

Ndeshtrasha and Its Use of Biblical Code

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Abstract—This paper offers a detailed and rigorous analysis of Beqir Musliu's novel *Ndeshtrasha*, focusing on the novel's engagement with biblical themes and their interplay with literary and real life figures. It examines how key characters, such as Mejrem, who is a reflection of Mary, and Baton, who is portrayed as a Christ-like figure, shape the narrative. The study applies descriptive, analytical, and comparative methods to interpret the novel, particularly through the lens of Baton, tracking his journey from birth to the writing of his memories. Central motifs - loneliness, absence, inadequacy, sacrifice, and fear- are analyzed within the novel's cultural and religious context. An essential aspect of this novel is the fusion of Islamic and catholic religion into one, symbolizing a core value of Albanian identity. This analysis is significantly important as *Ndeshtrasha* remained unpublished during Musliu's lifetime and received little attention after. Consequently, the paper has remained unstudied in depth and unknown by the readers, making this paper the very first scholarly study of this novel. By introducing *Ndeshtrasha* to a broader audience, the study aims to uncover its universal themes while also shedding light on the distinctive elements of Albanian literature.

Index Terms—*Ndeshtrasha*, biblical code, discourse, dream, memoir

I. INTRODUCTION

Beqir Musliu was born in Gjilan, Kosovo in 1945 and died in Pristina in 1996. While he is widely recognized as one of the most celebrated Albanian playwrights, his prose novels have remained relatively unknown. Among his notable works is the novel *Ndeshtrasha*. Like many of his other novels, it was written in the final quarter of the twentieth century, initially remaining only in manuscript form. Literary scholars later engaged with his manuscripts, culminating in the first publication of his collected early novels in 2004. This study focuses on *Ndeshtrasha*, one of his most significant works.

The novel *Ndeshtrasha* begins with a confession from the character Baton. Throughout the narrative, Baton assumes a dual role, acting both as the protagonist and the narrator, weaving together his personal story with that of the storyteller. The narrative is framed from a first-person perspective, blurring the line between the character's inner world and the storytelling voice. The timeline of Baton's confession is ambiguous, shifting fluidly between the past and present, making it difficult to anchor the events in a fixed temporal framework. The novel juxtaposes reality with unreality, blending dreams with waking life, and rationality with illusion, blurring the boundaries between these elements.

Baton's account of his daily life reveals a monotonous existence, marked by isolation, absurdity, and moments of existential crisis. The narrative delves into various family dynamics, particularly the grandmother's deep affection for the grandfather and the relationship between the brother and sister. However, the story's emotional center lies with the mother, whose self-sacrifice defines every aspect of her life. She is portrayed as a figure of suffering, enduring hardship to ensure her family's well-being and living in a perpetual state of waiting.

The father represents a bridge between reality and imagination. His departure to war during Baton's childhood and his prolonged absence emphasize the themes of longing and loss. These experiences bring Baton face to face with unpredictable challenges, triggering anxiety, fear, and chronic insomnia. Baton finds solace in abstract concepts and holds conversations with both real and imaginary figures, resulting in shifting visions that blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy.

According to Rugova, Musliu employs what he describes as the "immanent diffraction of things," a method of perception based on imaginary induction (Rugova, 1987, p. 179). These characteristics form the essence of the novel. By analyzing the signs within the narrative, the deeper essence of *Ndeshtrasha* is gradually uncovered—a truth hidden beneath the layers of absence.

II. DISCUSSION

A. Analysis of the Novel's First Part

The narrative of this novel begins with the relationship between the narrator and an unknown individual seated opposite him during a train journey. Although the opening scene appears simple, the author introduces the central themes of the novel from the very start. The unknown individual seems to reflect different aspects of the narrator—at times resembling himself, at other times, his father. However, upon deeper analysis, this figure connects with the image of Christ, who becomes one of the most frequently mentioned characters in the novel. The concept of the internal trinity of God unfolds primarily within the narrator's thoughts and imagination, while the external aspect is expressed through creation and its communication (Rugova, 2005, p. 139).

Throughout the train journey, the communication between the narrator and the unknown individual takes place in complete silence—without words, gestures, or expressions. Their interaction transcends verbal language, relying instead on eye contact that conveys meaning beyond what words could express. As the narrator observes the stranger, he begins to suspect that the man might be Christ. A thought strikes him: Could this really be Christ? (Musliu, 2004, p. 17). The narrator becomes increasingly uncertain, wondering whether the stranger might be a reincarnation of Christ. At first, the man seems unfamiliar, yet there is something otherworldly about him, as if he has just emerged from a fairytale. Strangely, the man also resembles the narrator himself, as if seeing the light for the first time in years. The stranger's snoring, however, fills the narrator with terror and unsettles his mind. Indeed, I have long since lost my sense of calm. Hmm! (Musliu, 2004, p. 24).

It is the stranger's snoring that brings Baton back to memories of his past. The author masterfully uses this figure of the unknown man to embody not only Christ but also Baton, his imagined father, and even perhaps the author himself—each representing individuals adrift in a bewildering world. The first part of the novel concludes as the train reaches its final station. Baton is followed by the stranger to the door of his home, and upon arriving at house number 13, he encounters the man once more. Baton merely gazes at him while his mother, emerging from an imaginary garden, waits at the door.

B. Analysis of the Second Part of the Novel

A child's imagination encourages exploration beyond boundaries, enabling one to transcend what might seem impossible (Musliu, 2004, p. 26). From a young age, Baton experienced profound thoughts and emotions that carried him into a realm of dreams and fantasy. Consequently, his real life became inseparable from this imaginary world. His reliance on his mother was established early on, shaping his development. The following chapter recounts Baton's unusual experiences during his solitude. Although he recognized these experiences as abnormal, they unfolded naturally and without warning.

The continuation of the novel weaves together the narrative present and Baton's memories. One night, his mother's cry transported him back to childhood recollections: the lullabies she sang to him in the cradle, the fear of the white-bearded old man in his dreams, his constant questions about his father, trips to the cinema with his grandfather, and a moment from first grade when the teacher asked him to write a word starting with the letter D, and he wrote dad. He also remembers his mother's overprotectiveness due to his insomnia, the long conversations with his grandfather, the revelation that his father had been taken to an unknown war, and his grandfather's story explaining that his father had opposed Christ (Musliu, 2004, p. 50).

The narratives of childhood unfold chronologically, intertwined with dreamlike digressions and illusions. A particularly painful memory emerges from the day Baton returned from the gymnasium to find the ground blanketed in snow. They had no wood or food. His mother tried to gather something for them but failed, leaving them to huddle beneath a quilt, waiting for spring to arrive. He also recalls the times his mother was absent for days, searching for medicine to cure his "illness." Yet, even her remedies proved futile, as his condition was not physical. At five years old, I now realize I could not distinguish between reason and empathy. My young mind was flooded with questions—questions that still remain unanswered—because I now understand that some things will never be resolved. I could scarcely imagine that all of this could have been deception or impossibility. Impossibility, for me, has always been a disease from which I still suffer today. And yet, it is impossible for me not to suffer from it (Musliu, 2004, pp. 42-43).

The novel makes it clear that the essence of Baton's confusion stems from the notion of impossibility—a concept rooted in the absence of his father.

Baton repeatedly asked questions about his father, trying to comprehend his absence: Where was his father? Why didn't he write letters? Why didn't he acknowledge him? When would he finally return? In addition to these childhood concerns, Baton noticed that his mother often came home late—or sometimes, not at all. His grandparents scolded their daughter-in-law, which only deepened the confusion for a child already growing up in a gloomy household. Our lives no longer felt real; instead, they resembled a game where we were nothing but playthings, instruments of amusement, and nothing more. Yet, Father never returned. This troubled me greatly, stirring a persistent and complex emotional turmoil within—a constant sense of concern (Musliu, 2004, p. 45).

Materially, Baton's life was also challenging, as the family survived solely on his grandfather's pension. This harsh reality pushed him into a dreamlike state, where he began to imagine scenes such as the painting *Forgotten Memory*, which depicted his father's portrait. He also envisioned images of a church, the fading figure of Mary, the scent of incense, and the death of his grandfather. With the grandfather's passing, the sense of misery in Baton's life grew even deeper. In that moment, I began to wonder whether life itself lacked color, appearing instead as a monochrome experience (Musliu, 2004, p. 46).

His mother worked elsewhere and returned home very late. Baton stayed awake until she came back, afraid to sleep alone. Meanwhile, unknown men began showing up, asking for Mejrem—his mother. This situation devastated Baton, eroding his sense of self. At the time, he was reading Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and the story planted a dangerous thought: he wanted to kill the stranger who kept coming to their house—or even kill his mother. "In this world, there are more black thoughts than white," said the unknown man (II). For days, even as I read *Crime and Punishment*, I thought about how I could drive that man away. Slowly, my spirit began to deteriorate. I felt worse with each passing day, tormented by a thought that grew into something external, speaking directly to me. How could I get rid of that man? More

than once, I thought of killing him. But in the end, the thought slipped away—I lacked the confidence. At one point, I even thought of killing Mama, but I could not go through with it. I still loved my mother. The mother cannot be killed (Musliu, 2004, p. 62).

Although Baton often felt hatred toward his mother, the deep bond between them remained a profound and irreplaceable connection. Despite everything, she loved me, and her behavior showed it. At times, I believed that no one else could love me, for the unique bond of love between mother and son was undeniable (Musliu, 2004, p. 56).

The novel continues to explore the hardships of Baton's youth: the grueling task of unloading wagons just to buy bread, followed by employment as a statistical clerk with a modest salary. Despite the stable job, Baton felt exhausted and isolated, as others saw him as a lost soul—some even thought he was mad. His struggles were further intensified by painful conversations with his mother, as both sought independence from each other. His long-lasting grief toward his mother developed into disgust for her actions, and the fading hope for his father's return only deepened his despair. "You cannot contradict anything, for everything in this world contradicts itself, let alone other things..." (Musliu, 2004, p. 66).

Baton's search for meaning continued into adulthood, where his deep loneliness created profound anxiety, filled with illusions of objects, events, and actions. This sense of isolation became so overwhelming that he imagined he was already dead. His mother grieved deeply for him—she often cried and looked at him with compassion, doubting his sanity. As Baton drew closer to his mother emotionally, he felt both sympathy and doubt toward her fragile existence, merging into her being.

In Baton's internal dialogue, he reflected on the unsettling presence within him, as if his identity was divided. The author skillfully blends imagination with reason and emotion, interweaving visions of objects, shadows, people, and unknown voices. With me existed another presence, one that not even my mother could recognize. I do not know who this other self is either; I can only speculate (Musliu, 2004, p. 84).

The narrative shifts to self-dialogues and abstract voices. One illusion involves a butterfly that emerges from a shadow, transforming into Christ resurrected from the crucifixion—a reference to his grandfather's belief that butterflies carry the souls of the dead. In this vision, Christ asks Baton to wipe away his wounds, representing human corruption. Another whisper, initially linked to a skeleton, transforms into the figure of Christ. These encounters construct a symbolic triangle involving Baton, his father, and Christ.

Another significant element in the story revolves around alchemy and self-discovery, as Baton engages with beings from his thoughts and illusions. One voice speaks about Christ's resurrection, and a connection emerges between the skeleton and his father's portrait—his father's image now appearing bloody. At first, Baton mistook the figure for Christ and began an imagined conversation with the skeleton, contemplating body-swapping and continuing a surreal dialogue with the dead.

Nysret Krasniqi notes that Musliu's works often explore communication between the living and the dead, or between reality and imagination, creating a poetic narrative filled with ethnic symbolism (Krasniqi, 2016, p. 478). Kujtim Shala, in the preface, emphasizes that *Ndeshtrasha* engages with prominent literary figures and ideas, including Christ, Faust, and Mephistopheles, weaving an intertextual network of symbols. These are grand themes from European literature (Musliu, 2004, p. 8).

As the story progresses, Baton mentions mirrors, flashes, lights, and butterflies. His mother warns him that such thoughts would drive him mad. It became harder to distinguish dreams from reality, and reality from dreams (Musliu, 2004, p. 122).

A key part of the narrative explores Baton's marriage to Dafina, where the line between dream and reality constantly shifts. Baton reveals that Dafina understood his tendency to live in dreams rather than in reality. Every room I entered overwhelmed me with a deep sense of boredom, as if my entire life were entangled in a secret hall of tedium. Oh God, I do not know whether I live for this boredom or if it lives off me. Dafina would tell him, "You are not living but dreaming." To which he responded, "You live for me until I finish this dream." Despite his eccentricities, Dafina believed in Baton's alchemical experiments. One day, she told me, "You will set the entire house on fire searching for that Sapphire Stone of Wisdom" (Musliu, 2004, p. 156).

Baton continued to dream about his father, imagining that he attended his wedding. In his dream, he felt his father's warmth as he placed a hand around his neck—but then, without speaking, his father returned to his place on the wall, becoming part of the portrait once more. Baton concludes, I made this entire journey to identify that voice—a whisper that echoed through me in some mystical form. In the end, that voice was mine (Musliu, 2004, p. 182).

His loneliness, present throughout his existence, brought back memories of his nanny's words. Her sleepy voice lingers in my mind, speaking of secrets that appear in life like the *Ndeshtrasha*. But now, she is far away. I build my solitude from the colors that remain to me (Musliu, 2004, p. 90).

C. The Biblical Code as a Feature of *Ndeshtrasha*

Western literature has been more profoundly influenced by the Bible than by any other book (Fraj, 1990, p. 26). As Fraj points out, literature in general—and Albanian literature specifically—has had biblical writings as its foundation since the beginning, continuing to be a central theme throughout all literary periods. This influence was not absent in the penultimate century and remains evident in contemporary works. Various authors have presented biblical themes in different ways, transforming those elements into unique forms that relate to modern works. In modern Albanian literature,

a dominant model of biblical writing recapture is apparent, evidenced by quotations and, at a deeper level, by the figurative transformation of biblical situations and events (Hamiti, 2005, p. 62).

One of the late 20th-century authors, Beqir Musliu, skillfully intertwines the biblical theme in his novel *Ndeshtrasha*, particularly through the figures of Christ and Mary. He incorporates various ideas, discourses, and elements of the biblical code in a distinctive manner. A crucial aspect of this analysis is the comparison between biblical characters and literary figures, whether direct or indirect, highlighting their shared fundamental traits. This will also be demonstrated through the quotes and explanations provided later.

The biblical discourse in *Ndeshtrasha* is presented in a transformed manner within a semantic framework. This exploration delves into various dimensions of meaning—both religious and artistic—while remaining true to the work's core purpose and the role of literary fiction. Musliu employs the biblical code by articulating ideas transformed into semantic dimensions that are entirely opposed to reality, while also characterized by national, artistic, and aesthetic elements.

First, we will examine the relationship between the characters and their biblical counterparts. Musliu indirectly infuses qualities, experiences, and personality traits reminiscent of Christ into the novel's characters, aiming to convey deeper significance that reflects the balance within this relationship. Some characteristics of the protagonist in *Ndeshtrasha* that align with the Christ archetype include his birth from a woman named Mejreme, who has a Muslim background; this name is a variation derived from the Christian name Mary. The character is portrayed as alienated, misunderstood, and judged by society; he is seen as mad and unusual. This crucial aspect underscores his distinctiveness within his community, setting him apart from those around him.

In *Ndeshtrasha*, the protagonist's unique character is expressed through dreams, illusions, and abstract concepts that explore the essence of human existence. These elements transcend ordinary human reasoning and are specifically attributed to individuals who embody the personifications of Christ and Baton. "I cannot talk; something deep in my soul smites me. I feel how he speaks to me and remains silent, just like me. Someone owns me; I do not know who he is. Something wraps around my head, it does whatever it wants with me and everything around me. I cannot say 'no,' and I cannot even say 'yes'" (Musliu, 2004, p. 164). Something undefined possessed Baton, an element he did not know or see, only felt within himself and which he called God. This might be a sign of his communication with God, as Christ was connected to God. This dialogue ascends to the divine level through Baton's conversations with Christ and, on another level, conversations with devils such as Mephistopheles, intriguing the unraveling of a character like Baton.

Upon closer examination of the work, we notice the introduction of certain symbols that may intrigue attentive readers. The essence of the novel is revealed early through the figure of an unknown man, a shadowy presence symbolizing Christ. The church, as the house of God and Christ, plays a significant role in Baton's reflections on childhood memories of attending church—a place he visited in response to the traumas he experienced as a child. He deeply analyzes the man with chains in his hand (the priest), the picture of Mary and Christ, realizing that he saw his mother in the face of Saint Mary and himself in Christ. "In the form of Saint Mary, I saw the face of Mama, while in that of Christ I saw mine, my concern" (Musliu, 2004, p. 44). His mother embodies the figure of Mary through her sacrificial love for her son. In contrast, he reflects on his existence—marked by solitude and the absence of a father figure—as a condition akin to that of Christ. This lack of paternal presence deeply influences his perceptions and concerns.

The church, a symbol of religious service and faith in God, is identified here with the House of Sins. "Maybe sins are hidden there; maybe sins are committed there," and according to a child's point of view (Baton), the church was a cold, gloomy, rude object that elicited negative feelings every time he visited. He recalls: "the smell of incense, the image of Mary and Christ in the picture, the gloom of the friars and priests, vestments, the chains, and all those crosses, nuns, voices calling 'Christ! Oh Jesus, have mercy!'—these seemed to him like a turmoil that passed into a terrible fear through the whole body to the soul. Just when the priest gave him a look after gazing at the image of Christ in the picture, he felt that ... if he might think that I am the Christ and came down from the icon" (Musliu, 2004, p. 49).

The author creates a paradoxical blend of religions by portraying Baton's father as an antichrist while various elements of Baton's family identity are rooted in Islam. For instance, Baton's mother, named Mejreme, a Muslim name, nonetheless prayed to Saint Mary, a figure in the Catholic tradition. Even the celebration of Eid belongs to the Muslim religion, yet regular visits to the church signify Christianity. The author sometimes refers to Christ as "Christ" and other times as "Issa," employing different names from both religions within the same work for the same figure. This paradox may have been deliberately constructed by the author to illustrate that religious differences remain invisible and incarnated in Albanian society, continuing to exist forever.

The garden of Saint Mary is depicted in vivid detail, incorporating surreal elements and conversations about the abstract and absurd with Issai. Here, the whispers of a skeleton transform into a living being, appearing to him as Christ. A fire and crimson aura manifest, accompanied by a voice that speaks of Christ and his resurrection. This skeleton then transitions into the figure of *Forgotten Memory* (the father's portrait). When he describes the garden of Saint Mary, it is compared to Mejreme, portrayed as a saint: "There my mother was Saint Mary herself, and I used to follow her through that holy garden and along that troublesome path I slowly leaked into the new mysteries. Now, even here, I am unable to unravel them all, as I hold them within myself, for my pure soul walks through a divine meadow, gathering flowers for the holy mother" (Musliu, 2004, p. 112). The description continues with reflections on the mother's condition: "Maybe

she is asleep; she is already in a dream. This kind of dreaming may have thrown her into the garden of paradise; there she is enjoying all the forbidden fruits and can fall back to earth like Hava (Eve)” (Musliu, 2004, p. 119).

In his interactions with abstract concepts, one notable conversation involves a figure who appears as a skeleton. This skeleton reveals that his shadow lies in bed with his mother and that it will also sleep with Mejreme, eventually returning to “The Forgotten Portrait.” The shadow proposes: “Follow my shadow and see how it lies with your mother, and do everything I was able to do. Perhaps your mother can give birth to a new Issa” (Musliu, 2004, p. 104). A little later, Baton explains that the frame with his father's photo was brought by himself and is the only memory of his father, through which they both communicate. These confusions then reveal the unknown man, who says, “I am coming back once more to see what Mejreme is doing and how she is doing with her son Issai. Oh, it is me, Issai. Even my mom often calls me that” (Musliu, 2004, p. 104).

The novel concludes, but without a definitive ending—deliberately constructed to allow the reader to create their own conclusion.

III. CONCLUSION

This paper presented a comprehensive analysis of the novel *Ndeshtrasha*, focusing particularly on its biblical discourse and the relationship of the character Baton with Christ, whom he embodied as an archetype. The study explored the novel's narrative style and key symbols within the context of Albanian literature, delving into the text's semantic dimensions—ranging from biblical and personal to philosophical and national. Ultimately, the analysis revealed that Baton epitomized a figure deeply isolated, reflecting individual characteristics within his social milieu. Through themes of suffering, loneliness, and sacrifice, he metaphorically represented Christ as a spiritual or prophetic entity. The notions of absence and impossibility emerged as central to the narrative. The author portrayed absence as the essence of the individual, particularly emphasizing Baton's sense of emptiness. This paper contributed to understanding how to approach this phenomenon.

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