

Subtle Dissent of a Balkan Bard The Life and Works of Ismail Kadare

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Ismail Kadare, who has won the first International Man Booker Prize, is without doubt the best example of creativity and originality in contemporary Albanian letters. He is, in addition, the only Albanian writer to enjoy a broad international reputation. Kadare's talents have lost none of their innovative force over the last four decades. His courage in attacking literary mediocrity within the Communist system brought a breath of fresh air to Albanian culture in the sombre years of imposed conformity.

Born in 1936 in the museum-city of Gjirokastra, Kadare studied at the Faculty of History and Philology of the University of Tirana and subsequently at the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow until 1960 when relations between Albania and the Soviet Union became tense. On his return to Albania he worked as a journalist, became editor-in-chief of the French-language literary periodical *Les Lettres Albanaises* and carried out several formal political functions. Kadare lived the next thirty years of his life in Tirana, constantly under the eye of the Party and of the dictator Enver Hoxha (1908-1985). He began his literary career in Albania as a poet but turned increasingly to prose, of which he soon became the undisputed master and by far the most popular writer in the whole of Albanian literature. His works were extremely influential throughout the 1970s and 1980s and, for many readers, he was the only ray of hope in the chilly, dismal prison that was communist Albania.

He was privileged by the authorities, in particular once his works became internationally known. Indeed, he was able to pursue literary and personal objectives for which other writers would certainly have been sent into internal exile or to prison. But Kadare knew well that liberties in Albania could be easily withdrawn, by an impulsive stroke of the tyrant's pen. At the end of October 1990, a mere two months before the final collapse of the dictatorship, Kadare left Tirana and applied for political asylum in France, a move that enabled him for the first time to exercise his profession with complete freedom. His years of Parisian exile were productive and accorded him further success and recognition, as a writer both in Albanian and in French. After twelve years in Paris, he returned to Tirana in 2002.

Though Kadare is still admired as a poet in Albania, his reputation and, in particular, his international reputation now rest entirely on his prose, especially his historical novels. Kadare's first major prose work was the novel *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur*, (1963; *The General of the Dead Army*, 1971). In view of the publication date - the author was a mere twenty-seven years old at the time - *The General* could almost be viewed as a work of youth, and yet, it is still one of Kadare's most effective novels, and one of his best known. "Like a proud and solitary bird, you will fly over those silent and tragic mountains in order to wrest our poor young men from their jagged, rocky grip." Such is the vision of the Italian general in the company of a laconic priest on his mission to Albania to recover the remains of his soldiers who had fallen some twenty years earlier. He begins his duties with a sense of grandeur befitting his rank: "In the task he was now undertaking there was something of the majesty of the Greeks and the Trojans, of the solemnity of Homeric funeral rites." The general finds himself in a sombre, rainy country

with a sullen and resentful population as he sets about his noble task of exhuming the bones of a dispersed army. Gradually, and inevitably, he is confronted with the grim realities of the past and haunted by the futility of his mission. His grand intentions have long since become a personal nightmare when the bones of the infamous Colonel Z are thrown at his feet by a deranged old woman.

The rain, which streamed down the windshield of the military vehicle put at the general's disposal, is a common metaphor in Ismail Kadare's prose. At the time of publication of *The General*, this constant downpour and many other features of the novel made it a clear step forward in Albanian letters. Grey stormclouds, mud and the humdrum reality of everyday life contrasted sharply with the otherwise obligatory sunshine and blithe victories of socialist realism. So did the Italian general. Here too we find a favourite device of the writer who, more than any other, was to bring his country's literature out of its stylistic and thematic lethargy: the vision of a remote and haunted Albania as seen through the eyes of the innocent or uncomprehending foreigner. This perspective not only gave shape to a European country which at the time was more isolated from the Western world than Tibet, but also helped Albanians themselves see their homeland as others might see it.

After the initial Albanian edition of 1963, and a revised version in 1967, it was the French-language edition *Le général de l'armée morte*, Paris 1970, which laid the foundations for Kadare's deserved renown abroad. (The English-language edition first appeared shortly thereafter, in 1971, and has been republished at least five times.) What gave Ismail Kadare, living in the most severe Stalinist regime imaginable, the courage to publish a novel whose main characters were a Fascist general and an Italian priest? For courage was definitely needed to publish anything in communist Albania beyond party panegyrics and the standard tales of Communist partisan heroism. Albania had broken off ties with the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc countries in 1961 and had embarked upon a new alliance with Red China. Certain of economic assistance from its new friends, the communist regime in Albania enjoyed a certain amount of political and economic stability in the early 1960s. In 1962, the Democratic Front won 99.99 percent of votes in parliamentary elections, with 99.99 percent participation. A world record! Although there was obviously no semblance of choice or real democracy here, the Communist Party felt sufficiently confident that all open opposition had been stifled, and permitted a modicum of liberality in cultural affairs for a brief period before the Cultural Revolution swept into the country from China in 1966. Kadare took full advantage of this period of political stability. Subsequent novels such as *Dasma* (1968; *The Wedding*) and, to an extent, *Kështjella*, (1970; *The Castle*, 1974) are reflections of more turbulence and insecurity in the Albanian population in general, and for Kadare personally.

Another period of relative political calm occurred between the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1969 and the so-called Purge of the Liberals under Todi Lubonja and Fadil Paçrami in 1973. It was during these years that Kadare wrote and managed to publish one of his most impressive novels: *Kronikë në gur* (1971; *Chronicle in Stone*, 1987). This novel in eighteen chapters and an epilogue is the chronicle of the beautiful city of Gjirokastra in southern Albania under occupation during the Second World War. Known to the Greeks as Argyrokastron, this fabled city with its lofty fortress manors of stone looming from the mountainside over narrow cobbled alleys was successively occupied, like much of Albania at the time, by the Greeks, the Italians and the Germans. *Chronicle in Stone* is a work of linguistic finesse and subtle political allusions. It offers not so much a portrayal of the grim historical events of a city under occupation, as a compelling mixture of childhood observations, impressions and fantasies by a young Albanian lad. Kadare was himself born in Gjirokastra in 1936, as was the inscrutable Communist dictator, Enver Hoxha, a generation before him. Autobiographical in inspiration at

least, the novel follows the young boy through the streets of his occupied city and through the realms of his own imaginary world as he views events and as he overhears and interprets bits of gossip, conversations and local superstitions. He sees a neighbour as Lady Macbeth, while a cabbage in the market takes the form of a severed head. Passing troops become Crusaders until the lad and his friends grow up to join a band of partisans and the world of childhood fantasy finally gives way to that of an often savage maturity.

It was in *Chronicle in Stone* that Kadare's inclination towards the fantastic first came to the fore, an element which in later years was to be called his 'magic realism' and which, among many critics, evoked parallels with Gabriel García Márquez. It is also in this novel, curiously enough, that Enver Hoxha makes his first appearance. The Purge of the Liberals during the Fourth Plenary Session of the Central Committee on 26-28 June 1973 caused, as intended, shockwaves in intellectual circles. Ismail Kadare, as a leading literary figure, had to tread lightly to ensure his survival. In *Nëntori i një kryeqyteti*, 1975 (November of a Capital City), he once again set his novel in the Second World War, but with a politically more acceptable theme, the partisan struggle against the German occupation of Tirana in 1944. Like *The Wedding* before it, this 223-page novel was a work of propaganda, a reflection of the 'ideological struggle against foreign manifestations and liberal attitudes.'

Prilli i thyer (1978; *Broken April*, 1990) published in the 1980 volume *Gjakftohtësia*, (Cold-Bloodedness), and set in the 1930s, begins with a murder. Gjorg Berisha has accomplished what all his family and relatives insisted he must do: cleanse his honour by slaying his brother's murderer from the rival Kryeqyqe clan. There was no way out of the bloody rituals of vendetta, anchored in the ancient Code or Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini. Whole families have been wiped out in the 'taking of blood' and now he, too, is obliged to follow suit, only to set himself up as the next victim. Everything is regulated by tribal law, including a thirty-day truce during which he will be allowed to spend his last days out in the sunlight and during which he will have to journey through the mountains of Mirdita to submit 'blood money' to the feudal *qeheja e gjakut* (Blood Steward), keeper of the records. When the protagonist of the novel, the writer Besian Vorpsi, announces to friends and acquaintances at a dinner-party in Tirana that he intends to spend his in the tribal highlands, he is met by a stunned silence. His young bride Diana, too, is taken aback at the thought of spending a holiday on a desolate plateau in the northern Albanian Alps. Would not the sparkling beaches of the Albanian Riviera or Italy, or even France, be more appropriate for members of the upper middle class of pre-war Albania's burgeoning little capital? Some friends can understand that Besian, as a writer, is fascinated by the prospects of a journey by car into the past, among the feudal and feuding mountain tribes of the north, a primitive society as yet untouched by modern civilisation. But what of poor Diana? The more adventuresome envy her: "You will leave this world for the world of legends, ancient epics which are rarely encountered anywhere on the face of the earth today." Later, on Gjorg's journey to the bleak fortress of Orosh, he is startled to see one of the rare horseless carriages he has heard of, a vehicle carrying a beautiful young lady from the city. Diana, too, has not failed to notice the young tribesman on his way to the Inn of the Two Roberts. Inevitably, Besian's morbid fascination with the bloody custom and Diana's erotic attraction to Gjorg Berisha, a growing obsession which draws her into the other world, lead to the couple's estrangement.

Broken April is a popular novel, providing the Western reader with much "local colour." Vendetta which, since the fall of the communist dictatorship, has come back to the mountains of northern Albania, is the aspect of Albanian culture which perhaps most fascinates the outside world. Kadare has managed here to give it the epic proportions of an Aeschylean or Shakespearian tragedy.

Kush e solli Doruntinën? (1979; *Doruntine*, 1988) is a wonderful tale set in the Middle

Ages and based on an Albanian legend. The story of Constantine and his sister Doruntine is one of the best-known in Albanian folklore - simple and yet, as we see, with many possibilities. An old woman has nine sons and one daughter. Eight of the sons have already died by the time the daughter is to marry a distant suitor. Because the ageing mother is apprehensive about giving her consent to the marriage and thereby losing her daughter as well, perhaps forever, the only surviving son, young Constantine, makes a solemn pledge (*besa* in Albanian) to bring back his sister whenever the mother should express the desire to see her. Time passes, but, of the surviving members of the family, it is Constantine who dies first. The old woman, now alone, regrets her decision, longs for her daughter, and curses the dead Constantine for having broken his *besa*. Thereupon, Constantine, faithful beyond the grave to his pledge, rises from the tomb, mounts his steed and sets off in the night to find his sister, whom he returns to the arms of their dying mother.

Such is the Balkan legend which Kadare skilfully transforms into the period thriller. The action revolves around Captain Stres, a minor official in Albania during the Middle Ages who is responsible for sorting out the facts of the case and preparing a report: the daughter's unexpected arrival from distant Bohemia on a misty October night, the sudden death of mother and daughter, persistent rumours of an incestuous relationship - a desire so strong as to overcome death itself - the gravestone ajar, devious attempts to hush up the growing scandal and preserve the interests of Church and State, and finally, a suspect. The atmosphere of medieval intrigue offered by Kadare is reminiscent of that in Italian writer Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.

Few of Kadare's works has been so well received by critics as *Pallati i ëndrrave* (1996; *The Palace of Dreams*, 1993) originally known as *Nëpunësi i pallatit të ëndrrave*, (1981; The official of the palace of dreams). It can rightfully be considered one of Kadare's masterpieces. *The Palace of Dreams* is the world of Franz Kafka and of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, set in the sybaritic, if somewhat torpid atmosphere of the Ottoman Empire. Mark-Alem, scion of a noted family of public servants, is appointed to work at the Tabir Sarrail, the awesome government office responsible for the study of sleep and dreams. It is his duty to analyse and categorize the dreams and nightmares of the Sultan's subjects and to interpret them in order to enable the authorities to stifle any incipient rebellion and prevent criminal acts. It is a novel which is basically humorous, but certainly not so for those who have lived in a totalitarian state. The analogy for Albanians was more than evident. The novel was conceived in the years 1972-1973 and was completed and published in 1981. In early 1982, an emergency meeting of the Albanian Writers Union was convened in the presence several members of the Politburo, including Ramiz Alia, who was to take power in 1985 after the death of Enver Hoxha. Terrified by the obvious allusions, writers and party members criticized *The Palace of Dreams* severely. At the end of the meeting, Ramiz Alia warned Kadare: "The people and the Party have raised you to Olympus, but if you are not faithful to them, they will cast you into an abyss." But the Albanian Communist Party was weary by this time. After the rupture of its alliance with China and the cession of aid from that source, Albania was in rapid economic decline and had other concerns. Ismail Kadare was already an important and internationally recognized literary figure and could no longer be imprisoned or exiled without a scandal. As a result, *The Palace of Dreams* passed, and its author surprisingly survived the turmoil to continue his literary career. In doing so, he put Albanian literature on the map for the first time.

Krushqit janë të ngrirë (1986; *The Wedding Procession Turned to Ice*, 1997), evokes the explosive events of the Albanian uprising in the then autonomous region of Kosova in March-April 1981. The Albanian demand for republic status within the Yugoslav federation met with severe reprisals as well as the imposition of martial law by the Serb authorities in Belgrade. Tension between the Albanians and Serbs who had shared the plains of Kosova for centuries

reached yet another tragic zenith that year - two peoples pitted against one another instead of united in harmonious co-existence. It is to the idea of a union rendered impossible by circumstance that the title of the novel alludes. According to legend, the *oras*, spirits of Albanian mythology, would turn a wedding procession to ice before it reached home in order to prevent what was simply not permitted to be. Kadare's allegory touches on an unpleasant reality. We follow two days in the life of Teuta Shkreli, a surgeon at a Prishtina hospital during the bloody events, who finds herself caught up in a web of intrigue and incrimination. Who was responsible for the extra beds being set up in the ward the night before the uprising? Who removed the list of patients' names from the hospital files? Who was providing medical care to enemies of the state? And were Serbs being sterilized by Albanian doctors, or vice versa? Teuta, aware of impending repression, senses that her loyalty to her people and to her profession outweighs her passive allegiance to the State. Kadare is unsparing in his portrayal of political realities in Kosova, in particular in his description of drunken Serb ruffians longing for the good old days of Aleksandar Ranković, the head of the Yugoslav security police who was responsible for the systematic persecution of the Albanian population until his dismissal in July 1966.

In *Dosja H* (1990; *The File on H*, 1997) two fictive Irish-American scholars, Max Roth and Willy Norton, set off for the isolated mountains of pre-war northern Albania, tape recorder in hand, in search of the homeland of the epic. The two folklorists, based on Milman Parry and Albert Lord of Harvard University, are intent on investigating the possibility of a direct link between Homeric verse and the heroic songs sung by the Albanian mountain dwellers on their one-stringed *lahutas*. Is this heroic and epic poetry, still sung by the Albanians and southern Slavs, indeed the last outpost of the Homeric epic? It is a hypothesis which has particularly fascinated Ismail Kadare. The field trip is somewhat of a puzzle to the Albanian authorities, in particular to the sub-prefect of the region who, just to be on the safe side, sends out the bumbling secret agent Dullë Baxhaja to observe and report on the pair's activities and movements. The sub-prefect's wife, Daisy, reminiscent of the figure of Diana Vorpsi in *Broken April*, is equally fascinated by the presence of the two male scholars. Suspicion soon arises among the native population that the intruders from abroad are indeed spies. Their quarters at the Buffalo Bone Inn are eventually ransacked and the recording equipment which had captured the peasants' voices, is destroyed. End of mission to Albania. *The File on H* is a delightful satire on two innocent foreigners endeavouring to fathom the Albanian soul and, in particular, on the foibles of Albanian life at which foreign visitors often marvel: the Balkan love of rumours and gossip, administrative incompetence, and a childish fear or suspicion on the part of the authorities towards anything foreign. By once again placing his tale in the 1930s, Kadare was able to take a safe sideswipe at his country's isolationist tendencies and at the bungling interference of the security apparatus in all spheres of contemporary life.

Many other novels of Ismail Kadare merit critical appraisal. Of particular interest are *Koncert në fund të dimrit*, (1988; *The Concert*, 1994), an epic novel which focuses on the dramatic rupture of relations with Communist China; *Piramida* (1993, *The Pyramid*, 1996) which is set in Pharaonic Egypt and evinces clear political analogies with the Enver Hoxha dictatorship, in particular in view of the pyramid-shaped museum in Tirana which was devoted to the dictator; *Ura me tri harqe* (1978, *The Three-Arched Bridge*, 1998) set in the Middle Ages and translated directly from the Albanian by John Hodgson, who has been active recently at the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia in The Hague; and most recently, *Lulet e ftohta të marsit* (2000; *Spring Flowers, Spring Frost*, 2002) in which Kadare, among other things, returns to the theme of vendetta. Kadare has lost none of his élan in recent years. In addition to some works of a journalistic and political nature, he has published a collection of short stories, *Përballë pasqyrës së një gruaje* (In a lady's looking-glass); the novels *Jeta, loja*

dhe vdekja e Lul Mazrekut (Life, game and death of Lul Mazreku), *Pasardhësi* (The successor) and *Vajza e Agamemnonit* (Agamemnon's daughter); a play, the Promethean tragedy *Stinë e mërzitshme në Olymp*; and the poetry collections *Ca pika shiu ranë mbi qelq* (Some raindrops fell on the window-pane) and *Kristal* (Crystal), both essentially republications.

He has also recently published his collected works in twelve thick volumes, each in an Albanian-language and a French-language edition, and has been given membership in the prestigious Académie Française (October 28, 1996) and in the French Legion of Honour. He has been nominated on several occasions for the Nobel Prize for Literature, while the Man Booker International prize will help introduce him to the English-speaking world at large and, it is to be hoped, will encourage more translations of his works.

There can be no doubt that Ismail Kadare has been a profoundly dissident writer who, at the same time, has led an extremely conformist, if you will, collaborationist life. Dissent in Kadare's prose up to the fall of the dictatorship was very discreet but ubiquitous. Notwithstanding its subtle nature, it was sufficiently evident at all times to the educated Albanian reader, and this is one of the major factors which contributed to his popularity at home. Kadare missed no opportunity to attack the follies, weaknesses and excesses of the Albanian communist system, yet many of his barbs are difficult to understand for those who did not grow up in or live through that system. The very treatment in a conformist manner of a taboo subject, of virtually anything beyond the very narrow scope of socialist realism and communist partisan heroism, constituted in itself an act of extreme dissent, amounting to treason in Albania. Though some observers there silently viewed him as a political opportunist, and many Albanians in exile later criticized him vociferously for the compromises he made, it was Ismail Kadare more than anyone else who, from within the system, dealt the death blow to the literature of socialist realism - from within. He made use of his relative freedom and his talent to launch many subtle but effective fusillades against the dictatorship, in the process of becoming most prominent representative of Albanian literature under the rule of Enver Hoxha and, at the same time, the regime's most talented adversary.

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