

Neshat Tozaj

The knives

[*Thikat*].

Tiranë. Naim Frashëri. 1989. 264 pages

Followers of recent Albanian history will recall the explosion several years ago of a small bomb on the compound of the Yugoslav Embassy in Tiranë, normally the epitome of tranquillity itself, which led to a minor diplomatic incident and which was never satisfactorily clarified. It is to incidents of this kind that Neshat Tozaj alludes in his startling novel *Thikat* (The knives). In the fictional story created by Tozaj, the tires of vehicles belonging to foreign diplomats in Tiranë are slit by person or persons unknown. The authorities immediately suspect a plot to undermine Albania's international relations and the *Sigurimi*, the ubiquitous and formidable state security department of the Albanian Ministry of the Interior, is called in to investigate. In the course of research, it becomes evident that the deed was not perpetrated for political reasons by the dastardly foreign agents or grotesque domestic 'traitors' so prevalent in other Albanian spy novels, but was simply the act of a dazed woman suffering from a psychopathic disorder. This turn of things is refreshing enough, but what would normally have been the end of the investigation becomes the beginning. Too much is involved for the investigators at the Ministry of the Interior to give up so easily. Had Enver Hoxha himself not stated that too many plots had been uncovered by the Party and not by the *Sigurimi*? They need a find. A full investigation gets underway and a treasonous plot must be uncovered by any means. Culprits, whether guilty or not, are to be sniffed out and convicted swiftly and mercilessly in the manner all too familiar to the inhabitants of Eastern Europe. With careers, prestige and influence at stake, power is flagrantly abused and basic human rights are simply in the way. The omnipotent Ministry of the Interior seems to be on the verge of taking control of the other ministries, and even of the Party itself, of becoming a state within the state.

*Thikat* will certainly be read with great interest by many Albanians and no doubt by Albania observers abroad for its candid criticism of a 'theoretical' abuse of power. The first large edition of 15,000 copies was sold out quickly at any rate. Noted writer and critic Ismail Kadare, who is at the vanguard of the present literary campaign against mediocrity, 'schematism' (i.e. stereotyping) and timidity in contemporary Albanian writing, stressed the significance of the novel in an unusually long and favourable review in the 15 October 1989 issue of the Tiranë literary newspaper 'Drita'.

Author Neshat Tozaj was born in the village of Kallarat near Vlorë in 1943. He studied law at the Faculty of Political Science in Tiranë and has published ten volumes of prose on the so-called topic of vigilance, i.e. spy novels and short stories, many of which have been filmed. In his preface, Tozaj goes to length to stress that *Thikat* is a work of fiction and that any similarity to real persons is entirely coincidental, but he obviously knows what he is talking about. Tozaj himself works for the Ministry of the Interior.

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