A UNIFYING SYMBOL IN LITERATURE: NATIONAL ANTHEMS

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ABSTRACT

National anthems are one of the earliest forms of universal symbols which unify communities and create a strong bond among individuals. They include the significant values of a nation and arouse intense feelings since they are usually written after an important victory in a country's history and are performed orally in a loud manner altogether with a sense of identification. However, they have not undergone extended research so far in the scope of literature as the context and the performance of them have been the main focus of interest. Indeed, national anthems are regarded as not only significant components of oral culture but also contributors of the genre of epic poetry after they are put into written form. For this study, with the hope of providing further research to the area, national anthems of England, the USA and France have been selected as the core sources to be evaluated in accordance with the methodology of textual analysis. The reason behind this choice is to relate the concept of anthems to literature specifically English Literature; thus, anthems of England and the USA have been prioritized. Since these two countries have been in close interaction and had respectable relationships with France for decades, the national anthem of France has been found appropriate as the third item of the analysis. The results of the study have shown that though they may differ in tone, the level of God's influence and in the use of combining other national elements, anthems present similar patterns and are personified with the attribution of patriotic and stimulating characteristics, which result in the formation of a national identity embracing every segment of the nation holistically. It is concluded that anthems play an important part in maintaining the unity of a nation and in creating a sense of belongingness among its citizens proving once again the intrinsic unitary power of literature and literary works simultaneously.

Keywords: national anthems, sense of belongingness, patriotism, *God Save the King (Queen)*, *Star Spangled-Banner*, *La Marseillaise*

1. INTRODUCTION

National anthems are poems which are combined with tunes and turned into national songs and are often sung during national and international official ceremonies. Though some of them exceptionally appeared during the eighteenth century, many of the national songs emerged in the nineteenth century when the concepts of patriotism and nationalism gained prominence. Accompanied with the idea of independence, these songs were generally authorized and officialised a century later in the twentieth century. They are believed to "embody the ideologies and collective self-images of the nations to which they are attached" (Daughtry, 2003, p. 42) and to give a "collective voice" to the nations (Eyck, 1995, p. xx). As they represent every segment of a nation and people from various origins, cultures and environments, collective characteristic of an anthem usually stands out since individual differences are pushed into the background. Among other national symbols, specifically anthems hold a peculiar place because being different from the others, anthems are performed – usually in a

collective manner, which is what makes them distinct and more easily identifiable. Benedict Anderson states related to the relationship of anthems with music and performance:

> There is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests – above all in the form of poetry and songs. Take national anthems, for example, sung on national holidays. No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance. " […] If we are aware that others are singing these songs precisely when and we are, we have no idea who they may be, or even where, out of earshot, they are singing. Nothing connects us all but imagined sound. (Anderson, 1991, pp. 132-133)

In that way, anthems create a "collective sentiment" (Daughtry, 2003, p. 45). They coordinate the collective action and contribute to the national identity and to the sense of belongingness. Such performances play a role in uniting the peoples of a society and encourage them to join each other as well as strengthening the bonds among them. To some extent, they "serve as modern totems (in the Durkheimian sense) – signs that bear a special relationship to the nations they represent, distinguishing them from one another and reaffirming their identity boundaries" (Cerulo, 1993, p. 244). Associating themselves with the nation they are attached to, citizens feel proud and have patriotic feelings holding onto their national identities, which is quite different from political, religious or gender identities. That's why, national anthems through performance constitute national identity and are "crucial in the nation-building process" (Cusack, 2008, p. 48). Benedict Anderson, in his pioneering work *Imagined Communities*, puts forward that nations are "imagined as a community, because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson, 2006, p. 7). As a result, though the message they convey may be slightly different, the function of national anthems is more or less the same in every culture and "ruling bodies use them as a tool for creating bonds and reinforcing goals among their citizens" (Cerulo, 1989, p. 78). They do it by focusing on the lyrics and the overall context provided in the anthem for they "reveal most about the national investment of a particular act of unison" (Kelen & Pavkovic, 2012, p. 248). It is via this practice that the mentioned unity can be internalised and made stabile. Constant repetition of the lyrics and the familiarity of the music provide one's identification with it. Transferring the national heritage, ideals and driving forces from oral culture to the written form through a national symbol – national anthem in this case helps people pass these values from one generation to another in the most convenient, permanent and credible way possible. "The putting-in-writing of a nation, […] bears the sign of an imagined community: it suggests the unity of society where there is diversity and speaks of such unity as a necessary historical becoming that denies both indeterminacy and agency" (Basto, 2013, p. 185). This also makes anthems more accessible on the contrary to many other national symbols such as flags, official holidays or currencies. (Lauenstein, Murer, Boos, & Reicher, 2015, p. 315). While the meaning is implicit and needs to be inferred and interpreted in those other national symbols, in national anthems, the meaning is usually explicit and many opportunities are offered to practice them.

Furthermore, anthems are pretty common and popular symbols when compared to the others as they are open to encounter in quite a lot of public events such as national or international competitions, concerts, school organizations or holidays making each and every kind of citizen acquainted with them. Additionally, from the earliest times of history, owing to human beings' interest in the tradition of music and to their awareness of the effect of music and poetry both on mind and soul and to the fact that examples of poetry concentrating on epic themes, religion, victory, love of hometown or country are already available, anthems are adopted virtually effortlessly (Aktaş, 2013, p. 73). As seen, anthems have some other functions apart from their ceremonial functions. As well as evoking the ideas of nationality, national identity and the sense of belonging, anthems serve as reminders and alerters regarding the history of a nation since they carry traces of its past and political

regimes together with references to the current one. (Liao, G. Zhang, & L. Zhang, 2011, p. 106). The lyrics "store collective memory of the past, thus creating knowledge of the past" (p. 106). Not only the historical but also political and social conditions of a society are depicted in the narration of an anthem, so "a national anthem can mediate between culture and social relations/culture" (p. 113).

Taking these into account, national anthems can be attributed similar characteristics particularly when their functions and purposes are considered. They generally aim at triggering patriotic feelings, fostering one's ties with the country creating a national identity with regular references to history, raising one's sense of belonging and the idea of nationalism and uniting every citizen under a single roof. Despite the fact that these are the most common characteristics and are shared by the majority of nations, some other elements may be added when it comes to constitute an anthem such as religious allusions, family associations, flag ascriptions and regime attributions. To illustrate those points, the national anthems of England, the USA and France will be examined and exemplified below.

2. DISCUSSION

2.1. *God Save the King (Queen)*

England's national anthem originally known as *God Save the King (Queen)* was written in 1740 "as a celebration of solidarity, glorifying Admiral Vernon's victory" (Cerulo, 1989, p. 78) and as a representation of faithfulness to the crown in times of the Jacobite rebellion. It gained so much attention with its uniting feature that it even became a role model for some other nations such as Germans who adapted the anthem for themselves thanks to composer Joseph Haydn in the late 1700s (p. 78). The fact that it was initially sung for the sake of assisting James II supports the idea that national songs are produced as a reaction to threats coming from inside or outside and are compulsory social needs (Morgan, 2014, pp. 62-63). It is the outcome of a "spontaneous reaction to a perceived threat to national security" (p. 63). People began to sing it whenever the king became present in public, which led to the rise of a ritual. This situation is in accordance with one of the mainstream themes in anthems across cultures, which is the theme of unifying.

The lyrics of the English anthem start and continue paying tributes to the Queen with the repetitive lines "God save our gracious Queen! […] God save the Queen". Indeed, the anthem itself is built upon her and blessings of her by God stressing the link between them. In a sense, it gives the implication that after God, the nation puts the Queen in the second place in terms of significance and even attributes her some god-like characteristics such as "glorious", "victorious" and "gracious" hoping her to live long and reign long. In line with that view, the citizens sound to be ready for sacrifice and devote all they have to her by saying "Thy choicest gifts in store / On her be pleased to pour, / Long may she reign". For Cusack, national anthems are like "national hymns, praise songs not necessarily to God but to the nation, often treated as some kind of lesser God, certainly a sacred entity" (Cusack, 2005, p. 238). In the case of England's national anthem, there is not only a reference to God but also a praise to the nation, which corresponds to the Queen herself through God, so she is treated as a kind of lesser God. What is more, although the song seems to be praising the monarchy of England, as it regards the Queen as a national value and a socially prominent person, praising the monarchy means praising the nation and nationality. Therefore, the national anthem of England contains the themes of nationalism, God-state relationship and the regime as well as the common theme of unity in national anthems.

2.2. *Star-Spangled Banner*

Being alike the English national anthem, the US national anthem *The Star-Spangled Banner* has a uniting basis. It aims at gathering all American citizens and encouraging them to defend their land no matter how bloody or challenging the circumstances may be. It was written by lawyer-poet Francis Scott Key in 1814 upon gazing at the American flag waving on the top of a hill, so the anthem is a "burst of emotion and inspiration" (Delaplaine, 1944/45, p. 18). However, unlike the English anthem, it is more militaristic and contains war-like elements. As it was written at the time of war, emotions are much denser, stronger and wilder when compared to the softer and calmer tone of the English anthem. In the first stanza, the setting, which is a battlefield, is depicted as such: "And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air, / Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there;". In spite of the rockets passing above them, the view of the flag shakes the soldiers and motivates them to endure the condition providing the necessary mental strength. In the former text, while the national symbol is the Queen herself, in the latter, another widely accepted national symbol is addressed, which is the flag. In both cases, anthems that are already national symbols themselves are combined with other national symbols and/or values.

The following lines, "O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave / O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?" are repeated at the end of every stanza in the anthem. America is approached as a piece of land which is possessed by free and brave people. That is an apparent compliment to the nation as a whole and signifies the essence of living for its people, which is living independently, so the emphasis and praise are not only towards the peoples of the country but also to its regime. Contrasting with the English national anthem which proudly correlates itself with the Queen and monarchy, American anthem is situated on the side of liberty. On the other hand; however, their references to God show similarity in that the US anthem states "Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation! / Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just, / And this be our motto: 'In God is our trust.'". Here the capitalised 'Power' appears to be a personification representing God and later it is clearly expressed that while struggling and doing their best for the nation, God's support and blessing are needed for people at the same time. Though some critics find the phrase 'conquer we must' as well as the other references to war too harsh, extreme and not suitable for the modernised world of the twenty-first century promoting war and fight, being "too war-like in spirit" and "the product of a single historical event" (Weybright quoted in Abril, 2007, p. 72), as long as "culturally defined love objects" (Erickson, 2005, p. 36) like music and anthems keep reflecting one's "culture and strong emotional attachments" (Abril, 2007, p. 73), American national anthem seems to be maintaining its popularity.

2.3. *La Marseillaise*

The French national anthem, *La Marseillaise*, being alike the former anthems discussed above, renders the theme of unity from the very beginning with its call "Arise, children of the Fatherland, / The day of glory has arrived!". It invites the citizens to join the forces and to celebrate the victory of France over its enemies. Naming the country as the 'Fatherland' is notable here because it is a detail that is not acknowledged in the previous anthems as obviously as it is here. France has been given the characteristic of a male symbolising the war spirit and patriotic national identity similar to the American anthem. Here there are not as frequent references to God as there are in the English national anthem because "the nation is more like a father or mother and addressed familiarly" (Cusack, 2008, p. 46). While the English anthem places some distance between the godlike figure Queen and the common citizens with consecutive references, which could be approached as an inherent requirement of monarchy, the French seemed to have preferred intimacy as residents of a republic emphasizing brotherhood that could give people, especially to soldiers, the comfort and reliability of the familiar.

Moreover, though England's anthem identifies the country with the Queen and can be considered as a motherland as a result, the word 'motherland' has not been mentioned in the anthem itself. This direct reference of 'fatherland' in the French anthem works as a driving force especially for the males as when the anthem was written, it was ordered that "it should be a song capable of exciting patriotism of the French soldiers" (Jouvet quoted in Varma, 1981, p. 583). The effect was so successful that a general commented that *La Marseillaise* was also fighting with them on their side (p. 585). It possibly derives from the fact that like the US national anthem, the French wrote their anthem during the hot times of war when the emotions were on their peaks. For this reason, the anthem affects not only the French but also some other revolutionists worldwide who are attracted and inspired by the call "To arms, citizens, /Form your battalions," which is repeated at the end of every stanza increasing its impact cumulatively. In line with the American anthem, military vocabulary is included in it; for example, "raising bloody standard of the tyranny" which is an outcome of the combat times, and "cherished Liberty" is mentioned concentrating on the importance of sovereignty for the country.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, national anthems shed a light to a country and nation's conditions at the time they were written. If they are put down on paper during the fiery and heated times of war, related themes and vocabulary are reflected in the anthems. Generally, these are universal themes adding up to the success of the anthems as they provide easy association with the majority of people and they favour intra-national unity. Along with this unification, patriotism is underlined as it evokes feelings inside and makes an anthem more touching, moving and driving. National anthems are reactions of peoples they belong to and social and political references reflecting the regime of the country or the desired state are quite common topics in them. Owing to the fact that anthems are cultural heritages and national symbols which offer many chances to repeat and practice on certain occasions, they are vital in forming the national identity. Last but not least, national anthems are "Janus-faced – looking to the past as well as the future" (Cusack, 2008, p. 49) picturing the past but also maintaining the prospect, confidence and unity both for the future and future generations of a country.

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