

Ismail Kadare

*Broken April.*

New York. New Amsterdam Books. 1990. 216 pages

When writer Bessian Vorpsi announced the destination of his honeymoon to friends and acquaintances at a dinner-party in Tiranë, he was met by a stunned silence. His young bride Diana, too, was taken aback at the thought of spending a holiday on a desolate plateau of the northern Albanian Alps. Would not the sparkling beaches of the Albanian Riviera or Italy, or even France have been more appropriate for protagonists of the upper middle class of pre-war Albania's burgeoning little capital? Some friends could understand that Bessian, as a writer, was 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 his poor bride Diana? The more adventuresome envied her too, "You'll be escaping the world of reality for the world of legend, literally the world of epic that scarcely exists anymore."

Take two: 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 Canon of Lek Dukagjini. Whole families had been wiped out in the 'taking of blood' and now he too was obliged to follow suit, only to set himself up as the next victim. Everything was regulated by tribal law, including the thirty-day truce during which he would be allowed to spend his last days out in the sunlight and during which he would have to journey through the mountains to submit 'blood money' to the feudal *qeheja e gjakut* (blood steward), keeper of the records.

It was on Gjorg's journey to the bleak fortress of Orosh that he was startled to see one of the rare horseless carriages he had heard of, a vehicle conveying a beautiful young lady from the city. Diana, too, had not failed to notice the young tribesman on their way to the 'Inn of the Two Roberts'. Inevitably, Bessian's morbid fascination with the bloody custom and Diana's erotic attraction to Gjorg Berisha, a growing obsession which draws her indeed into the other world, lead to the couple's estrangement.

Though the plot is set in the 1930s, *Broken April* (Alb. *Prilli i thyer* 1980) has little to do with Ismail Kadare's other well-known novels of twentieth-century Albania: *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* 1961 (Engl. transl. *The general of the dead army*), *Kronikë në gur* 1971 (Engl. transl. *Chronicle in stone*), *Dimri i madh* 1977 (The great winter) and *Koncert në fund të dimrit* 1988 (Engl. transl. *The concert*). It must rather be ranked among the author's cycle of mediaeval tales (Albanian historians utilize the term 'mediaeval' rather liberally to include events well into the eighteenth century), in which myth and legend mingle with the harsh realities of Albanian history. Among the latter novels are *Kështjella* 1970 (The castle), *Ura me tri harqe* 1978 (The three-arched bridge), and *Kush e solli Doruntinën* 1980 (Engl. trans. *Doruntine*). Despite its mediaeval flavor, *Broken April* focuses on a timeless institution, one which has been endemic to the northern Albanian tribes until quite recently. In neighbouring Kosovo there have been virtually thousands of families discreetly entrapped in these bloody rites to this very day, though deprived of all the romantic frills of a 'blood steward' etc. The anti-vendetta campaign there, led by prominent Kosovo Albanian intellectuals, has recently resulted in the 'pacification' of more than nine hundred blood feuds.

Over the last thirty years, Ismail Kadare has invited the reader on many a fascinating journey into curious episodes of Albanian history and into the more exotic aspects of its little-known culture. There can be no doubt that he has contributed more than any other author to the

advancement of contemporary Albanian letters, both through his works and through his candid criticism of mediocrity and politically motivated stereotyping. He has clashed publicly on several occasions in recent years with critic Koço Bihiku, protagonist of an orthodox socialist realism, and has accused Albanian critics in general of impeding literary creativity. Most Albanian intellectuals agree with him, many of them openly now. If anyone can bring about a revolution in Albanian literature from within the political system it will be Ismail Kadare.

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