

Ismail Kadare

*Lulet e ftohta të marsit. Roman* [The Cold Flowers of March. Novel]

Tirana: Onufri. 2000. 180 pp. ISBN 99927-45-03-7

*Froides fleurs d'avril. Roman.* Jusuf Vrioni, tr.

Paris: Fayard. 221 pp. ISBN 2-213-60642-0

The nineties were busy and productive years in the literary career of Ismail Kadare. Now in permanent residence in Paris, far from the chaotic Balkans, he had to reaffirm his talents as an international writer without the exotic political and ethnic role as Albania's writer in exile. Over the last seven years he has republished almost all of his works in two impressive nine-volume series, one in Albanian and the other in French, with a total of over 5,000 pages in each language. Only a few youthful and politically imposed writings have been omitted. Despite this undertaking, he has also found time to offer his readers new works of prose and to maintain his momentum.

Born near the Greek border, Ismail Kadare is a southerner, a term which in Albania, as opposed to many other countries with a north-south dichotomy, denotes the more advanced, prosperous and civilized part of the country. Yet it is to the more rugged - dare one say primitive? - culture of the northern Albanian mountains that he has turned once again in his most recent novel.

The 'Cold Flowers of March,' which his French translator has preferred to entitle the 'Cold Flowers of April,' reminds one immediately of Kadare's acclaimed novel *Broken April*, New York 1990 (see WLT 65:2, p. 343-344). This time it is the painter Mark Gurabardhi who is confronted with the constraints and legendry of northern Albanian society in a small provincial town in the mountains. Though the plot has much in common with *Broken April*, the novel is set not in the 1930s, but in the 1990s when the bloody rites of vendetta had returned to the country with a vengeance after fifty years of suppression under the Communist dictatorship.

The backdrop to the 'Cold Flowers of March' is thus one of blood and the rules of vendetta as codified in the famed *Kanun* of Lekë Dukagjini. Feuding was and is practised as a means of exercising tribal justice in wide regions of northern Albania and Kosova. Behind the blood feud is the principle of 'male honour,' i.e. that a man cannot cleanse his honour until he has given satisfaction in blood for a crime or infringement upon his honour. Vendettas usually occur between families, but they can also take place between entire tribes and may last for decades, even after the original cause of the feud has been forgotten. A murder committed in revenge is usually carried out according to specific customs and norms and is considered fully justified by the community in question. The murderer must inform the family of his victim and ensure that the body be transported home. He must also see that the victim's rifle be returned to the family and, after the arrangement of a twenty-four-hour cease-fire, he is even expected to attend his victim's funeral. The *Kanun* originally sanctioned the slaying of the murderer himself, but the practice was later extended so that male honour or blood could also be 'cleansed' by the slaying of any male relative of the murderer.

It is in this framework that a simple love story between the painter and a young woman evolves until the customs of the north offer a dramatic turn of events. Albanian legendry, too, plays its part. Interwoven into the novel is Kadare's literary adaptation of the tale of the maiden who was forced to marry a snake.

The 'Cold Flowers of March,' or April, is very much a novel in the traditional style of Kadare. It is a complex work with many levels of interpretation and intertwining themes, and will be appreciated in particular by anyone with an interest in northern Albanian culture and legendry.

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