

Ismail Kadare
A moonlit night
[*Clair de lune*].
Jusuf Vrioni, transl.
Paris. Fayard. 1993. 133 pages

Ismail Kadare
The Great Wall, followed by the Blind Firman
[*La Grande Muraille, suivi de Le Firman aveugle*].
Jusuf Vrioni, transl.
Paris. Fayard. 1993. 137 pages

When 'A moonlit night' was originally published in Albania (as *Nata me hënë*) in January 1985 it caused something of a scandal. It was one of the rare occasions under the dictatorship during which Ismail Kadare ventured to take up a contemporary theme. As Stalinist Albania was not a country noted for its excess of tolerance in any respect, one had to tread with extreme caution in dealing with social realities, and in particular with anything vaguely associated with sex. Albanian prose on contemporary themes had consisted up to then of standard panegyrics on the creation of the perfect communist society and on the conversion of the workers and intellectuals to the new obligatory religion. Kadare chose a topic which seemed safe enough at first glance. Women's liberation from the yoke of patriarchal society had, after all, been one of the great goals of the Party during the late 1960's. What place had petty bourgeois morality in a socialist society?

While walking home with her would-be boyfriend one moonlit night, young Marianne happens to wonder out loud whether love is a stronger emotion in men than in women. Her peer group soon gets wind of her rather innocent verbal meanderings, though, and in a stifling atmosphere of petty gossip, jealousy and ill-will, the whole machinery of social control comes down upon her. At an organized 'meeting' of her fellow workers, matters get out of hand and Marianne is publicly required to present a medical certificate of virginity, as definitive proof of her good moral standing in the community.

'A moonlit night' was banned a few months after publication, not so much for its peripheral treatment of sex, but for its harsh and very realistic portrayal of how the mechanisms of the infamous workers 'meetings' of the period, the very memory of which every Albanian still dreads, could destroy the life of an innocent individual.

This being said, it is evident that 'A moonlit night' is more than simply a political statement. The past two or three years since the fall of the dictatorship have shown that Albanian society, closely-knit and very much moulded by and subject to traditional patriarchal values, is and remains basically intolerant. Social constraints on women and on sexual behaviour are features of this society which have transcended political ideology. As such, a re-edition of this work in Albanian would do no harm.

In a separate volume, Kadare offers readers two other short stories, 'The Great Wall' and 'The Blind Firman', both of which provide his favourite mixture of historical fiction and political allegory.

First published in: World Literature Today 68.2 (spring 1994)