

## Recurrent Themes and Iconographic National Symbols: A Formalist Approach in the Comparative Study of the Selected National Anthems of Libya, France and Albania

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### Abstract

*This study explores the similar themes and symbols embedded in the national anthems to demonstrate how these anthems construct or preserve the collective imagination and identity. In order to disclose the similarities in the manner of emphasising patriotism and strengthening the national bonds, this study probes into three different national anthems: “Hymn to the Flag” of Albania, “La Marseillaise” of France and “God is the Greatest” of Libya. Although the three of them represent different cultures and they are located in different continents, they employ similar concepts, themes and symbols in their national anthems to heighten the sense of nationalism. In consideration of this affinity, this study aims at exploring the similarities in thematic aspects and the differences in formulation in which their peculiar culture is reflected and constructed. As such, this analysis discusses the functions and cultural meanings of the national anthem by featuring the theme of unity, duty, and the propaganda of the lurking enemy through the formalist approach.*

**Keywords:** National Anthems, Unity, Duty, Liberty, Creation of Enemy, Formalism

### 1. Introduction

Having grown out of the Russian literary criticism in the late nineteenth century, the Formalist Theory or New Criticism is based on the analysis of a text by putting the emphasis on words on the page since it regards them “autonomous” (Habib 100). Instead of focusing on the historical and biographical background of the author, the Formalist approach emphasizes on close reading. This kind of study enables the critic interpret a text from different perspectives by saving him or her from the restrictions of emotions and intentions of the author (Brook 246) Thus, by accepting and internalizing the “literariness” of a work, this approach views a work as an aesthetic object, so that it requires a comprehensive analysis of literary devices. This emphasis on form and content does not necessarily cast out the meaning, rather it mulls over the message and how it is structured rather than emotions. In the light of this approach, this study aims at exploring the lyrical content and form of the national anthems of three countries from different cultures and different continents: “Hymn to the Flag” of Albania, “La Marseillaise” of France and “God is the Greatest” of Libya. As far as this study is concerned, this study focuses on the recurrent thematic similarities and structural differences in the analytic comparison of three national anthems.

National anthems are official songs of countries which are sung during the special national occasions. Historically, there is no or little consensus among the critics about the origin of the

national anthems. Peter Mwinwelle postulates that they date back to the Ancient Greek customs for praising deities and this was later adopted by countries (162). It is also acknowledged that the first nation anthem belongs to Netherlands which was written and composed by a French musician in 1568 (Cusack 237). For some critics, such as C. Kellen, an anthem does not mean anything without music. Thus, she believes “*the words that must always be sung, that have always been sung. That is how those words and that tune seem like permanent signs. That is how they make entities like nations appear to be permanent*” (166). The appeal of musical composition stems from the fact that national anthems are solemnly regarded as a song to praise. Although other critics such as Karen A. Cerulo accepts the praising and elevating function of the anthems, they are more interested in lyrical structures which are constructed by divine national symbols. According to Cerulo, these national anthems represent a nation’s history, glorify its history and liberty, and celebrate the victory. Hence, they are considered significant instruments in terms of evoking unity, commitment, and prosperity in a collective identity. Although they are different in their musical composition, almost all the national anthems are similar across the countries through the lyrical context.

In this regard, Cerulo defines national anthems as “*official patriotic symbols-the musical equivalent of a country's motto, crest, or flag. As such, they represent the nation's identity or character-its mood, desires, and goals as put forth by those in power*” (“Sociopolitical Control” 78). As understood from her definition, the national anthems play a prominent role in the representation of a country. Countries employ similar themes such as freedom, duty, responsibility, courage, readiness to die, unity, loyalty, glory, liberty and etc. These themes are sacralised and accompanied by national iconographic symbols such as mottoes, flags, crests, martyrs. All these motivating patriotic actions are constructed in the lyrics of national anthems in the subtle forms.

These national anthems have a lot of functions, particularly when considering the fact that they are sung in every significant national occasion, whereby their psychological effect on masses to praise a nation cannot be denied. For Cerulo, they serve mainly three goals of a country: “*to create bonds, motivate patriotic actions, honor the efforts of citizens, and legitimize formal authority*” (“Symbols and World Systems”244). To be able to achieve their national goals and to create a powerful sense of national spirit, governments and ruling bodies in a country benefit from the anthems through symbolic structures in the anthems. The national symbols embedded in the anthems are so significant, whereby each leader wants to evoke and heighten the national allegiance in the most impressive and appealing way. Karl W. Deutch puts forward five types of symbols as follows: 1. abstract symbols (slogans and mottoes), 2. pictorial symbols (flags, flowers, statue), 3. personal symbols (national heroes such as kings, warriors or poets), 4. symbolic places, 5. symbolic organisations or institutions 6. religious symbols. These symbols establish and/or perpetuate the enthusiasm for the national identity, allegiance, sovereignty and solidarity. However, each country provides these patriotic motivations through different symbolic constructions.

## **2. A Call for Unity, Duty and Liberty: Thematic Interpretation**

Even though they belong to different regions and religions, Albania, France and Libya seem to share the same standpoint in the concept of nationalism. The first clear thematic similarity asserts itself in propagating the nationalistic unity and solidarity. The three national anthems; “Hymn to the Flag” of Albania, “La Marseillaise” of France and “God is the Greatest” of Libya are configured on different symbolic forms to address their own target audience for the

same purpose in order to create and/or reinforce the desired national unity in a particular nation. In “Pledge to the Flag” of Albania, the call for unity is structured in the first lines on the imaginary and symbolic bonding function of a flag.

Around the flag united  
With a desire and a reason  
All vowing to him  
To unite the word for freedom (1-4)

As discerned from the first stanza of the Albanian national anthem, the flag is employed as a sacred national symbolic code which unites individuals with a collective dream and desire. By highlighting the national role of a flag for a particular country, Whitney Smith points out “*Like other symbols, flags express the unity and identity of one group as against all others; it is a way of asserting the bonds which link people despite differences in their wealth, social standing, power, or age*” (37). The desire to be one in a particular community despite the differences is emphasized by word repetitions. To exemplify, the word “a” or “one” is repeated 8 times in the Albanian anthem. This unity is accompanied by the theme of holy mission of the citizen: “*The Lord Himself has said/ That Nations vanish from the earth/But Albania will live*” (13-15). Thus, the pledge to the flag in the Albanian society includes a sacred vow for protecting the sovereignty of Albania even at the expense of dying. Thus, through this national anthem, Libya both evokes courage and justifies the death for a nation. Actually, the anthem goes beyond justification and views this kind of death as a sign of victory of proud since it calls the citizens who can die while defending their country as “martyr” (8).

This call for unity echoes in “La Marseillaise” of France with the use of a pictorial symbol, French flag. However, Albania unites the individual under one reason and one desire or common ideal “*to protect our homeland in anywhere*” (10), whereas France utilizes military abstract symbols to strengthen the national bonds. This abstract symbol is designed on the bloody images of war and revenge that is depicted as follows: “*Against us the bloody flag of tyranny/ is raised; the bloody flag is raised*” (3-4). Here, there are two repeated words, “bloody” and “flag”. When compared to the depiction of unity under one flag in the national anthems of Libya and France, it is obvious that they put different sentiments to use for inspiring national pride and collective identity. France portrays a fearsome warlike atmosphere through the employment of military terminology such as marching, comrades, arms, battalions, and etc. Regarding this variation in tone, France attempts to convey the theme of national unification in a serious mood through a military voice. Thus, while Albania uses the sense of holy mission to protect its own homeland, in French, the anthem with the sense of death, war, fear, and vengeance are used as instruments to lay the stress on allegiance and solidarity.

This military voice of France is also accentuated in Libya’s “God is the Greatest” in the first stanza: “*With faith and with weapons I shall defend my country/ And the light of truth will shine in my hand/ Sing with me!*” (3-5). The speaker in the poem addresses the reader by making his community witness his sacred duty “to defend” the country in unity and solidarity. To act together, the speaker invites the reader to sing the anthem together with him. As seen in the anthems of Albania and France, the main idea is the same that is to sustain the sovereignty and solidarity in a particular culture. Even though the common ideals to unite and protect the country show parallelism with the national anthems of Albania and France, it can be argued that Libya uses more religious tones because the anthem repeats the

word God eleven times, and it stresses the religious terms such as faith and light of God. To put it in a nutshell, to call for unity and duty, Libya makes use of religious symbols and tries to unite people under one faith.

### **3. Creation of Enemy and Verbal Violence: Structural Interpretation**

In order to generate the theme of unity and call for a holy mission to protect the homeland, almost all the national anthems need to construct “the other” as an enemy. The sense of having a common enemy is thought to intensify the feelings of solidarity and prepare the citizens to die easily in an instable or dangerous political atmosphere. Being well aware of this fact, political leaders make use of this psychological function of the national anthems. As a result, in the designation of a national anthem, almost all nations’ propagandas lurk enemy in their anthems. Taking this specific function into account, it is possible to argue that the three national anthems verbally use the propaganda of an enemy at the door to heighten the sense of patriotism and national pride. To feature the idea of enemy and impeding threat against liberty or freedom of the homeland, they rely on lexical devices such as word frequency, word repetition, synonymy or antonymy.

Out of the three national anthems, Albania postulates the mildest sense of enemy. During the whole anthem, the discourse of enemy is created in the last two lines of the third stanza as follows: “Our rights we don’t share them/ Here the enemies don’t have a place” (11-12). This oath to protect the country is viewed in Libya in a more hateful way. It creates a brutal “enemy”, “treacherous tyrant”, “oppressor”, “aggressor” “the Imperialists”. Hence, all these words are intentionally selected for the description of an enemy to reflect its colonial inheritance and glorify the glorious victory over the colonialist. As derived from the word selection and repetition, Libya’s national anthem presents more an inimical treatment in a more repulsive way than Albania does. However, this sense of hatred and repulsion against the enemy is reflected in a most bloody and hateful way in France’s national anthem. When considering the whole anthem, the enemy is described as “bloody”, “tyranny”, “ferocious soldiers”, “Impure blood”. To be able to make the enemy’s presence felt, the poet makes use of sensory imageries as follows:

Do you hear, in the countryside  
The roar of those ferocious soldiers?  
They are coming right into your arms  
To cut the throats of your sons, your comrades!  
...  
Lets march, lets march  
That their impure blood  
Should water our fields (5-12)

Likewise, the speaker appeals to the hearing and sight senses of the reader. Consequently, the binary opposition between the comrade and the enemy is drawn in such discernible way that all the lexical meanings defining the other dehumanize the enemy with negative and barbarous adjectives. Such violent attitude displayed in the national anthems is explained by Oluga along these lines:

This form of linguistic violence employed in some national anthems aimed at preventing the activities of those identified or labelled as enemies of the nations in question. The linguistic violence therefore is intended to mobilize the target audience of the anthems to disallow any anticipated or perceived

moves of those seen as adversaries of nations aimed at oppressing the people or subjecting them to humiliation. (13).

In the argument of Oluga, this linguistic violence and enemy design contribute to the national alliance and comradeship for the target reader in the French society. It also justifies or legitimizes the act of killing or racism as seen in the description of the enemy's impure blood.

Considering the forms of the three national anthems, it could be stated that each one presents the same or similar ideas in different forms. For instance, the Albanian national anthem consists of four stanzas in a free verse style. As induced from the title "pledge to the Flag" In four stanzas, the anthem depicts a serious promise of a country by heightening the feeling of allegiance, national commitment and holy duty to die in the case of danger for the country. This anthem shows an oath of a nation who strive to remain free even at the expense of being martyr. The tone and diction can be regarded as moderate when compared to France and Libya. France's anthem consists of seven stanzas in a black verse. From the very beginning, France uses a serious tone to call the attentions to the significance of the national togetherness and sovereignty. This serious tone is manifested through the use of imperative mood: "Arise, children of the Fatherland" (1). Throughout the poem, the reader feels the speaker's authoritative commands for calls to awake, arise and work for the future. This imperative tone creates a strong image of France's desire to command and dominance. Accordingly, the French anthem is more aggressive with the repetition of "let's march, let's march" and to cut the enemy's throat and water their own land with their "impure" blood.

Hence, it can be said that there is some similarities between France's aggressive and serious tone and Libya's serious tone. However, when regarding the name of Libya's national anthem, "God is the Greatest" or "Allah-u Akbar" in the original version from the Formalist Approach, this anthem can be conceived as a hymn to Libya's freedom and sovereignty in the form of prayer. Allah-u Akbar is known as "takbir that states God is greater than anything that can be named" (Oxford Islamic Studies). This takbir is used in Muslims' prayers and is significantly used as a slogan in Muslims' societies. By means of this form, the national anthem of Libya serves two political functions. First, the anthem intends to construct and convey the sense of nationalism through the common faith in their society. Second, it aims to disdain the material power of the enemy, oppressor or the imperialist by putting the emphasis on the invincible power of the one and the most powerful God. Thus, by means of this anthem, Libya both prays for and praises its own society and culture.

#### **4. Conclusions**

To recapitulate, this study aimed at presenting a linguistic and textual analysis of the three national anthems which are the representatives of three different regions, including Europe, Africa, and Balkans. Although they are far from each other and they have different cultures, this study has found that in the manner of conveying national identity, they follow almost the same pattern. Thematically, the three national anthems share similar ideas in terms of sustaining the patriotic actions and motivations. All of them promote the significance of national ties by making some sentiments susceptible such as courage, sense of responsibility, national proud, commitment to liberty, and limitless allegiance to the country. Even if there are some slight differences in tone and mood, the three anthems achieve a common enemy through the linguistic violence. These themes and linguistic constructions are displayed through a series of imaginary codes and symbols. In this regard, this study observed that all the anthems differ by the designation or configuration of these codes. While Albania benefits



from the symbolic meaning of the flag, France makes use of bonding and protecting the symbolic function of the army. In contrast to both anthems, Libya underlines the role of the spiritual power, so that it expresses this power of faith inside with the emphasis of God in the prayer form people. This can be interpreted as evidence that social, cultural and historical experience impinge upon the linguistic construction.

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