

National Anthems as Unifying Tools: A Comparative Analysis of Selected Western National Anthems

Yalçın ERDEN
School of Foreign Languages
Karabuk University
Turkey
yalcinerden@karabuk.edu.tr

Abstract

National anthems are highly nationalistic and patriotic poems which are mostly accompanied by a suitable tune. These poems masterfully serve the construction and conservation of a national identity. In addition, they include myriad symbols and images that enable solidarity among the members of a certain society. In the current study, “God Save the Queen” of Britain, “La Marseillaise” of France, and “Star Spangled Banner” of the USA, which belong to the Western world, are analysed focusing mainly on how certain tools and strategies are employed to achieve the social unity. While the function of the monarchy, religion and the description of enemies are interrogated in the British anthem, how the emotion of fear constructed through the image of foes and arousing patriotic emotions serving for solidarity are examined in the French national anthem. Further, how the flag is used as an emblem to provide a unification of the members of society is mainly discussed through the American national anthem. As a result, it is concluded that these national anthems of the Western world share certain common characteristics and some minor differences. Nevertheless, all powerfully function to achieve a unity in society as well as construct or preserve a national identity.

Keywords: National anthems, Poems, Western world, Comparative analysis

1. Introduction

National anthems are highly nationalistic and patriotic poems which are mostly accompanied by a suitable tune. These poems include myriad symbols and images that enable the solidarity among the members of a certain society. The nationalistic trend that occurred as a result of the French Revolution heightened the significance of a national identity, particularly for the newly founded countries after the collapse of large empires. Therefore, it could be argued that national anthems remarkably serve for the construction and conservation of a national identity as well as the unification of society. Hence, the current study discusses “God Save the Queen” of Britain, “La Marseillaise” of France, and “Star Spangled Banner” of the USA and how the national anthems of the Western world function as unifying tools in the society through employing a New Critical approach.

New Critics believe that focusing on the context while analysing a literary work could be an objective analysis, thereby analysing merely the text. In other words, neither the intentions of the author nor the historical aspects of a certain period are considered by the New Criticism (Tyson, 2006, p. 136; Selden et.al., 2005, p. 19). Rather, they emphasize on the organic unity of the structure and meaning (Tyson, 2006, p. 138). It could be argued that a work of art is

considered a sample to be analysed in isolation from its surrounding, but this does not mean solely focusing on the form of a literary work and ignoring the meaning. In fact, the profound effect that arises from the integration of form and meaning is valued in this approach. In addition, self sufficiency of a work of art in prose or verse is highlighted by the New Critics (Tyson, 2006, p. 136). In other words, a work of art as an autonomous entity is regarded efficacious enough to undergo a literary analysis. One of the significant contributors of the New Criticism, as noted by F.R. Leavis (1961), is “*poetry can communicate the actual quality of experience with a subtlety and precision unapproachable by any other means*” (p. 17). Therefore, a close reading of the British, French and American national anthems was conducted without resorting to any other means, as Leavis suggests, with the aim of displaying the unifying role of national anthems in the construction and permanence of the social values.

National anthems are indispensable parts of every country within the contemporary world, and they are interwoven with cultural, religious and nationalistic values. By emphasizing the role of national anthems in bonding the members of society, Karen A. Cerula (1989) defines the national anthems:

National anthems are official patriotic symbols-the musical equivalent of a country's motto, crest, or flag. As such, they represent the nation's identity or character-its mood, desires, and goals as put forth by those in power. Anthems, like other national symbols, become a nation's "calling card." They are modern totems-signs by which nations distinguish themselves from one another or reaffirm their "identity" boundaries. (p. 78)

As it could be discerned from Cerula’s definition, national anthems are quite powerful symbolic poems and represent the portrait of a nation as well. Significantly, national anthems serve the confirmation of national identities. Similarly, Daniel Hummel (2017) notes that the national anthems may inspire the individuals in a certain society and allow them develop a sense of belonging (p. 225). It is obvious that national anthems are crucial symbolic poems that mainly provide internalization of certain social values. Nevertheless, these anthems might result in controlling the masses in a society as well.

There is no doubt that an individual is the product of his or her surrounding and society. In Emile Durkheim’s (2005) words “. . . *it is society which, fashioning us in its image fills us with religious, political and moral beliefs that control our actions*” (p. 170). Hence, it could be argued that individuals who are exposed to various social codes are conditioned in each society. Furthermore, by emphasizing the totalitarian and impersonal aspect of the traditional genre, epic, Georg Lukács (1971) notes that the epic’s main goal is “*saving the tradition*” (p. 153). Likewise, the national anthems serve protecting constructed national identities and the tradition of a society. Therefore, it is possible to regard national anthems not only as influential instruments that equip individuals with certain social codes in order to turn them into citizens but also as modern versions of poems that follow the epic tradition.

2. A Comparative Analysis of “God Save the Queen,” “La Marseillaise,” and “Star-Spangled Banner” in Terms of their Unifying Roles

The national anthem, “God Save the Queen,” consists of five stanzas, and free verse is employed in it since a regular rhythm or a rhyme scheme cannot be observed. As it could be discerned from the title, the anthem is a reminiscent of a kind of hymn. Bombastic and exuberant tone that is mostly employed in national anthems does not exist. In contrast, the anthem seems like a serene prayer through which the safety of the Queen is wished. Furthermore, connotative language is avoided, and a simple language free from figures of

speech prevails in the poem. Nevertheless, certain concepts are often repeated to highlight certain sentiments in the poem.

At the very beginning of the poem, the word, “queen,” is repeated four times, and the speaker prays to God to save the Queen. Despite the fact that monarchies and kingdoms lost their validity a long time ago, and democracy which enables the participation of each individual in the governance of a country is valued in today’s world, a member of the archaic system is championed and exalted throughout the poem. Therefore, it could be argued that the desire for preserving the tradition is observed at the outset. The Queen’s long life, happiness, glory, victory, and her long reign are implied to be closely connected with the future of the country. The speaker or the speakers in the poem wish wellness of the queen rather than soundness of the country since the monarchy is associated with Britain. As Chris Alden (2002) notes, “*the Queen has the right to rule: the people of Britain are not citizens, but subjects of the monarch*” (par. 3), and the anthem commences to serve for perpetuation of such mentality. Therefore, it could be highlighted that the notion of being loyal to the monarchy and the existing tradition are conveyed to the members of the British society via the anthem.

Spirituality and religion could be considered as crucial factors that unite the members of a certain society. In this regard, Durkheim (1995) points out “*a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden -- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community. . .*” (p. 44). Thus, the inclusion of concepts related to religion could be regarded as functional to unite the members of the society in national anthems. In “God Save the Queen,” the word “God” stands to be one of the most repeated concepts in the poem. As the tone of the poem is quite similar to a hymn, that concept might seem natural which is used to refer to the creator during a prayer. Nevertheless, the existence of an omnipotent creator who protects the supreme power of the monarchy is implied through the usage and association of such divine power with the British monarchy. Furthermore, the supremacy of this power is even revealed through the number of words used to describe the creator. While the word, “Queen,” is repeated seven times throughout the poem, the word, “God,” is repeated nine times and the word, “Lord,” was repeated twice. Therefore, it could be stated that the association of the monarchy with religious motives both enhances the credibility of such system and amalgamates the members of the society through shared sacred beliefs.

The primacy of the individual is forsaken, and all members of the British society are assembled while the Queen who is praised and prayed for in the poem. For instance, the first person plural subject pronoun, we, and the possessive pronoun, our, are constantly employed throughout the poem, and all individual differences are neglected. Thus, it could be argued that through the intentional usage of certain pronouns, the anthem conduces to the idea of unity and the formation of single nation who shares the same sentimental values.

Valuation of an archaic system, the monarchy, and religion might be considered influential tools to provide the unity in the society and preserve certain social values, whereas fear generated by the concept of an enemy fosters the solidarity among the citizens of a country as well. Thus, a remarkable part of the anthem is allocated to the description of possible enemies of Britain. All kinds of enemies including the secret ones and assassins are cursed in the poem, and prayers on the side of the Queen, British people, are automatically placed to the category of purified, innocent and rightful ones who defend their country. While speakers are praying to God, they note:

O Lord our God arise

Scatter her enemies
And make them fall
Confound their politics
Frustrate their knavish tricks. . . (God Save the Queen, 2015)

Although no other nation is more capable of constructing subtle plots and deceitful plans than the British, enemies of Britain are ironically described to be trickster. The fear of demonic enemies is not excessively employed in the poem, but it could be still considered a significant way of consolidating and controlling masses. Following the cursing of the enemies, the wish for the wellness of the Queen is repeated through the end of the poem, and the reason for this wish is clarified stating “for Britain’s sake...” (God Save the Queen, 2015). The line “God save the Queen!” is restated in the last stanza but with a slight difference: an exclamation mark is employed as a sign of final imploring.

In short, the British national anthem serves for the preservation of the existing tradition and solidarity among the members of the country through the appraisal of the monarchy and the inclusion of religion. What is more, praying to God as a single community and cursing of the described enemies in the poem could be viewed as functional for the same purposes. Even though a dynamic or energetic tone is lacking in the anthem, implication of the necessity of the solidarity among the British people is successfully accomplished through the intentional repetition and preference of specific concepts.

In the French national anthem, “La Marseillaise,” it is not possible to observe the boasting of the monarchy and the inclusion of religious motifs to unite the individuals as it is the case in the British national anthem. “La Marseillaise” aims at constructing the unity and solidarity like the British anthem, but it achieves it through constructed images of brutal enemies and appealing to patriotic emotions of the French on the whole. The anthem consists of mainly seven stanzas and one quatrain, which is used as a kind of refrain. Despite the fact that the figurative language could not be observed and blank verse is employed in the poem similar to “God Save the Queen,” a very patriotic, nationalistic, menacing, and violent tone seems prevalent via the repetition of certain concepts and vivid images throughout the poem.

Fear is a natural emotion that might be felt by an individual when faced with a threat or a risk. Nevertheless, this emotion could be functional in shaping and consolidating members of a society through constructed images of danger. H. L. Mencken (1998) underlines “. . . *the whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by an endless series of hobgoblins, most of them imaginary*” (p. 19). Thus, it is clear that the perceptions of individuals are conditioned by constructed sources of fear, and a sort of solidarity could become possible when all these people are intimidated as it will be displayed in “La Marseillaise.”

A threat of demonic enemies is highlighted particularly in the first three stanzas, and through the descriptions of these enemies as barbarous creatures, fear is achieved to be aroused among the citizens of France. Undoubtedly, the construction of such emotion through the anthem serves for the unification of the individuals in that society. At the very beginning of the anthem, an announcement like a call for waging war against invaders who head towards France is observed. Next, the speaker commences to describe the imaginary invaders, and

nearly half of the poem is allocated for the description of these hostiles. According to the speaker, these enemies are so fearsome that they could “. . . cut the throats of your sons and consorts” (De Lisle, 2015). They are determined to chain the French people and plan to rebuild the old system: slavery. What is more, they are likely to be lawmakers in the French courts, and they even have the potential to kill all the soldiers of the French army. Descriptions of the enemies with such violent and fearsome details automatically form both fear and the need for togetherness against the foes of France. Therefore, it could be argued that the anthem becomes functional to sustain the unification of the society members through a disturbing moment of crisis and created brutal images.

Contrary to serene praying of the speakers in “God Save the Queen,” a vivid, violent, and bloody scene of a battlefield is displayed in “La Marseillaise.” After highlighting the seriousness of the threat, the speaker commences to make a speech as if he were a commander who was haranguing to hearten his soldiers in the battlefield. All the members of France are turned into soldiers, and they are summoned to fight against the invaders in a very nationalistic and patriotic tone stating “Let impure blood/ Water our furrows” (De Lisle, 2015). While the enemies are described as “traitors,” “tyrants,” and “despots,” the French people who are summoned to defend their country are described as heroic figures, defenders of their flags, and “magnanimous warriors.” In other words, the image of the fearful enemy is counterbalanced with the image of the heroic and glorious French warriors. Similar to the British anthem, the first person plural pronoun, we, is mostly used, and a sense of unified nation who have the same purpose is also felt through that strategy. Furthermore, violent and brutal intentions of the French warriors for seeking revenge are displayed as the deeds to achieve liberty and glory under the French flag. Thus, violence committed by the French warriors is justified, and the members of the society are recollected under the umbrella of certain concepts or causes like liberty.

In spite of the fact that the main goal of the anthem is similar to the British anthem, “La Marseillaise” differs in the usage of tools. In the anthem, fear is pumped through the possibility of invasion by cruel enemies, and this emotion serves the unification of the individuals at the time of crisis. In addition, employing certain terms to glorify the French people as innate warriors, nationalistic and patriotic feelings of the members of that society are appealed. In the end of the anthem, it is highlighted that all French warriors are waging a bloody war in order to gain liberty, and the idea that all the French serve for the same cause as a single community is hinted through such scene. Thus, the anthem turns into a very useful instrument for the internalization of nationalistic values and sustaining the social solidarity.

The national anthem of the USA, “Star-Spangled Banner,” is quite similar to the French national anthem in terms of displaying a battlefield scene and evoking patriotic feelings throughout the poem. Also, certain religious concepts such as the God are included in the anthem as it is the case in “God Save the Queen.” In addition, “Star-Spangled Banner” demonizes the enemies of the nation like “God Save the Queen” and “La Marseillaise,” but the focal point of the anthem revolves around the flag of the USA, and it aims to unite the members of the country through that flag. The anthem consists of four stanzas, and alternate rhyming (abab) and coupled rhyming (aabb) are employed within each stanza. In spite of the fact that it is not possible to observe highly figurative language throughout the poem, the flag of the nation is so much valued that turns into a personified object rather than a piece of cloth.

Flags are symbolic pieces of cloth that embody cultural, social, religious, and nationalistic codes of a nation. Their symbolic power is so tremendous. In this regard, Durkheim (1995) notes, “*a mere scrap of the flag represents the country as much as the flag itself; moreover, it is sacred in the same right and to the same degree*” (p. 231). Durkheim (1995) also highlights that emblems enable express “the social unit tangibly” and this enables “*the unit itself more tangible to all*” (p. 231). In other words, flags as emblems become a tool both to define a nation and to raise the consciousness of individuals as a single nation. Most importantly, flags function to “. . . *promote feelings of social solidarity*” (Shanefelt, 2009, p. 14) as it will be displayed through the national anthem, “Star-Spangled Banner.”

At the very beginning of the anthem, durability and strength of the flag are introduced, and how the flag is adored is highlighted by the speaker. Not only “at the twilight’s last gleaming” (Key, 1999), but also during “the morning’s first beam” (Key, 1999) the flag courageously streams with its all nobility. Even “the rocket’s red glare” and “the bombs bursting in the air” (Key, 1999) cannot prevent waving of the flag. The fire that occurs through them only renders the flag more visible. As it could be observed through these descriptions, the flag is elevated to the position of a heroic character that is never defeated despite forceful attacks of the enemy. Moreover, the concepts “glory” and “triumph” are associated with the flag, particularly in the third and fourth stanzas. Therefore, it is possible to put forward that the flag’s superiority and power are underlined throughout the anthem, and it turns into a timeless hero that represents greatness of the USA. Therefore, the repetition of personified flag’s supreme power in the anthem significantly contributes to the internalization of a national identity. The individuals are convicted greatness of their nation through the flag, and also it becomes a significant emblem that has the potential to provide the social solidarity.

In order to construct and maintain the social unity, “Star-Spangled Banner” employs certain concepts and strategies which are also common in the French and British national anthems. Similar to “La Marseillaise,” the battlefield scene and appraisal of the American citizens could be vividly observed in the poem. Like the speaker in the French national anthem who summons the French people to shed blood of the enemies, the speaker in “Star-Spangled Banner” is proud that the enemies’ “blood has wash’d out their fool footstep’s pollution” (Key, 1999). Likewise, the defeated enemies are described as “the hirelings and slaves” (Key, 1999). Thus, it could be stated that nationalistic and patriotic feelings of the Americans are recollected through a battlefield scene in which the victory of the Americans is highlighted. What is more, the idea of “the land of the free and the home of the brave” (Key, 1999) is repeated at the end of each stanza. Reminding certain concepts like freedom and bravery also significantly enhances the sense of belonging of the individuals, and these strategies masterfully serve the influential construction of a social unity among the Americans.

Certain concepts regarding religion and divine power are also employed in the anthem as it is the case in “God Save the Queen,” and through such concepts, the validity of the nation and its deeds are confirmed. The speaker believes “*the Pow’r*” *enabled them to survive as a nation and highlights necessity of conquering if their “cause is just”* (Key, 1999). Above all, the speaker underlines “In God is our trust” (Key, 1999), and thereby sanctity concerning the American nation is accomplished. Not only its so-called rightful intentions of invasion are validated but also preservation of society and its tradition are cemented through such religious concepts.

3. Conclusion

Briefly, the selected anthems from the Western world prove that the national anthems considerably serve the unification of the members of a country and conserving an existing tradition no matter how the tools employed in them differ. In addition, all these three anthems appeal to patriotic and nationalistic emotions of the members of society. While the members of a certain nation are canonized, the potential enemies of that nation are demonized, and a strong bond among these members is hinted through the totalitarian approach in the anthems.

“God Save the Queen” elevates the traditional values of its nation through the appraisal of the monarchy and the inclusion of religious motifs, whereby “La Marseillaise” mainly arouses fear among the society members through brutal descriptions of the enemies before praising the French people, and “Star-Spangled Banner” glorifies the American flag as a significant emblem on the whole. Nonetheless, they all employ common methods including the repetition of sacred and valued concepts such as divine power, liberty, and hostility. Above all, after a close reading of these three anthems, it could be concluded that they all serve the same purpose: solidarity in the society.

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