

Ismail Kadare
The caravan of veils. Tales
[*Die Schleierkarawane. Erzählungen*].
Oda Buchholz & Wilfried Fiedler, transl.
Berlin (East). Volk und Welt. 1987. 180 pages.

The *Schleierkarawane* or 'Caravan of veils' comprises three historical tales in German translation by the well-known Albanian writer Ismail Kadare, all of which focus on Albania under the yoke of the Ottoman Empire.

"I am pleased to be able to report to the mighty Sultan, vicar of the Prophet on earth, that all women and maidens in the greatest empire on earth are veiled."

Such is the culmination of the tale originally entitled *Sjellësi i fatkeqësisë - Islamo nox* (The bearer of ill-tidings - Islamo nox). It was the will of the Sultan that all females of the Ottoman Empire, both to the east and west of the Bosphorus, be veiled. The women of the Balkans, in particular the dark-eyed maidens of the remote Albanian mountains, Moslems only by name, had not yet appreciated how shameless their behaviour was, and so the Sublime Porte was forced to act. In a whole summer of intense activity, seamstresses from ten Turkish cities prepared half a million veils for the stubborn Europeans. Once delivered to the main storehouse in Istanbul, the veils were carefully bundled and eventually loaded onto the backs of Haxhi Mileti's mules. At this point, Kadare's story takes its course. We follow the caravan of Haxhi Mileti on its highly political trek to Albania to distribute the oriental apparel to the European women of the Empire. Haxhi, who is a faithful servant of the Sultan, manages to suppress his doubts about the ethics of his journey and carries out the imperial order to the letter. Or does he? On his return to Orman Çiftlik, he is to be arrested and thrown into prison for the rest of his days. Was it political intrigue that sealed his fate or was it indeed the 'curse of the Balkan women'? Kadare uses the figure of Haxhi Mileti to revive an almost forgotten chapter of women's history, one not devoid of ramifications in our times, as the plight of women in present-day Iran shows.

The second tale, *Komisioni i festës* (The celebration commission), takes us back to 19th century Albania, again in the grips of the Ottoman Empire. In minute detail, Kadare depicts the intensive preparations for a celebration to mark the reincorporation of Albania into the Empire after the quelling of an uprising, and the subsequent treacherous massacre of five hundred Albanian nobles and warriors. The story is based on one of the most tragic episodes of Albanian history. In 1830, after the Russian-Turkish war, the Sublime Porte decided once and for all to rid itself of the Albanian nobility which was constantly up in arms against the Empire and which made use of every opportunity for revolt. In August of that year, Mehmed Reshid Pasha arrived at Monastir (Bitola) to proclaim a general amnesty to the rebellious tribes. In the course of the celebrations to mark the amnesty, his troops encircled and massacred five hundred chiefs and their families, thus exterminating virtually all the nobility of southern Albania in one fell swoop. Kadare brings to life all the cynicism and cold-blooded mendacity of politics in a stagnating and autocratic system.

The third story is more intimate in nature though more extensive in scope. *Breznia e Hankonatëve* (The lineage of the Hankonis) traces in 78 episodes the rise of the Hankoni family in the southern Albanian city of Gjirokastër, the author's hometown. Kadare highlights their industriousness, their superstitions, their petty conflicts and rivalries, their successes and failures, following them from generation to generation over a period of no less than two centuries. Once

again, the author shows his skills not only in delineating a family's past, but also in portraying an era buffeted by the ironies of history and the throes of fate.

Translations in this volume are by Oda Buchholz and Wilfried Fiedler, noted Albanologists at the GDR Academy of Sciences in East Berlin and co-authors of an Albanian-German dictionary and of the most extensive grammar of the Albanian language to date.

First published in: *World Literature Today* 63.1 (winter 1989)