

Ismail Kadare, The Albanian Bard

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Abstract

Albanian writer Ismail Kadare was living in a dictatorship in which the harassment, interrogation, torture and even assassination of dissidents was common. And yet he produced works which were provocative and potentially seditious. He appears to have suffered greatly from the strain of writing, unable either to rein in his imagination or refrain from publicizing his work in the volatile and politically explosive environments of the 1970s and 1980s. He describes the machinations of the party factions, the intimacies, hatreds and daily familiarities of the tiny Tirana Nomenclature. He made enemies among the old guard and in the Sigurini, in a country where a word out of place could bring about imprisonment, physical harm, and death. Like many others he was sent to Berat in 1967 in the wake of the cultural revolution, but worked as a journalist and writer there and appears to have been free to return to Tirana. While the events surrounding the production of his works were dangerous, he succeeded in creating a protective shield from communist leader Enver Hoxha's vanity and survived the scandal of his attack on the Party bureaucracy.

Key Words: Tirana, dictatorship, Erasmian, Enver Hoxha

Introduction

Kadare never referred to himself as a dissident. He was a writer who tried to produce a normal literature in an abnormal country. His literary praxis was a form of opposition in that he constantly refused to surrender his language and identity or to be forced into exile. He expressed rebellion through the representation of the impossibility of everyday life under communism and through the evocation of an eternal Albania which was more ancient, more durable and more cultural than the new Albania of Enver Hoxha. However, he also paid dearly in personal terms for his denial to submit to the dictatorship. In his later work *The Shadow*, Kadare appears disillusioned and obsessed, an oddment of an early talent deformed by the spirit of refusal. In the final pages of *The Weight of the Cross*, he looks back over the body of work deeply damaged by its environment. Like all art born amidst violence, his work suffers deficiencies, mutilations and Disfigurements.

Methodology

Analytical Research

For the Western left, Kadare's greatest fault was his failure to speak out against the regime. They wanted a Solzhenitsyn, or a Havel or a heroic dissident in the post totalitarian mould. However, it was impossible to be a dissident in post 1968 Albania. Hoxha's dictatorship was Stalinist to the last and all signs of opposition or dissent were dealt with ruthlessly: opposition could only exist outside the country. Kadare did not and could not fit the post totalitarian model of the Eastern European dissident. Among dissident European intellectuals in the 20th century some chose a heroic opposition, others chose subtler forms of defiance. Kadare belonged to the latter group. In Kadare's view literature and dictatorship are completely opposed to each other as mutually exclusive realms of human being:

For a writer, of course, the struggle is rather more complicated, because as Kadare notes, "dictatorship and true literature cannot exist except in one way - in a struggle against one another, night and day." While ordinary people can wage silent guerrilla warfare against the system, between literature and censorship the terms of the conflict are very different: the battle lines are too closely demarcated. "To confront the dictatorship in these circumstances is actually a rather unremarkable attitude; to undertake dialogue with it is something scarcely less than heroic". Here Kadare is not merely justifying himself but explaining himself. "To confront the dictatorship is to be endangered by it and it alone; but to undertake dialogue with it is to expose oneself to threats not only from it, but from its most impatient opponents." (Falcoff, "Notes")

The British-German Sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf in his study of European intellectuals at times of social / political national crises argues for what he calls the Erasmian mode . Dahrendorf's Erasmian intellectual is depicted especially by the denial to be seduced by the grand projects of modernity, whether of the left or the right. His point is that there are alternatives to heroic dissidence, and that the Erasmian virtues of intellectual engagement, commitment to reason, self-determination and refusal to be seduced by ideology have a place in the assessment of the twentieth century intellectuals. Not heroic dissidence, which often meant unsupportable physical suffering or death, but truthfulness to self, is one of the core values of Dahrendorf's Erasmian intellectual, even if it is accompanied by a measure of outward submission. It is not easy for intellectuals to survive in dictatorships. And yet there are public intellectuals, Erasmians who have managed to survive, albeit with unavoidable but excusable limitations. Conformity to the regime, whether through occasional acts or by regularly turning a blind eye, is just one of several ways.

Dahrendorf describes the absence of passion as the characteristic feature of Erasmianism. He emphasises that this absence of passion does not make modern Erasmians "inner emigration"; that is people who withdraw from the world. They do actively participate in contemporary debate, but they do so with a compassionate detachment. The Erasmian cast of mind, according to Dahrendorf, served as a kind of inoculation against fascism and communism. It resulted in immunity to fascism and Communism.

While not fully an Erasmian in the Dahrendorfian sense, Ismail Kadare chose to compromise in order to continue living and writing in Albania, without adopting the suicidal role of the heroic outsider on the one hand, and without supporting the dictatorship on the other. The refusal to surrender to the inner censor is a manifestation of Kadare's Erasmian qualities in the particular context of the Albanian dictatorship. This refusal contradicted the everyday normality of Kadare's life as a member of the creative elite. It reveals Kadare as a figure whose inner exile in the second phase of his literary creativity, was a form of opposition to the dictatorship and everything it stood for. Kadare is generally considered as a literary inheritor of George Orwell and Franz Kafka (<http://www.theparisreview.org>), and his writing is as imaginative as it is philosophical. In its incessant obsession with truth and justice it engages with history and politics in a energetic and enthusiastic manner. Writing and working against the tyrannical political establishment of his native Albania, Kadare's storyline emerges from his ardent inquisition of the injustice found in the political sphere, and his work displays a dissident quality, refracted through allegory, metaphor and the lens of Albanian identity which he proudly upholds. Kadare's work reflects the changes in the Albanian political situation as well as the maturation of his own political views. In the 1950s and 1960s, when Albania was fast becoming a modernized country, Kadare, then a young man who was confident about his country's bright future, wrote works that expressed his political enthusiasm and his pro-communist attitude. In the 1970s Kadare started to doubt the righteousness of the communist rule. As a privileged writer, he enjoyed the freedom to go abroad and had chances to learn about the truth regarding the political conflicts within the Albanian Communist Party. As a result, he gradually grew unhappy with Hoxha's dictatorship. This change in Kadare can be seen from some of the subtle references in his late 1970s works. For example, at the end of *The Three-Arched Bridge*, Kadare writes:

I should return as soon as possible and finish it, because times are black; soon night may fall, it will be too late for everything, and we may pray with our lives for writing such testimonies. This was the immured man's message. And this chronicle, like the bridge itself, may demand a sacrifice, and that sacrifice can be none other than myself. (184)

Here, Gjon, the narrator, Kadare's alter - ego, complains about the black times he is in and the lack of freedom to record the truth, and this can be interpreted as Kadare's lamentation of the sacrifices imposed on Albanians for the building of a communist Albania, including his own sacrifice of freedom with regard to writing. The difference between his pre-1980 and post-1980 nationalist works is that the pre-1980 ones aim to establish the national self with the focus on Albania's antiquity, victimhood and heroism, whereas the post-1980 ones aim to strengthen Albanian national sentiment and to claim Albania's sovereignty over Kosovo. Kadare has contributed significantly to the popularity of nationalism by producing sharp and poignant nationalist works in 1980s and 1990s.

Kadare uses a variety of literary genres and devices – allegory, satire, historical distancing, legend, history, mythology, to construct trenchant political allegories that comment powerfully on contemporary issues. There can be no doubt that Kadare 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. His insightful depiction of the mechanism of repression, of the relationship between the individual and the power structures which try to suppress him, as well as his powerful treatment of classic philosophical themes such as life and death, love and hate, war and peace, make the humanistic values of his works universally valid rather than merely confined to the Albanian nation. Kadare has been acclaimed for his original voice, which is at once universal and deeply rooted in his own soil. If Thomas Mann upon arrival on the American soil in 1938 declared that “wherever I am, Germany is” (Kurzke, Thomas Mann 224), then the same can be said for Kadare. Kadare went to Paris in 1990 seeking political asylum and now spends his time equally between Paris and Albania. As a writer Kadare is mapping a whole culture, and he continues to write through merging its history, its passion, its folklore, its politics and its disasters. In fact, legends such as Constantine’s resurrection in Doruntine, the immurement in *The Three-Arched Bridge* have similar versions in the mythologies of other Balkan nations. It is in the Balkan cultures that Kadare’s literary interpretations stand out as more representative and more distinguished, as both regional and universal.

Conclusion

In the European imagination since Shakespeare, Albania has been the place of wild barbaric customs and romantic adventures. The poet Lord Byron’s “rugged nurse of savage men” excited generations of European romantics (Byron, “Childe” 67). It is hardly surprising that in 2007 the children’s author J.K. Rowling chose the forests of Albania in which to hide Harry Potter’s nemesis, the arch-villain Voldemort. Culture is conservative and the images of a medieval, wild or romantic Albania still looms large in the Western imagination despite Albania’s twentieth century history of national liberation, communist dictatorship and democratization. In describing Kadare as a Balkan bard and the progeny of Homer, Professor John Carey, Chairman of the International Man Booker Committee contributed to the well-meaning but romantic simplification of the writer and his land. It is time for the world to listen to Kadare and to see Albania through the mirror of his work as a modern nation poised to enter European life.

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