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Barbara Halla



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Barbara Halla

- 1 There are few men in Musine Kokalari's fiction.¹ Few that matter anyway. Whether in the short stories that make up her debut collection *Siç më thotë nënua plakë* [Tales from my Grandmother] or her only full-length novel *Sa u tunt jeta* [How Life Swayed], it is women who propel forward the story, who make the Albanian world spin.² Of course, there are women in the domestic space: they clean, they cook, they gossip; they help pregnant women give birth, and they put children to bed by reading them fairytales. But there are also women who do labor: they do farm work, take care of livestock, cut down wood, and manage household economies. And the women in Musine Kokalari's fiction negotiate with each other: they are portrayed as the ideators and implementers of the intricate marriage arrangements that were the bedrock of Albanian society at the turn of the twentieth century.³ Their inner lives are as complex as the roles that they perform. If Italian scholar Mauro Geraci describes Kokalari's worldview as permeated by a "gentle, lofty, and muted anthropological sensibility," it is a voice that shifted radically after the poetry of her teenage years, collected only posthumously under the title *Kolla e vdekjes* [The Cough of Death].⁴ The women who speak in her later works are not tender, nor are they maternal if the maternal is understood as gentle and nurturing. These women have to ensure their livelihood, often against the backdrop of poverty and unhelpful husbands. They do not have the time, nor the patience, for tenderness. And they fight: they fight in the streets, they throw insults at each other, and they break decorum.
- 2 What to make of Kokalari's women and the way she writes about them? To define them as complex requires that I place Kokalari within the literary and historical context she was inspired from and writing against: a strictly male literary canon where

motherhood emerged as a woman's sacred duty. While a recurring presence in epic poems and prose, the women of Albanian literature were first and foremost heroic mothers, idealized figures of mythical proportions that modelled a sacrificial form of womanhood. Under the pen of male authors, and in the male imagination, they were granted very little beyond this role.⁵ Inspired by the National Renaissance Movement, Albanian authors of the mid-to-late nineteenth century were literary and political men, and they saw literature as a battleground where Albanian identity was shaped and legitimized. The poetry and prose of this period is characterized by a self-mythologizing ethos that blended oral narratives with poetic melodrama to establish a new canon through which Albanianness itself would be defined and proved.⁶ In his seminal work chronicling the history of Albanian literature, Robert Elsie writes that “[it] was the Rilindja [National Renaissance] period... which moulded Albanian literature and determined many of its subsequent characteristics.”⁷ Kokalari too was shaped in part by this canon and her ethnographic fiction is deeply interested in Albanian history and folklore.⁸ But she also belonged to a literary tradition in transition, as the patriotic elan of mid-to-late nineteenth century Albanian literature gave way to a modern realism that depicted and denounced the poverty and subjugation of its most marginalized classes.⁹

- 3 Literary scholar Sazana Çapiriqi writes that the “Albanian literary canon is built on the foundations of a traditional conception of literature which considers literature as the arena of heroic individuals of extraordinary talent.”¹⁰ Çapiriqi argues that this conceptualization of literature has expelled Albanian women – as characters and as writers – from its canon. Educated in the classrooms built in the aftermath of the National Renaissance Movement, Kokalari engaged directly with the Albanian canon and the men who wrote it. But her passion for folklore and its roots in the ordinary inspired her interest in the real lives of Albanian women – women who had remained at the margins of the stories being written by Kokalari's male contemporaries.¹¹ In this vein, this article argues that Kokalari's work can be read as a challenge and expansion of the mythological and male-centric canon of Albanian literature.
- 4 In considering Kokalari's position and her challenge to the Albanian canon as a woman writer focusing on women, it is crucial to look at her writing through the prism of genre, as well as gender. So far, I have referred to her writing as fiction, and “fiction” perhaps best describes the form of her published works. But analyzing Kokalari's narrative writing in conjunction with her dairies, memoirs, and correspondence, I contend that her writing blends memoir, fiction, and ethnography to produce books that act also as an archive of the customs of southern Albanian life at the turn of the century. Kokalari's work straddles the porous borders between genres, employing both fiction and ethnography. Acknowledging this allows me to bring in the question of method as well, and what her methodology reveals about her commitments as a thinker. More specifically, it allows me to conceptualize Kokalari as a feminist thinker at a time when she may not have thought of herself in those terms. In doing so, Kokalari's work can be used to ask broader questions about the way the depiction of women's lives necessitates the creation of new genres, as well as the role of literature as feminist work and practice.¹²
- 5 This article will show that by paying close attention to women's lives, Musine Kokalari's fiction highlights the importance of women's knowledge and underscores how the domestic is important to the formation of national identity and history. To make my

argument, I will interweave a close reading of two of her books with her diaries and correspondence. I begin by looking at the introductory short story to the collection *Tales from my Grandmother*. The meta-fictional elements in this first story confirm Kokalari's commitment to women's knowledge and intellectual contributions. I then analyze Kokalari's only full-length novel, *How Life Swayed*, examining the diverging relationship dynamics between its women. By comparing the fictional elements of this book to the essay that serves as its coda, I show how these dynamics were informed by the need to ensure one's own survival amid gendered restrictions. Although I reference Kokalari's diaries and correspondences throughout this article, the final section will focus directly on her autobiographical writing to discuss her method and her decision to focus on women's lives. I will make the case that Kokalari's methodology – rooted in oral history – espoused a feminist ethos by design, including by making and citing the women in her life as her collaborators in the texts she wrote. Throughout, I will demonstrate that by concentrating on women's stories, not only did Kokalari produce an authentic record of Albanian women's lives which have historical and ethnographic value. In choosing women as her subject matter, she also produced “a literature of her own,” which – while inspired by the canon she was educated in – allowed her to depart from the epic tradition of Albanian literature.¹³

Women as Narrators

- 6 Kokalari published her first book, *Tales from my Grandmother*, in 1939 with her brother's printing house, Mesagjeritë Shqiptare.¹⁴ The ten short stories were written at the encouragement of Albanian academic Aleksandër Xhuvani in the summer between Kokalari's first and second years at university.¹⁵ Contemplating this assignment in her Rome diaries, Kokalari describes her work as “representing the life, thoughts, pains, superstitions and miracles of [my] people.”¹⁶ That this representation focuses almost exclusively on women and their domestic concerns should not be taken for granted: with few exceptions, the ordinary lives of Albanian women had escaped the notice of Kokalari's predecessors and contemporaries.¹⁷ In her fiction, Kokalari reveals an instinctive understanding that the domestic is also a space where history unfolds and is thus worthy of attention. This is clear in *Tales from my Grandmother*, which features stories where women discuss their daily burdens and dramas unvarnished by lyrical poeticism or attempts at heroization. Even though these stories are fictional, they are also the product of Kokalari's own childhood in Gjirokastra and her ethnographic work, undertaken independently by Kokalari throughout her twenties. The passion for folklore and the drive to collect were impulses that haunted Kokalari from her very childhood.¹⁸ In *My Life at University*, where she wrote about her four years in Rome, Kokalari records the summers she spent gathering stories and songs from family members and other women.¹⁹ Her archives at the Albanian National Archives are replete with notes upon notes of ethnographic material collected when Kokalari was a young researcher, with her first forays into this type of work dating back to her teenage years.²⁰ Even during her internment in Rrëshen, when her ability to conduct that type of research was curtailed, her time in prison or Rrëshen was still marked by an ethnographic impulse.²¹
- 7 From the autobiographical material available to date, it seems that Kokalari had received little to no formal training in ethnography or anthropology: her university

degree at La Sapienza was in literature. In describing her work as ethnographic, I follow Mauro Geraci and Simonetta Ceglie, among other scholars, who use these terms to characterize Kokalari's research and writing.²² As I mention above, Kokalari's foray into ethnographic research on southern Albania is deeply personal, but her scope and methodology are informed by her cultural milieu, including her older brothers' involvement in the Albanian literary scene as writers and publishers. Geraci classifies Kokalari's literary works as "tregime etnografike" (ethnographic stories), a genre particular to early 20th century Albanian literature.²³ The Albanian word "tregime" has a closer equivalent in the Italian "racconto," while the English term "story" or "short story" loses some of the collective and folkloric nuances of "tregime." Geraci describes tregime etnografike as literary works that "provide important scientific support to the cause of political independence and the construction of [Albanian] national identity. Such stories take the form of short popular sketches, infused with tones that veer from the ironic to the melancholic and stage events that try to document, film, exalt but also criticize the linguistic, proverbial, ritual, institutional and moral aspects of agropastoral Albania."²⁴ "Tregime etnografike" can be found in the works of many of Kokalari's contemporaries, including Migjeni, Ernest Koliqi, and Mitrush Kuteli. What sets Kokalari apart is her conscious focus on gender and the blending of research with personal experience to write fictional stories that border on the auto-fictional.

- 8 In this section, I will focus on the opening text of *Tales from my Grandmother*, which bears the same name as the collection in which it appears. This story, perhaps more than any other in the book, displays the porous boundaries between fiction, memoir, and ethnography. While less rich in details than other stories, I suggest that its meta-literary framing grants authority to the figure of the grandmother, but also underscores the complicated dynamics that undergird the relationship between women in Albania, especially at a moment of cultural and political transition. "Tales from my Grandmother" opens with a challenge. As the story begins, we are directly immersed in the perspective and voice of an older Albanian woman (ostensibly the narrator's grandmother) who confronts her granddaughter with a question: "Leave me alone, kid, don't mess with my head, don't waste my time. Why do you care about the way we used to live?"²⁵ This sentiment bookends the story, with the motif returning in the conclusion as well: "I can't even look at you, get out of my sight, you're hurting my eyes. Go away and don't bother me again. I don't have time for any of this. Who cares how we used to live, you have your life, we have ours."²⁶ In oral testimonies, we are used to being met with willing subjects eager to share their memories, to have their voices heard. But in this story, the encounter between the ethnographer and the informant is disrupted. The subject of the research is not simply reluctant; she is unwilling. Although Kokalari's stand-in wants to investigate women's lives, bringing them into history, the grandmother figure questions the validity of the entire project. As I will bring to the fore in the third section, Kokalari's interest in the domestic was dismissed as trivial, often from the very subjects whose lives she was trying to chronicle.
- 9 And yet, the entire framing of this first collection is predicated on a retelling. Through this framing, and by presenting the first story through the voice of the grandmother, Kokalari establishes the grandmother as a narrator/creator in her own right, granting her authority as a storyteller. Thus, the grandmother is positioned as a bearer of knowledge about the world, especially a world where women are at the center of history. In doing this, Kokalari is restituting women to the literary and historical

canon. Furthermore, she is presenting women as writers – broadly conceived – who are capable of artistic creation through storytelling, where storytelling itself has an expansive definition (it includes tales, gossip, and even these intimate exchanges). In this story, Kokalari acknowledges the debt that she owes her grandmother and presents the collection as a collaboration between granddaughter and grandmother.

- 10 “Tales from my Grandmother” dramatizes a conversation between a granddaughter and her grandmother, although the granddaughter (a stand-in for Kokalari herself) never speaks. Conversation may not be the right phrase: instead, we read only the grandmother’s response to the granddaughter’s desire to hear about her life and her customs. In return, she is met with contempt not only about her project, but about what her granddaughter represents. “Oh time, ruthless time that has turned this world upside down,” the grandmother’s tirade begins:

Go away, I can’t stand to look at you. You make my skin crawl when I see your bare legs and naked head. You’re a grown up now, you’re as big as a cow, look how tall you’ve gotten. Your head can hit the roof ... you’re ready to be married off and yet you still haven’t come to your senses. Get out of my sight. And now you want me to tell you about our times.²⁷

- 11 The remainder of this story follows the same pattern. While the grandmother might not have wanted to talk about the past, she has a lot to say about the present. She chastises her granddaughter about her refusal to marry, her desire to become a teacher, and even the time that she spends “writing, reading, and scribbling nonsense,” the nonsense encompassing Kokalari’s ethnographic work as well.²⁸ She continues to rally against modern women who refuse to marry and have public relationships with their boyfriends and fiancés. For the grandmother, the present is marked by a total breakdown of decorum – including well-established gender roles. Precisely on the point of decorum, she turns the granddaughter’s question on her head: “Ha, you want to know what our customs used to be? Well, we listened when grownups spoke to us, we also held our own, but at least we behaved properly.”²⁹ This grandmother figure – like many of the women in Kokalari’s stories – refuses a narrative of easy progress.
- 12 Kokalari’s works were published during an era a marked by palpable social transformation. The landscape for Albanian women was changing markedly, although not as rapidly or as radically as in other places, as she grew up. In 1928, the new Civil Code established a minimum age of marriage for girls (sixteen) and gave them the right to divorce and to inherit. The education law of 1934 opened up courses (including night courses) to fight illiteracy, in particular among women, building upon the work of women activists who had advocated for equal education for women for several decades. Such advocacy had begun by the late nineteenth century, and the first movements dedicated precisely to women’s education emerged in 1909.³⁰ As detailed in her autobiography, Musine spent her formative years taught by teachers who had been activists for girls’ education, in schools they had opened for that specific purpose: including activists Urani Rumbo and the Qiriazis sisters.³¹ While these opportunities were ostensibly available to all women, not many could take advantage of them. As a result, these schools created a class of highly educated women campaigning for women’s rights.³² In this sense, the anger on display in this introductory story is also the anger of a woman whose world is going through a monumental shift that leads to great uncertainty over the place she holds in it. This uncertainty is visible in the grandmother’s words:

I don't know how did we get to this point? No one looks at us, no one listens to us, no one cares about us. Everyone brushes us aside and no one turns their head in our direction. They think they can touch the stars, and so to them we look like rags. But it is men's fault too, they let you command. They have now become women, and you have become men.³³

- 13 The vocabulary at play here is revealing: the grandmother is experiencing what philosopher Stanley Cavell calls a lack of acknowledgment.³⁴ She feels unseen and unheard, and thus describes herself as a rag. And she blames this transformation on young women, taken aback by the upending of gender norms that she herself had helped maintain. This story explores precisely the tension inherent to how women of various generations see their place in this patriarchal world, but also how they help uphold it in exchange for a limited amount of agency. To understand the grief experienced here it is at the same time important to understand the role Albanian women played within the structure of Albanian society. As I will explore later in my analysis of the mother-daughter relationship in *How Life Swayed*, Kokalari is acutely aware of the way that women wield limited freedom in Albanian society. The only space where they get to explore agency and power is within the household, where they command children and brides. In the configuration of this new world, even that power over the destinies of their daughters or granddaughters (the power to set them up for marriage, or to command around a new daughter-in-law and oversee her performance within the household) is waning. While this new generation of women have more freedom to determine the course of their lives, their grandmothers and mothers are trapped in their previous roles and lack any independence. Even their one ability to wield power in the domestic sphere is now curtailed and there is nothing to be gained in exchange, as younger women create lives and households outside their immediate reach. The world is changing, but not to their apparent benefit.
- 14 In Cavell's essay "The Avoidance of Love," acknowledgment is intimately tied to the question of looking, of seeing someone and recognizing their pain and the responsibility that pain places upon the seer.³⁵ So the grandmother in this story feels not merely unacknowledged, but also unseen. "No one looks at us," she says. People pass by and don't even glance back. The notion of the gaze and the idea of looking permeate this introductory chapter. At various points in the narrative, the grandmother balks at her granddaughter: "I can't stand to look at you," while also saying that she can't bear to look at other young women either.³⁶ There is even a moment when she breaks down, saying "My eyes weep, please girl, I just want to see you as a bride, because I am old and who knows what will happen to me." This is a slip, a rare moment of vulnerability that betrays a hidden pain underlying the anger on display. But the moment does not last. By the end of the story, the grandmother puts an end to the discussion by telling her granddaughter: "I can't bear to look at you... when you're in front of me like this, I don't want to see you for one thousand years."³⁷ The question of acknowledgment is a two-way street. If the grandmother feels unseen, she too refuses to see in return. And while she seems to suffer from a lack of acknowledgment, she also refuses to be seen: "Why do you look at me like that?" she asks her granddaughter. This breakdown in solidarity is simultaneously a refusal to be truly known.
- 15 Ultimately, Kokalari's decision to open this collection of short stories about the lives of Albanian women with a refusal underlines the difficulty of recording women's lives. The vocabulary and sentiments of the grandmother to whom these stories belong set

the tone for the rest of the collection. In these other stories, women fight over slights of honor; women bear the burden of the entire household; women discuss infidelity, marriages, and immigration. What are we then to make of this introduction? In Kokalari's work, Albanian women are not portrayed as paragons of a docile and gentle domesticity, but rather as weather- and life-worn figures, their fate and status cannot be simply resolved in the new social context. And it ultimately comes back to the question of witnessing and attention. For all the accusations from the grandmother that she is unseen, Kokalari does see; and quite clearly. She stares straight at the lives of Albanian women ("why do you look at me like that") and chronicles precisely what had been heretofore unacknowledged: the domestic, the motherly, the intimate, and the mundane. But in doing so, as she herself acknowledges a few years later in the epilogue to *How Life Swayed*, she is also acutely aware that the world she is chronicling is slowly crumbling. Its traditions will soon disappear, and with the bad, the ordinary details of women's lives too may be relegated to the abysses of memory. As the grandmother's speech testifies, there will be considerable friction in this transformation into modernity as women reconsider their place in the world. And Kokalari herself feels a strong push and pull between the ushering of a new era that she considers necessary to women's advancement, and her own nostalgic remembrance of the world of her childhood and all that was beautiful in it. It is with this tension that she grappled in *How Life Swayed*.

Uneasy Cohabitation

- 16 In 1944, Musine Kokalari published *How Life Swayed*, her last work of fiction to see the light before her imprisonment and her only full-length novel. Like the rest of her published fiction, the story interweaves personal observations with fiction and ethnography to narrate the events of a traditional Gjirokastra wedding, from the negotiations between two families to the wedding itself. The novel is followed by a coda where Kokalari drops the mantle of fictional narrator and presents herself as an essayist in what is perhaps one of the few historical texts that directly addresses the woman question in Albanian society.³⁸ In this epilogue too, the topic of transformation and change is at the forefront: Kokalari contemplates the world that she has described and labels it as the "twilight of a bygone era."³⁹ The coda is explicit in its commitments to feminist principles and denouncement of the structures that consign women to "the heavy chains of servitude and fanaticism."⁴⁰ If in "Tales from my Grandmother," there was a tension in the adversarial relationship between two women at different poles of a changing world, *How Life Swayed* is about the world before it changed and Albanian women's place in it.
- 17 *How Life Swayed* presents a crucial conundrum, for if the world Kokalari portrays is a female-centric one, then its faults are also perpetuated by women. After all, it is women who negotiate engagements and rule over the lives of family members in the domestic sphere. Kokalari paints a rich picture of women as decision-makers, wielding power. But her story is not one that repaints spaces of oppression (like the home) as spaces of liberation. The question is always: who is power wielded over? More often than not this power is wielded over girls and young women, as Kokalari demonstrates how they are bent into shape first by the demands of their mothers, and later by the demands of their mothers-in-law: "[After the wedding], the girl is put under her mother-in-law's

heel, lives terrified of her father-in-law, and scared of her husband whose word is law."⁴¹ In the epilogue to the novel, Kokalari writes clearly that the wedding day is a threshold, but not necessarily into a new life; it is rather a threshold into another realm where the young woman (more often than not barely a teenager) ends up in another servitude. Her mother's home had been nothing but a servitude in preparation for the same services to be rendered in the girl's future home as a wife.

- 18 Through Kokalari's eyes the Albanian wedding becomes the center of literature and history. We see in her fiction that the domestic is not a space bound by the perimeter of the family home, but rather an interconnected network of homes that obey their own rules and their own conventions, conventions entirely orchestrated and negotiated by women. When the main character, a woman called Qibro, decides that it is high time that her daughter marry, she makes no effort to ask her husband or seek help from any male figures. Rather, she turns to Teto Haxho, an older neighbor who is known for her matchmaking skills. The two women hash out the list of potential suitors. Haxho is a well-respected visitor in their neighborhood's households and appears to know the economic and social standing of every young man, and how good of a match they would make for Qibro's daughter. Here Kokalari testifies to what sort of literature and stories are possible by focusing on the ordinary, including ordinary acts of speech like gossip. Maria Tatar argues that "gossip has value precisely because it creates opportunities for talking through the emotional entanglements of our social lives."⁴² Likewise, Kokalari in this novel describes how gossip is itself currency, as women's whole livelihood depends on it.
- 19 In dramatizing how women negotiate their livelihoods, Kokalari describes the complicated calculations undertaken by Albanian mothers, who must balance their emotional attachments to their families with economic needs and social demands. In this work, we witness firsthand the cruelty that is imposed on young girls who, at barely sixteen, spend hours helping their mother with household chores like cooking, cleaning, and taking care of younger siblings. Within the realm of the novel, the young girl is never asked her opinion about her betrothed, she never gets to meet her future husband before the wedding day. In addition to the overall cruelty imbedded in these negotiations, there is also the cruelty of the performance that she has to give to convince her mother-in-law of her worth, to prove that she is capable of paying her the respect that this latter deserves through the rituals of coffee-making and serving. The young girl's reputation and life hang in the balance. Marriage is but a precarious salvation that could be ruptured at every turn, leaving the young girl humiliated over something as small as a gesture. As Kokalari writes in the coda, "The young bride starts her life with fear and that is how she ends it, because for the smallest thing she will be sent back to the home she came from. The door is wide open when you leave it, but small as a hole when you try to go back."⁴³
- 20 Furthermore, the marriage negotiations reveal the economic trade that underpins the institution of marriage for both households. The exchange is meant to alleviate the burden of the bride's native household, for whom she becomes an extra mouth to feed and an extraneous body once it is transferred on to her brother or another male kin after her father's passing. But the bride also represents an economic asset to her new household, and not only through her dowry. She will help the mother-in-law share the burden of household labor, given that at her age, she will be more capable of back-breaking than her aging mother-in-law. The world described in Kokalari's fiction is one

rife with examples of the importance of unpaid housework (and even farming work), and the economics of reproductive labor.⁴⁴ In the text, this is especially obvious when Qibro and the mother of the groom discuss and negotiate a wedding date. For superstitious and religious reasons, Qibro wants to postpone the wedding date, but her future in-law haggles for an earlier date: "I don't know. I am completely alone. Like a cuckoo in that big house. The men are never around, they are always in the fields, looking after the sheep. Alone, I can't keep up with the household chores."⁴⁵ Kokalari expounds upon this idea of marriage as a trade in the coda to this book.

Any marriage is a trade for both parties. The girl's mother is looking to provide her daughter with a rich husband who belongs to a good home, and the boy's mother is trying to find a bride for the household chores and to govern over the little ones. Two young people who don't know each other, who have never seen each other, will one day be united [in marriage].⁴⁶

- 21 In this picture of family life described by Kokalari, senior women appear even more capable of cruelty and violence within the patriarchal framework than the men who are mostly absent or silent. In these details, Kokalari's works are an evident portrayal of the way the patriarchal system perpetuates itself through the people it oppresses. While the women in Kokalari's stories have set up a system and expanded the domestic to include other homes, it is nevertheless a system that seeks to maintain the status quo.
- 22 But even that interpretation can be too simplistic. *How Life Swayed* provides a delicate balancing act between the experience of both the mother and daughter at the center of the story, alternating and shifting perspectives. And there is plenty of compassion for both sides, though it is clear that Kokalari holds a special place for the daughter in the understanding that she too will be transformed and become like her mother and mother-in-law, the cycle repeating through the generations. That does not mean that the mother is caricatured; rather, Kokalari understands that her callousness is also a defense mechanism that ensures her survival. Towards the beginning of the novel, as Qibro contemplates the pressure she feels to marry off her daughter, she tells Haxho:
- Isn't it time for Xhemo to be married? You'll say she's young. No, think about how old we were when we were married. Of course, I will be sad to have her move away, but please, it's better for her to have her own home. My sons need wives and it's better for them not to have a sister-in-law inside.⁴⁷
- 23 Qibro's considerations are not merely about tradition as such: she is worried that her daughter may become an unwanted stranger in a home that was never meant to be hers, especially since household duties will be passed on to whomever the brothers decide to marry. This is a practical decision meant to ensure the daughter's future too, while Qibro acknowledges that it will pain her to see her daughter taken away from her. Likewise, thinking about her daughter's future, she begs Haxho to find a good home for her, so she won't be stuck "taking care of the sick."⁴⁸ And once the engagement is settled, Qibro's emotions are ambivalent: She "felt something inside her heart. She was happy but she also felt like crying. She was happy; happy that her daughter found a good home, but she thought about the fact that she was removing her from her home."⁴⁹
- 24 These cracks of vulnerability on the mother's part expose how thoughtfully Kokalari navigates the experiences of Albanian women at the turn of the century, and the competing pull between their affections and their duties. But for all these nuanced considerations, there is a sense in which Kokalari's loyalties remain more squarely with

daughters in the understanding that girlhood contains a potential that is then squandered after and through marriage. If for the first sections of the book, Xhemile (the bride-to-be) is seen only through the eyes of the older women around her, she is granted her own humanity beyond this role in Kokalari's text: "[Her cousin] often came to help her. When the girls were alone, they laughed and squealed. Xhemile who seemed so quiet, would be the loudest when she was with her friends. She teased them ... and they all died laughing."⁵⁰ This picture of great merriment is immediately juxtaposed to the seriousness and coldness Xhemile is met with when she is introduced to her mother-in-law. The shelter offered by this oasis of girlhood and joy will be shattered after the girl is married off, at which point she won't be allowed these visits without permission from her in-laws or husband. In this new home, she will be a stranger – alienated, powerless, and exploited. But she will also be lost, because she will be taught to lose the joyful girliness and model herself on her mother and mother-in-law: ruthless with her own children, waiting for a daughter or daughter-in-law over whom she can wield whatever limited power she has.

- 25 Kokalari describes the wedding day as a liminal space in a young girl's life; a threshold that is in itself but a mirror, a looking glass that – once crossed – throws her into a world that is familiar but slightly skewed. The wedding day itself is but a dream, the only time in a girl's life where she is the center of attention, where she is celebrated and expected to feel joy. But it is an ephemeral sort of joy which marks the entrance into another space of alienation and exploitation.

How Life Swayed is the brief daydream of the few days in a girl's life after which she will be placed under the mother-in-law's dominion; she will live in mortal fear of her father-in-law, and terrified of her husband, whose word has the power of law over her.⁵¹

- 26 Kokalari concludes this coda to her work with a note of hope, writing that a woman's liberation will arise from the ashes of this world of "useless beliefs, customs, the remains of fanaticism."⁵² She believed that the world she had depicted in the book was on its last legs. By the time Kokalari published *How Life Swayed*, Albanian women had seen a very slow transformation, although the customs depicted in the novel remained and still remain prevalent. Kokalari believed that a great shift was coming. The novel represents another case of Kokalari's impulse towards collection and remembrance, the desire to record a world at its twilight that, though complicated and harsh on women, still deserved to be chronicled. Like the rest of Kokalari's pre-imprisonment oeuvre, this novel exists as a testimony to women's lives in their ordinariness and complexities. In producing a novel that mixes genres and methods, Kokalari was engaged in what would become a central tenant of feminist activism across the globe some thirty years after her own work: recovery, attention, and archival work as feminist praxis.⁵³

Oral History as Feminist Praxis

- 27 The questions "Why collect women's stories?" and "Why Albanian women's stories in particular?" are undoubtedly at the center of Kokalari's work. If Kokalari never asked these questions directly, she surely was challenged with them. The grandmother's challenge – "Who cares how we used to live?" – echoes questions that Kokalari had to field in real life, as she recounts them in the diary she kept as a student in Rome. While a student at La Sapienza between 1938 and 1942, Kokalari made frequent trips to

Albania between semesters. During these trips, she would throw herself headfirst into ethnographic research, “collecting popular songs of my native place and other information regarding the customs of Gjirokastra.”⁵⁴ The sources she turns to for her research are the women in her life, from her mother to her sister-in-law, and even maids and washerwomen. But in approaching them for this research, she is confronted with an existential question:

I became close friends with the maid and exchanged gossip with the washerwoman. If I found something new, I wrote it down immediately. Once in a while, they would say about me, “Bless this girl, she goes to a famous school and here she is, writing down this nonsense. What do you need them for?” Oh, I responded: “Yes, they are useful, do you know what they say about us? That in our country, there is nothing ... and yet, we have so much.”⁵⁵

- 28 There are two things at play in this recorded exchange. On the one hand, confronted with Kokalari's inquiries, the women in her life respond with skepticism about her project: what about their lives and their stories is worth recording? It is, after all, “nonsense.” This is not surprising if we look at the long history of how women's experiences and their knowledge – especially oral knowledge – has been dismissed and excluded from both literary and historical canons.⁵⁶
- 29 At first glance, Kokalari's stated motivation has patriotic roots: a desire to fight against the absence of Albanian literature and folklore from the global canon, and the idea of Albania as a place without history (as showcased in Italians' attitude toward her home during her time in Rome). This impulse is understandable: Albania had been a nation-state for barely twenty years when Kokalari lived in Rome. And Kokalari was raised in a home that considered itself deeply patriotic. Indeed, patriotic sentiment permeated much of her writing, and is acknowledged by her as motivating the desire to collect information from, and write about, Albanians' lives.⁵⁷ Beyond stated intent, however, it is worth noting the particular subjects and sources of her stories. In seeking to reconstruct a cultural history of Albania, Kokalari did not turn to the archives. She could have: after all, she did her own doctorate on the writer and activist Naim Frashëri, a seminal figure in the National Renaissance movement.⁵⁸ She was not foreign to the methodology of rigorous and standard academic research. Yet, these are not the sources that she reached towards to construct an image of both past and (to her) contemporary Albania. Rather, she turned to her own memories of Gjirokastra, and to other women. Here we see the ethnographic ethos in Kokalari's research and methodology, one that is also feminist, if not explicitly so.
- 30 While Kokalari was surrounded by women who – like her – had benefited from higher education and were actively involved in both the academic and literary scene in Albania in the 1930s and 1940s, her research and her stories were not concerned with this demographic. Rather, the women that she approached were more representative of the Albanian private sphere: they were the washerwomen and cleaning women that helped around the household. They were neighbors, too, including strangers. In the summer between her second and third years of university, Kokalari recounts a trip to the southern town of Korça where she immediately befriended some local women and spent her afternoons in their company and their stories.

And so, between six and seven in the evening, we always got together at the bottom of the stairs for some fresh air and some small talk [with the women of the neighborhood]. That's how I learned how carpets are woven and heard about the struggles of their simple lives.⁵⁹

31 The women Kokalari met in Korça were for the most part housewives or seamstresses who worked in groups and passed their time together sharing stories, gossip, and songs. These communities organized around gendered forms of labor seem to complicate the picture presented in *How Life Swayed*, where the dynamics between women are often cold or adversarial. In focusing and paying attention to women's stories as part of her amateur methodology, Kokalari highlights that much of the knowledge needed to weave a cultural history of Albania is knowledge stored precisely with women. In not only gathering these stories, but portraying women as storytellers to whom she owes the information that would be foundational to her research, Kokalari is doing two things. First, she is positioning women as bearers of knowledge. And secondly, she is granting these women authority over their own lives, and considering them experts of their lived experience, in addition to considering that lived experience worthy of being written about. This impulse is reminiscent of Adriana Cavarero's idea of relating narratives: if, as we had seen with the grandmother, some women do not consider their stories as worth telling, Kokalari is going against the grain and showing that they are worthy of being recorded and told.⁶⁰

32 Kokalari's other source are the women in her life, especially her grandmother and her mother. We have seen in "Tales from my Grandmother," how she positions the grandmother as the source of the stories she is narrating, and on several occasions as the storyteller herself. Likewise, in Kokalari's diaries, it is her mother who appears as a source of knowledge and authority whose approval and expertise she seeks:

The more I wrote, the more I was drawn to those times when I experienced the most beautiful part of life, my childhood. Then I would run to my mother and read my writings to her so that she would correct me where she noticed a misplaced phrase or a grammatical rule that ran against how people actually spoke.⁶¹

33 In addition to turning to women for expertise, Kokalari's research establishes intellectual genealogies between women across generations. Her works create networks between women, in the belief that the knowledge and stories that women had access to and could tell were crucial to the literary canon and Albanian nation-making. In valorizing women's storytelling, Kokalari was anticipating feminist preoccupations with histories of recovery that center women's experiences and consider them worthy of telling.

34 Her methodology and reliance on oral history are key aspects of understanding Kokalari's ethos as a feminist *avant la lettre*. In her ethnographic work (which in turn informed her fiction), Kokalari relied on interviews and conversations with women, but also on the practice of listening itself. In writing about her method in her Rome diaries, Kokalari explains that while she actively sought out women to share their stories with her, often enough all she had to do was listen and not interrupt, or even question. Listening was a crucial aspect of her ethnographic work in Korça:

I thought it would be good to take advantage of this opportunity. So, I decided to collect some old songs here as well ... This work [weaving] has an intimate and familiar character ... [As they worked], they narrated: thousands of sweet memories of a distant past awoke in them. An old woman, as if struck by a sudden inspiration, let out a big sigh and began to sing very loudly with her eyes half-closed.⁶²

35 The world of women as depicted in Kokalari's fiction and research is rich with moments of storytelling and manual labor. It is simultaneously a world made up of a community of women, where the domestic and the private are given a public dimension as women congregate in public spaces to talk and keep the past alive through their songs and

stories. In her encounter with this world, Kokalari's self-imposed task has a dual duty of listening and recording, but also transforming them into written stories and making space for them in the literary canon.

- 36 As evident in the epilogue to *How Life Swayed*, by the time Kokalari returned to Albania permanently in 1943, her interest in women had become far more overt, as opposed to the more unintentional feminist ethos of her first two works. Instead, here we see a more conscious desire to write and dramatize the ordinary lives of Albanian women in their most intimate details. In this sense, it feels impossible to separate Kokalari's research impulses from her own experiences. In a recent article on Kokalari, Albanian scholar Bajzola Shatro Gami writes that Kokalari's diaries in Rome represent a portrait of the artist as a young woman, a writer coming to terms with her sense of self.⁶³ I would argue that the diaries demonstrate also a growing consciousness of Kokalari as – if not a feminist thinker for lack of any evidence that she would consider herself as such – at least what we might call a feminist ethos that was born out of her own experiences as a woman in two patriarchal societies: the Albania of childhood and youth, and her years in Italy as a student.
- 37 One of the most interesting aspects of Musine Kokalari's life is how she mixes the personal and the political, or rather how she used the personal to inform her political worldview: it is possible to see this with her understanding of social democracy as informed by her own experience with hard labor, but its beginnings were firmly lodged in her experience of the world as a woman, and more specifically as an Albanian woman. And nowhere is this clearer than in her doomed relationship with a young student whom she refers to exclusively as P.T. in her Rome diaries. What started as a friendship and study partnership appears to have become a romantic relationship, but it was marked by ambivalence on Kokalari's part because she was not interested in staying in Italy, finding it particularly hostile to Albanians:
- So many times during that unforgettable first year, some Italians insulted, without meaning to, my country and its smallness: their attitude pierced my heart, and although I knew it was not reasonable, it still hurt my feelings. Not to mention that my mother wouldn't have liked it at all if love tied me to an Italian.⁶⁴
- 38 Indeed, her understanding of herself as an Albanian student in a country that had invaded her own, would be just as crucial to Kokalari's dynamics in this relationship, as her being a woman. Kokalari's relationship to P.T. was marked by a sense of power imbalance from the very start, as Kokalari acknowledges "in front of men, I felt less educated; and his thought dominated mine."⁶⁵ While she does not make this connection herself, it is nevertheless revealing to see in Kokalari's life a repetition of broader patterns about women in love, and gender hierarchies. For instance, P.T. would use Musine as a soundboard for his ideas, as the two discussed politics and their studies together. In her diaries, Kokalari writes about the time spent doing research for him and typing out his manuscripts, in a stark reminiscence of women like Sophia Tolstaya who was responsible for preparing and editing Tolstoy's novels.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Kokalari already felt a sense of unease over P.T.'s domineering presence in her life, and his insistence of knowing about her feelings and whereabouts at all times became immediately stifling to her. "All these questions of his made me feel like I was losing my freedom," she wrote.⁶⁷
- 39 Despite this reluctance, the relationship with P.T. was not short-lived, although once he was deployed to Ethiopia as part of Italy's colonial army, it would morph and become a

hotbed of misunderstandings that would ultimately spell its end. In particular, it was the fact that P.T. appears to have deceived her, and his mother's dislike of Kokalari's nationality, that would lead to its demise, with Musine breaking up with P.T. on her own terms.

- 40 This experience marked a turning point in Kokalari's thinking about gender. Although she had noted a feeling of inferiority at the beginning of the relationship, P.T.'s illogical and petty behavior undermined the foundations of this belief. This relationship led Kokalari to realize that if there was a superiority, it was not innate but rather the accumulated advantage of centuries of being given the opportunity to study and access to power. "I thought: where does man's superiority lie? What does he have more than woman, than that intelligence that he has had free opportunity to develop over the centuries?"⁶⁸ This understanding of the nexus between politics and the personal appear again in the coda to *How Life Swayed*, and guide its outward demand for women's equality and freedom. The notion also that one's personal experience is crucial to one's political awakening will reappear in her post-internment diaries, as her years of hard labor led her to feeling greater solidarity with the Albanian working classes.⁶⁹

Conclusion

- 41 Musine Kokalari's fiction captures a world at the brink, where change feels imminent and yet the traditions of the past continue to hold on to the present. Her writing examines the experiences of Albanian women and their place in the Albanian historical and literary canon by intermixing memoirs with ethnographic investigations. In employing a hybrid form of writing that features both fiction and scholarly research, Kokalari's work indicates that women's lives sometimes require the invention of new forms and genres to be told. These forms, under Kokalari's pen, challenge the predominantly male and epic tradition of Albanian literature. In staging her writing in southern Albania – a space where Kokalari spent her childhood –, her fiction serves as both literature and an archive of the traditions and cultural artefacts of the region. Furthermore, in writing about the flawed lives of ordinary women, she shatters the image of the heroic mother that haunts depictions of Albanian women in fiction and myth, while maintaining a compassionate gaze on the conflicting demands that shape their actions.
- 42 This paper sought to underline the feminist ethos of Musine Kokalari's early writings and how this ethos allowed her to write stories that focus on women's experiences at their most intimate and domestic, revealing the exclusions of the Albanian literary canon. With her attentive gaze turned to women's lives, Kokalari unveils the complex dynamics that exist between women within and outside the household. The world that she describes is one where the domestic is an intricate network whose rules and processes are determined by women's decisions as they negotiate with each other. There are uneasy exchanges that seek to alleviate domestic burdens. Many of the women that she writes about are often angry, and that anger is both a result of living in a world that exploits them, but also (for older women) anger towards the changing configurations of a world in constant transformation, where their position (which they had achieved by wielding what little power was afforded to them) is undermined. Rather than rejoicing at the opportunities afforded to a new generation of women, they mourn the loss of their ability to control them.

- 43 Kokalari's feminist ethos is evidenced in her approach to both her research and her writing. Not only does she use oral history that puts women at the center of her work, but she engages in collaborations with other women, never subsuming their voices to her own. In centering women and attending to their experiences (fraught and complicated as they may be), she grants women authority not only over their life stories, but portrays them also as custodians of Albanian history, disputing traditional forms of epistemology. I show that her methodology and her writing demonstrate a growing awareness of what it means to be a woman in Albanian society, a realization that Kokalari reaches by working through her own disappointments and humiliations as a young woman in Italy.
- 44 If reclaiming one's subjectivity is about defining yourself beyond the role assigned to you, Kokalari managed to establish herself as a subject through her political activism and literary works. This article is an attempt to engage with her literary work in the understanding that her attention to women's lives was not accidental but purposeful. It is also an attempt to acknowledge the work that Kokalari started some eighty years ago in looking at women's lives. By centering on Kokalari's compassionate gaze on Albanian culture and history, it further destabilizes the exoticizing narratives of early twentieth century Albania – so often provided by Western travelers with little command of Albanian and reliant upon dubious constructions of Albanian savagery and backwardness – that continue to define Albanian culture within and beyond its borders. Much remains to be explored about Kokalari's literary and ethnographic research, including her understanding of Albanian cultural history, her growing class consciousness following her imprisonment and years of hard labor, and even her understanding of Albanian history. The multiplicity of her work is a sign of the complexity of her thought beyond facile interpretations of her work. Like the women in her stories, she deserves the same consideration in the scholarship surrounding her.

NOTES

1. Musine Kokalari (1917-1983) was an Albanian writer and political activist. Born to a middle-class family of lawyers and teachers, she grew up in Gjirokastra and later studied Albanian literature at the University of La Sapienza in Rome, before returning to Tirana in 1941 to continue her ethnographic research and work as an editor and teacher. In 1943, she co-founded the Socialist-Democratic Party and was involved in the anti-fascist struggle during World War II. In 1946, when the Communists rose to power, she stood trial for conspiring to overthrow the recently established government. She was sentenced to sixteen years in prison and twenty more of political internment in northern Albania. Because of her status, she was prohibited from doing research, writing, or publishing although she continued her work in secrecy. She died of untreated breast cancer in 1983.
2. Musine Kokalari published three books in her lifetime. In addition to *Siç më thotë nënua plakë* (1939) and *Sa u tunt jeta* (1943), she also published *Rreth vatrës* [Around the Hearth] (1943), a collection of fairytales and games for children. In Albanian, these three titles have been published in various collected editions of Kokalari's works. Unless otherwise specified, all my

citations are from KOKALARI Musine, SHEHU Novruz (eds), *Vepra: vëllimi 1 dhe 2* [Collected Works: Volumes 1 and 2], Tirana, Geer, 2009.

3. For an overview of the role and status of Albanian women throughout the nineteenth century and before World War II, see LUKU Elvida, "Aspects of the Feminist Movement in the Albanian Monarchy (1928-1939)," *European Journal of Social Sciences, Education and Research*, vol. 1, n° 1, 2014, p. 285-293; MUSAI Fatmira, NICHOLSON Beryl, "Women Activists in Albania following Independence and World War I," in Ingrid Sharp, Matthew Stibbe (eds), *Aftermaths of War*, Leiden, Brill, 2011, p. 179-196.

4. GERACI Mauro, "Musine Kokalari dhe fuqia e ëmbël e poezisë: letërsia, autobiografia dhe antropologjia" [Musine Kokalari and the sweet power of poetry: literature, autobiography and anthropology], in Persida Asllani (ed.), *Konferenca shkencore "Musine Kokalari: vetëdija e shkrimit dhe e qëndresës"* [Scientific Conference "Musine Kokalari: the self-awareness of the writing self and resistance], Tirana, Biblioteka Kombëtare e Shqipërisë dhe Biblioteka Kombëtare e Kosovës "Pjetër Bogdani," 2018, p. 15-30. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

5. See HOXHA Mentor, *Figura e femrës në letërsinë shqipe: Stërmilli, Kokalari, Migjeni, Koliqi* [The Figure of the Woman in Albanian Literature: Stërmilli, Kokalari, Migjeni, Koliqi], Tirana, Botimet MetB, 2015.

6. ELSIE Robert, *History of Albanian Literature*, Boulder, Social Science Monographs, 1995, p. 209-334.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 339.

8. Kokalari's emotional attachment and intellectual debt to the Albanian National Renaissance can be traced in sets of writings that were published posthumously by her nephew Platon Kokalari, and his wife, Bibika Kokalari. See in particular, KOKALARI Musine, KOKALARI Bibika (eds), *Leterkembime, shenime, kujtime* [Letters, notes, memories], Tirana, Dudaj, 2018, p. 89-104. See also, KOKALARI Musine, KOKALARI Platon, *Si lindi Partia Social Demokrate* [On the Birth of the Social-Democratic Party], Tirana, Naim Frashëri, 2000.

9. GERACI, "Musine Kokalari dhe fuqia e ëmbël e poezisë," *op. cit.*, p. 19. See also SHATRO Bavjola, *Between(s) and Beyond(s) in Contemporary Albanian Literature*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016.

10. ÇAPIRIQI Suzana, "Roli i kanonit letrar në përjashtimin e gruas shkrimtare nga historia e letërsisë shqipe" [The role of the literary canon in the expulsion of the woman writer from the history of Albanian literature], in Sabri Hamiti, Mehmet Kraja (eds), *Historia e letërsisë shqipe: Materialet e konferencës shkencore* [The History of Albanian Literature: Collected Conference Materials], Prishtinë, Akademia e Shkencave dhe e Arteve e Kosovës, 2009, p. 157-164.

11. SUTA Blerina, *Pamje të modernitetit në letërsinë shqipe: Proza e shkurtër e Koliqit, Kutelit Dhe Migjenit* [An Overview of Modernism in Albanian literature: the short stories of Koliqi, Kuteli and Migjeni], Tirana, Onufri, 2004. Among male writers, modernist poet Migjeni (1911-1938) remains a notable exception. While his premature death means his literary output was relatively small his fiction and poetry feature a diverse set of women characters, ranging from teachers to sex workers.

12. On the question of feminist genres, and literature as feminist practice, see MICIR Melanie, *The Passion Projects: Modernist Women, Intimate Archives, Unfinished Lives*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2019.

13. SHOWALTER Elaine, *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, London, Virago, 2009.

14. Although *Tales from my Grandmother* was Kokalari's first book, by 1939 she had already published dozens of short stories, poetry, and ethnographic sketches in Albanian newspapers of the era, often under pen names. See GERACI, "Musine Kokalari dhe fuqia e ëmbël e poezisë," *op. cit.*, p. 17.

15. Born in the central Albanian city of Elbasan, Aleksandër Xhuvani served as Minister of Education under King Zog between 1920 and 1933. During the Communist regime, Xhuvani continued to work in education, drafting textbooks and co-founding the Albanian Writers' League. He also worked as head of the Literature and Linguistics branch of the Institute of Science that would then become the University of Tirana. Xhuvani ran in the same circles as Kokalari's brothers which allowed the two to meet in Tirana, where Kokalari showed Xhuvani a first story she had written about her childhood home and its customs. Delighted by their creativity, Xhuvani asked Kokalari to write more in this vein. See KOKALARI Musine, *La Mia Vita Universitaria: Memorie di una scrittrice Albanese nella Roma fascista (1937-1941)*, Rome, Viella, 2016, p. 129, fn. 29.

16. KOKALARI, *La Mia Vita Universitaria*, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

17. HOXHA, *Figura e femrës në letërsinë shqipe*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

18. See for example, KOKALARI and KOKALARI, *Leterkembime, shenime, kujtime*, *op. cit.*

19. KOKALARI, *La Mia Vita Universitaria*, *op. cit.*, p. 130, p. 144, and p. 188 for some examples.

20. GERACI, "Musine Kokalari dhe fuqia e ëmbël e poezisë," *op. cit.*, p. 17.

21. I have had the opportunity to read notebooks that Kokalari kept while she was exiled to the northern town of Rrëshen. These notebooks, which were recently donated by Bibika Kokalari to the Albanian National Archives, contain notes about the books she read and her continued studies and interest in Albanian history and culture.

22. See GERACI Mauro, "La Muza albanaese alla Sapienza. Vita e morta di un sogno Universitario" [The Albanian muse at la Sapienza: Life and death of a university dream] and CEGIE Simonetta, "Un libro nel cassetto" [The secret book], in KOKALARI, *La Mia Vita Universitaria*, *op. cit.*, p. 11-50 and p. 63-108. See also KARAGJOZI-KORE, "Vepra e Musine Kokalari - Dëshmi etnolinguistike e Gjirokastrës së viteve '30" [Musine Kokalari's Work - Ethnolinguistic Records of 1930's Gjirokastra], *Gjurmime Albanologjike - Seria e shkencave filologjike*, n° 47, 2017, p. 69-80.

23. GERACI, "La Muza albanaese alla Sapienza," *op. cit.*, p. 18-19.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 18, fn. 15.

25. KOKALARI, *Vepra*, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. DANAJ Ermira, "'I'm not a Feminist but...': women's activism in post-1991 in Albania," *Gender, Place, and Culture*, vol. 25, n° 1, 2018, p. 994-1009. See also, SEFA Eriselda, "The Efforts of King Zog I for Nationalization of Albanian Education," *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, vol. 2, n° 1, 2012, p. 334-339.

31. See KOKALARI and KOKALARI, *Leterkembime, shenime, kujtime*, *op. cit.*, p. 89-104.

32. While often positioned as the sole Albanian woman writer, Kokalari's books were published during an era that saw the proliferation of women writers in Albania. This included fellow-classmate Selfixhe Ciu whose poems were published even before Kokalari's, as well as journalists like Ollga Plumbi and Mila Vangjeli. See LESKAJ Valentina, BARDHYLI Alda, *Politika si Ide* [The Idea of Politics], Tirana, Botimet Toena, 2021, p. 21-22.

33. KOKALARI, *Vepra*, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

34. CAVELL Stanley, *Must We Mean What We Say*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 306.

36. KOKALARI, *Vepra*, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

38. Another notable example is Olga Pëllumbi's essay "Gruaja Shqiptare: Feminizmi dhe Shoqëria e Jonë" [The Albanian Woman: Feminism and our Society], in Eglantina Gjemeni, Marsela Dauti

(eds), *Studime Gjinore: Antologji, Volumi I* [Gender Studies: Anthology, Volume I], Tirana, Media Print, 2012, p. 124-126. In this 1938 essay, Pëllumbi, a journalist of Kokalari's generation, calls on Albanian women to start fighting for their rights as men's equals.

39. KOKALARI, *Vepra, op. cit.*, p. 225.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

42. TATAR Maria, *The Heroine with 1,001 Faces*, New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021, p. 121.

43. KOKALARI, *Vepra, op. cit.*, p. 229.

44. On the question of unpaid domestic labor and reproductive labor, see FEDERICI Silvia, *Wages against Housework*, Bristol, Falling Wall Press, 1975.

45. KOKALARI, *Vepra, op. cit.*, p. 50.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

53. See STUART Mary, "You're a Big Girl Now: Subjectivities, Feminism and Oral History," *Oral History*, vol. 22, n° 2, 1994, p. 55-63; GILMORE Leigh, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1994; HEILBRUN Carolyn, *Writing a Woman's Life*, New York, Norton, 1988.

54. KOKALARI, *La Mia Vita Universitaria, op. cit.*, p. 130.

55. *Ibid.*

56. TATAR, *Heroine with 1,001 Faces, op. cit.*, p. 116. "Old wives' tales—that is, worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the genuine art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it takes all value from it." See also HEMMINGS Claire, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.

57. See for example, KOKALARI and KOKALARI, *Leterkembime, shenime, kujtime, op. cit.*, p. 89-104.

58. KOKALARI, *Vepra, op. cit.*, p. 250-331.

59. KOKALARI, *La Mia Vita Universitaria, op. cit.*, p. 144.

60. CAVARERO Adriana, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, New York, Routledge, 2000.

61. KOKALARI, *La Mia Vita Universitaria, op. cit.*, p. 130.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

63. SHATRO GAMI Bavjola, "A Stranger in Rome: Musine Kokalari and Her Memoir *La mia vita universitaria* in Twentieth-Century Albanian Literature," *Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 30, n° 1, 2022, p. 76-107.

64. KOKALARI, *La Mia Vita Universitaria, op. cit.*, p. 155.

65. KOKALARI, *La Mia Vita Universitaria, op. cit.*, p. 156.

66. See POPOFF Alexandra, *Sophia Tolstoy: A Biography*, New York, Free Press, 2010.

67. KOKALARI, *La Mia Vita Universitaria, op. cit.*, p. 156.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

69. KOKALARI, *Si lindi Partia Social Demokrate, op. cit.*, p. 58-60.

ABSTRACTS

Musine Kokalari's literary universe is exclusively the domain of women. From overseeing marriage arrangements to gossiping about men's untrustworthiness, Kokalari's books weave a rich tapestry of southern Albania's private sphere in the early twentieth century. This article explores Kokalari's fiction to show how her writing challenges and expands the mythological and epic character of the Albanian literary canon. Focusing on her collection of short stories (*Sif më thotë nënua plakë*) and her only full-length novel (*Sa u tunt jeta*), it will argue that Kokalari's attention to the lives of ordinary Albanian women demonstrates the importance of women's knowledge and how the domestic is crucial to a nation's cultural history and its identity.

L'univers littéraire de Musine Kokalari est exclusivement le domaine des femmes. De la supervision des négociations de mariage aux discussions entre amies sur l'indignité des hommes, les livres de Kokalari dépeignent un portrait détaillé de la sphère privée du sud de l'Albanie au début du xx^e siècle. Cet article analyse les romans de Kokalari pour montrer comment son écriture défie et élargit le caractère mythologique et épique du canon littéraire albanais. En se concentrant sur son recueil de nouvelles (*Sif më thotë nënua plakë*) et sur son seul roman complet (*Sa u tunt jeta*), l'article soutient que l'attention portée par Kokalari à la vie des femmes albanaises ordinaires démontre l'importance du savoir des femmes et la manière dont la sphère domestique est tout aussi essentielle au développement de l'histoire culturelle d'une nation et de son identité.

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Mots-clés: Musine Kokalari, littérature albanaise, écriture féminine, histoire orale

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AUTHOR

BARBARA HALLA

Duke University

barbara.halla[at]duke.edu