrity. The theatrical device of distancing allows the audience to reflect critically on the characters’ actions without emotional involvement, reinforcing comedy’s educational potential.

In the context of early 20th-century “*Luloja*” highlights the tension between modern ideals and traditional values, offering a mirror to a society in transition. Even today, the themes of deception and pretense resonate in a world dominated by social media and image culture, where the line between appearance and reality is often blurred. Koti’s work remains significant not only for its entertainment value but also for its moral and cultural insights. As a pioneer of Albanian comedy, Koti enriched the theatrical repertoire by blending humor with social critique. His characters, though flawed, offer a valuable window into human nature and societal dynamics. Through the fall of the mask, *Luloja* encourages audiences to reflect on their own lives and the importance of authenticity in a world often obsessed with appearances.

Koti’s work also aligns with Aristotle’s concept of comedy as an imitation of the less virtuous aspects of human behavior, prompting laughter not only for amusement but also as a tool for moral reflection<sup>[15]</sup>. Through absurd scenarios and satirical commentary, “*Luloja*” critiques the unjust norms of society and advocates for authenticity as a foundation for personal and social integrity.

To conclude, Dhori Koti’s “*Luloja*” exemplifies the transformative power of comedy in challenging societal norms and fostering self-awareness. By exposing the folly of ambition, the absurdity of pretense, and the importance of authenticity, the play offers a reflection on human nature and social aspirations. “*Luloja*”’s themes of identity, ambition, and morality continue to resonate, offering valuable insights for modern audiences navigating the complexities of appearance and reality in an increasingly image-conscious world. Koti’s contribution to Albanian comedy reflects the enduring relevance of theater as a tool for social critique, encouraging individuals to embrace authenticity and reject superficiality in both personal and public life. Through humor, irony, and satire, Koti not only entertains but also educates, leaving a

lasting legacy in Albanian theater and cultural history.

## 6. Identity, and the Role of Satire in Albanian Comedy through Grameno’s “The Curse of the Albanian Language”

In line with the transformative elements seen in Albanian comedy of the early 20th century, Mihal Grameno’s “*The Curse of the Albanian Language*”<sup>[16]</sup> provides a poignant example of how humor, satire, and social critique were wielded to confront pressing cultural and political challenges. Much like other comedies of the period that expose virtues and vices, Grameno’s play dismantles the hypocrisy of foreign influence while championing the virtue of national identity through language.

Set in 1886 Korçë, the play reflects the tensions between Albanian identity and Greek cultural domination, especially in schools and churches, where the use of Albanian was systematically suppressed. This suppression is depicted as a symbolic mask, imposed by foreign clergy to stifle the language that underpins Albania’s cultural identity. Through satire and humor, Grameno exposes the absurdity of these attempts, crafting a narrative where the mask of foreign superiority ultimately falls, revealing the hypocrisy and self-interest driving these efforts.

In “*The Curse of the Albanian Language*”, the characters Koloja and Gjini personify the struggle of Albanian youth to reclaim their language. Their frustrations mirror the larger societal yearning to strip away the mask of imposed identity and reconnect with their cultural roots. Similar to the themes explored in Dhori Koti’s *Luloja*, Grameno uses humor as a catalyst for resistance, revealing that beneath the mask of authority lies moral and intellectual emptiness. The foreign priests - like Sisoni - chant in Greek, ignorant of the meanings behind their words, embodying the vice of superficiality that Grameno satirizes throughout the play. This clash between authenticity and pretense serves as the heart of Grameno’s message: the refusal to teach and use Albanian is not merely an educational oversight but a moral and national betrayal. Much like the characters in *Luloja* who strive to climb the social ladder through deceit, the foreign clergy in Grameno’s play seek to dominate by manipulating language and culture, only to have their deceit exposed by the resilient

spirit of Albanian identity.

The irony within the narrative lies in the use of religious concepts like “curses” as tools of repression. Grameno reclaims this concept, transforming it into a symbol of empowerment: what is cursed by the oppressor becomes a source of resistance for the oppressed. His satire functions as a mask-breaking tool, revealing the virtue of authenticity and the vice of hypocrisy in a society grappling with both external pressures and internal contradictions. The curse becomes a metaphor not only for the cultural repression faced by Albanians but also for the transformative potential of language. This theme aligns with the broader exploration of Albanian comedy in the period, where laughter serves as a mirror to society, challenging conventions and exposing unjust norms. Much like the masks that fall in Postoli’s and Koti’s works, Grameno’s play encourages audiences to confront the illusion of imposed authority and recognize the power of language and culture as tools for emancipation.

“*The Curse of the Albanian Language*” remains a powerful example of the role of comedy in national awakening. It echoes Henri Bergson’s theory of humor, as the priests’ rigid and mechanical behavior—reciting foreign prayers they cannot comprehend—creates absurdity, inviting the audience to laugh at their foolishness. However, this laughter is not mere entertainment; it carries a deeper message about the importance of education in one’s native language and the virtue of cultural preservation.

Ultimately, the play’s mask-breaking humor calls for a return to authenticity. It aligns with the moral dimension seen in other early Albanian comedies, where characters must shed their illusions to uncover deeper truths about themselves and society. In Grameno’s work, the revelation of the clergy’s hypocrisy serves as a powerful metaphor for the broader need to protect cultural identity in a world prone to deception and false appearances. In the same way that Postoli’s “*Luloja*” unveils the futility of social pretense, “*The Curse of the Albanian Language*” demonstrates that truth and integrity will prevail, no matter how heavily masked by external pressures. Through humor and satire, Grameno offers a timeless reflection on the virtues of authenticity and resistance, inspiring future generations to safeguard their heritage and values amidst the changing tides of modernity. This interplay between satire, authenticity, and identity exemplifies the enduring power of Albanian comedy to entertain while

fostering critical thought and social awareness. Grameno’s contribution to Albanian theater complements those of Postoli and Koti, enriching the theatrical tradition with themes that resonate far beyond their historical moment, affirming the importance of language and culture in shaping national identity.

## 6.1. Fragmentation and Cohesion of the Text

Bertolt Brecht’s idea that “the fragmentation and connections between the ‘pieces of white thread’ in events and episodes must retain an internal structure... Yet, the distinct parts of the plot must be carefully combined and adjusted so that the groups of characters move in harmony”<sup>[17]</sup> offers an insightful framework for understanding the structure of Mihal Grameno’s *The Curse of the Albanian Language*. While Brecht is known for rejecting classical harmony, such as the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action, in favor of open forms characterized by fragmented episodes loosely linked to a central theme, his emphasis on the internal coherence of the fragmented structure resonates with Grameno’s approach.

In *The Curse of the Albanian Language*, Grameno employs episodic storytelling to critique societal and clerical hypocrisy. The plot unfolds through distinct yet interrelated scenes, each contributing to the overarching theme of cultural and linguistic emancipation. Similar to Brecht’s modernist experimentation, Grameno’s fragmented episodes are not bound by strict classical unity but are connected through thematic and ideological coherence. This structure aligns with Brecht’s principle that fragmentation and juxtaposition can serve to highlight contradictions and evoke critical reflection, rather than merely adhering to traditional notions of seamless harmony. Thus, Grameno’s play not only prefigures elements of Brechtian dramaturgy but also exemplifies how fragmented forms can effectively deliver a cohesive moral and cultural critique.

This Brechtian concept emphasizes that, even though events and narrative segments may seem fragmented or episodic, the story must still maintain a coherent and underlying structure. Every part should serve the overall meaning and thematic harmony of the narrative, ensuring that characters, conflicts, and moments interlock meaningfully. Let us explore how Grameno achieves this in his play and how he balances distinct scenes to serve both artistic and ideo-



logical purposes. At first glance, the text appears to consist of loosely connected episodes: clashes between characters, humorous dialogues, and sudden moments of introspection. These seemingly disconnected scenes reflect the chaotic social context of Albania in the late 19th century, when external pressures - especially from Greece - and internal divisions challenged the Albanian national identity. Grameno's deliberate fragmentation serves both as a mirror of reality and a technique to intensify the satirical tone of the play.

Each scene introduces a new problem or tension: young Albanians struggle to learn in a language foreign to them, hypocritical Greek clergy attempt to impose their influence, and the protagonists encounter both external obstacles and personal frustrations. However, these episodes are not isolated; rather, they interweave to reveal the larger conflict: the fight for cultural survival and the defense of the Albanian language as a fundamental aspect of national identity. Despite the episodic nature of the narrative, Grameno ensures an internal cohesion through recurring motifs and consistent character development. The recurring presence of key symbols - such as the curse, language, and hypocrisy - helps unify the scenes. The curse, for example, emerges both as a literal religious condemnation and a metaphor for the oppression of Albanian culture. Similarly, the characters' continuous struggle to use their native language across different episodes reinforces the central theme of resistance.

Furthermore, the play's dialogue and interactions are carefully crafted to maintain narrative rhythm and cohesion. Even as characters express frustration and humor, their words echo the broader concerns of the Albanian nationalist movement, creating a continuous emotional undercurrent that runs through the fragmented episodes. Each individual interaction, no matter how trivial it may seem, feeds into the larger narrative of resistance and identity formation. The relationships between characters serve as both narrative links and ideological reflections. The interaction between Koloja and Gjini, for instance, symbolizes the awakening of a new generation that seeks education and self-empowerment in their native language. On the other hand, the clergy figures, such as Sisoni and the Bishop, represent external pressures and hypocritical authority. These character groups are not static; they evolve and shift as the plot progresses. Koloja and Gjini's frustration turns into determination, while the clergy's influence begins to falter as the protagonists find strength

in their shared resistance. Grameno aligns these character movements carefully, ensuring that every shift serves the larger ideological message of the play - the empowerment of individuals through the preservation of language and identity. This careful alignment reflects the ideas of the author: although the plot may be fragmented into distinct scenes, the interplay between characters ensures a coherent movement toward the resolution of the central conflict. The tension between personal frustrations, collective struggles, and institutional pressures forms the emotional rhythm that binds the seemingly episodic narrative.

## **6.2. Fragmentation with Purpose**

In Grameno's play, the fragmentation of the narrative serves a strategic purpose. Each episode offers a different lens on the central conflict, enriching the audience's understanding of the struggle for cultural preservation. For instance, one scene may highlight the personal frustrations of students, while another exposes the hypocrisy of religious authorities. These shifts in focus create a dynamic narrative structure that reflects the complexity of real-life struggles. However, the fragmentation is not arbitrary. Grameno carefully calibrates each scene to build tension and maintain thematic continuity. The humor, satire, and frustrations expressed in the earlier episodes culminate in a deeper reflection on the power of language and culture. In this way, the individual scenes function like musical notes that, when combined, produce a narrative in which every element serves the greater whole. The fragmentation invites the audience to reflect critically on each scene rather than passively consume the story. The episodic nature encourages viewers to engage with the narrative actively, piecing together the connections between characters, symbols, and events. This structure transforms the play into a tool for social critique, urging the audience to consider the importance of language in shaping identity and resisting oppression. Through its episodic nature, recurring motifs, and evolving character relationships, the play achieves a delicate balance between fragmentation and cohesion. Grameno's work serves not only as an entertaining comedy but also as a powerful statement on the significance of cultural preservation and the role of language in defining national identity.

In aligning the fragmented structure with the ideological message of resistance, Grameno offers a narrative that is

both intellectually stimulating and emotionally resonant. His careful calibration of scenes and characters ensures that the play remains relevant to contemporary audiences, providing insight into the ongoing importance of language and identity in a rapidly changing world. Through humor, satire, and thoughtful reflection, *The Curse of the Albanian Language* invites us to consider the power of narrative as both a mirror of society and a tool for transformation.

## 7. Results

This study reveals that early Albanian comedy of the 20th century serves as both a reflection of societal virtues and vices and a platform for cultural and linguistic critique. The analysis highlights the interplay of humor, satire, and irony as tools to address socio-political issues and cultural identity. The findings can be summarized in the following key areas:

**Socio-cultural critique through humor:** Comedies such as Mihal Grameno's *The Curse of the Albanian Language*, Foqion Postoli's *The Marriage of a Lawyer*, and Dhorë Koti's *Luloja* effectively use satire and humor to critique societal flaws, including hypocrisy, deceit, and foreign domination, while advocating for virtues like authenticity, solidarity, and patriotism. These works expose the vices of societal structures, particularly in education, religion, and governance, through the lens of exaggerated, yet relatable, human behaviors.

**Linguistic strategies:** The comedies examined employ linguistic tools such as irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, and wordplay to amplify their critical messages. These techniques serve both to entertain and to provoke thought, grounding the humor in regional dialects and cultural idioms. The characters' use of language often highlights the social and cultural challenges of the time, making language a central theme in the broader critique.

**Performance and interaction:** Theatrical elements, such as employing distancing techniques, enhance the impact of these comedies. These methods engage audiences actively, encouraging them to reflect critically on the societal issues depicted. For example, the exaggerated behaviors of characters like Postoli's Franks Peterson or Koti's Luloja emphasize the absurdity of societal norms and values.

**Fragmented yet coherent narrative structures:**

These comedies utilize fragmented episodic storytelling while maintaining thematic coherence. The narrative cohesion is achieved through recurring motifs, consistent character development, and the overarching moral and cultural critique, which ties together the seemingly disjointed scenes.

**Historical and cultural significance:** The study underscores the significance of these works in preserving Albanian linguistic and cultural identity. By addressing the challenges of foreign domination and the need for cultural emancipation, these comedies have left a lasting imprint on Albanian literary and theatrical traditions.

## 8. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that early Albanian comedy not only entertained but also provided a critical commentary on the social, cultural, and political landscape of its time. This dual function underscores the genre's importance in the broader literary and cultural discourse. The study highlights a recurring tension between tradition and modernity in Albanian comedy. This dynamic reflects the transitional phase of Albanian society in the early 20th century, grappling with the pressures of modernization while striving to preserve its cultural and linguistic identity. Characters like Postoli's Franks Peterson and Koti's Luloja embody these struggles, their exaggerated personas revealing the absurdities of societal expectations and the fragility of constructed identities. A crucial insight from this research is the need to re-evaluate the contributions of lesser-known authors. While the towering figures of Albanian literature often dominate anthologies and critical studies, authors like Grameno, Postoli, and Koti played pivotal roles in shaping the comedic genre and fostering cultural dialogue. Their works demonstrate that the literary canon should encompass a diversity of voices, reflecting not only aesthetic values but also cultural and historical contexts.

By juxtaposing distinct scenes and characters, they invite reflection on the broader societal contradictions they depict. Moreover, the linguistic richness of these comedies highlights the interplay between language and identity. The use of colloquial expressions, regional dialects, and rhetorical devices not only enhances the humor but also situates these works firmly within the Albanian cultural milieu. This linguistic anchoring reinforces the central theme of cultural

preservation, making language both a medium and a message in these plays. In this context, the study reaffirms the enduring relevance of early Albanian comedy. In an era increasingly shaped by global influences and digital culture, the themes of authenticity, integrity, and cultural identity resonate as strongly as ever. By revisiting and re-evaluating these works, scholars can gain valuable insights into the foundational role of comedy in Albanian literature and its potential as a tool for social critique and cultural preservation.

## 9. Conclusions

The study of early 20th-century Albanian comedy, with key contributions from Mihal Grameno, Dhori Koti, and Foqion Postoli ecc., illustrates how comedy served as both a mirror and a catalyst for social change. The most common point of view considers the Albanian people with an early inherited European identity and also related with the geographical determination, which was lost as a result of historical fates and finally in an attempt to regain it<sup>[18]</sup>. This perspective underscores the deeper cultural tensions and aspirations reflected in these comedies, revealing a society striving to reconcile its historical legacy with the pressures of modernity. These playwrights employed linguistic strategies such as irony, sarcasm, and wordplay to explore themes of cultural identity, deception, ambition, and the clash between traditional values and foreign influence. Through these linguistic devices, they crafted dialogues that exposed societal flaws and created characters whose exaggerated language and speech patterns heightened the comedic effect while reinforcing their critique of societal norms. The symbolic fall of the masks in these works is not only a dramatic device but also a linguistic one, as the language shifts from formal to colloquial, unveiling deeper societal truths. By breaking down these facades, the plays emphasize authenticity and self-awareness as guiding principles in a society navigating change. The linguistic dichotomy between authentic and artificial speech in these plays exposes virtues and vices such as integrity versus hypocrisy and authenticity versus deceit. Moreover, the linguistic aspects of these comedies resonate with contemporary concerns about cultural preservation and the dangers of superficiality. The exaggerated rhetoric, use of satire, and ironic twists in dialogue reflect themes that

remain relevant in today's image-driven society, where performative language often overshadows substance. These comedies remind us that linguistic authenticity must prevail over superficiality. Laughter, amplified through linguistic devices, offers a means to confront uncomfortable truths while encouraging personal and societal growth. The enduring legacy of these works affirms that comedy, enriched with sophisticated linguistic tools, is not merely a form of amusement but a vital social instrument. These comedies, deeply rooted in the Albanian cultural context yet resonating with universal themes, continue to inspire reflection on identity, culture, and morality. They remind us of the enduring power of language and laughter as tools for emancipation and cultural continuity, offering lessons as relevant today as they were a century ago.

Lastly, while this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. The analysis focuses on a selection of early 20th-century Albanian comedies, which may not fully capture the diversity and scope of the comedic literature from this period. Future research should consider broadening the corpus to include a wider range of texts, particularly unpublished or lesser-known works, to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the genre. The study's linguistic analysis focuses on rhetorical and stylistic devices but does not extensively explore audience reception or the performative aspects of these comedies in historical contexts. Further research could investigate archival materials, such as performance records and audience reviews, to understand how these works were received and interpreted by contemporary audiences.

Finally, the study does not delve deeply into comparative analyses with comedic traditions from other Balkan or European countries. Future research could explore the interplay between Albanian comedy and broader European comedic trends, identifying shared themes, influences, and unique national characteristics.

In conclusion, early 20th-century Albanian comedy demonstrates the transformative power of humor and language to critique societal norms and foster cultural continuity. By addressing these limitations and expanding research in these directions, scholars can deepen the understanding of the cultural and linguistic significance of this genre, ensuring its enduring legacy in Albanian and global literary studies.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization, E.R.; methodology, J.S.; software, E.R.; validation, J.S. and I.S.; formal analysis, E.S. and I.S.; investigation, E.R. and J.S.; resources, E.R.; data curation, E.R.; writing—original draft preparation, E.R.; writing—review and editing, E.R. and J.S.; visualization, J.S. and I.S.; supervision, E.R. and J.S. project administration, E.R. and J.S.; funding acquisition, E.R. and J.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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