

BALKAN IMAGES IN THE FICTION OF ISMAIL KADARE

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In 2001, the aftermath of the Bosnian and Kosovo wars, Ismail Kadare wrote in an article titled “The Balkans: Truth and Untruths”:

The distorted history of the Balkan peoples is one of the veils that prevents knowledge of these peoples, and ... fuels the Balkan chaos. This fog of history has been the best ally of the chauvinistic castes in the region, of fierce nationalism and monstrous doctrines (6)

According to Kadare, both the Ottoman and the Balkan people have distorted self-perceptions: the Ottomans think they humanized and civilized the Balkan, whereas the Balkan people believe they were martyrs and heroes (7). The heroic Balkan self-image emerged from an embarrassment about cooperation with the Ottomans; Serbia has claimed for itself an exaggerated importance and belittled an allegedly small Albania, which actually supplied Ottoman Grand Viziers.

As in the article, such Balkan relations and misconceptions are associated in Kadare’s fiction, with *fog* and *veiling*. Fog and mist often appear as features of the Albanian and Balkan landscape, whereas in a figurative sense, they prevent people from recognizing who and where they are. I want to show that the blurring of sight and insight is at the very heart of Kadare’s fiction. In the first part of my talks I discuss portrayals of the relationship between Albanians, Slavs, and the Ottomans; in the second, I focus on the ambiguous power that ancient bards and the famous Albanian *Kanun* still wield in Kadare’s fiction.

The Balkans and the Ottoman Empire

Kadare’s fictional portrayals of the Ottoman Empire have a double thrust: they are allegories of dictatorship, but they also thematize real historical conflicts between the Ottomans and the Balkan, as well as between the Balkan people themselves.

Let me start with *The Siege* (1970), which Kadare does not regard as a historical novel, though internal references indicate that this Ottoman siege of an unnamed

Albanian fortress occurred some sixty years after the battle of Kosovo (1389) and shortly before the Ottoman occupation of Constantinople in 1453. The Ottoman attackers fight the Albanians and their hero Skanderbeg, but aim to conquer all of the Balkan. The lengthy, cruel, and desperate siege is unsuccessful. When the last assault falters and the onset of the rainy season saves the fortress, the Ottoman army withdraws and its commander commits suicide. Yet, the defenders are not jubilant and the attackers do not despair. Another army will pitch its tents in the same place next year, and if it still cannot take the citadel yet another expedition will be launched in the spring thereafter.

The Ottoman Quartermaster General is a member of the Padishah's "semi-official supreme council," a kind of "think tank." In his view, neither numerical nor technological superiority will assure the occupation of the Balkan, for an enemy is only defeated when its religion, language, and song, its immaterial "Heaven," is conquered. The Balkan people should be permitted to keep their religion, but their written language should be forbidden. This means, however, that epic bards may continue to glorify their Balkan national heroes way beyond the defeat of the countries themselves. Skanderbeg seeks to generate an "immaterial" Albania of heroic songs, a ghostly but poetic shadow of physical Albania that attackers will resurrect if they try to slay it. The Balkan people should not be exterminated but won over as allies. From an Ottoman perspective, the nationalism of folk ballads were dangerous, but in 1970 Kadare still valued them from a Balkan perspective.

The Quartermaster's historical vision of integrating the Balkan people in the Ottoman Empire resonates in two allegories of dictatorship that Kadare wrote in the first half of the 1980s. Both are set in nineteenth-century Istanbul and involve members of an Albanian/Ottoman clan, called Quprili in *The Palace of Dreams* and in a Turkish way Köprülü in "The Blinding Order." In the latter, Aleks Ura's Köprülü family and other households of Albanian descent differ from Ottoman families by including Christian and Muslim members, integrating thus the feuding religions. However, ethnic relations are not at issue of "The Blinding Order," which moves from blurred visions to literal blindness. Reviving an ancient belief in "evil eyes," the allegedly liberal Tanzimat Empire spreads terror by blinding suspected people. Instead of lynching or executing suspects, the liberal regime announces a "blind decree" that promises to give careful attention to each case and to "disocculate" only those whose eyes are truly evil. However, since "evil eyes" have no symptoms everybody can be accused. As one of the Köprülü's remarks, the power of the decree derives from the all-pervading anxiety it induces.

In *The Palace of Dreams*, which does focus on ethnic tensions, one of the Quprili is an Ottoman Vizier, yet the Albanian/Ottoman relations are bloody. The collision is brought about precisely by those epic ballads that the Ottoman Quartermaster had feared. Mark Alem, a Quprili, gets a job at the powerful Ottoman Tabir Sarrail Institute, which sifts and interprets all dreams in the Empire in search of subversive plots. Unfortunately, Mark's eyes are unable to penetrate the veil of a dream that others decipher with dire consequences. He goes to an evening given by his Vizier

relative, to which his admired uncle Kurt, also invites Albanian bards to sing, among other songs, the “Ballad of the Bridge with Three Arches” about the immurement of a man in the bridge that gave the Quprili their name. Such ballads of immurement, which actually exist in many languages, inspired Kadare’s novel *The Three-Arched Bridge* (written 1976-78) about the immurement of a man in a bridge built to facilitate the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans. During and after dinner, Slav rhapsodists are scheduled to sing their version of the immurement ballad, but the imperial police interrupts the Albanian performance, arrests uncle Kurt Quprili, and murders the rhapsodists, for certain interpreters discovered in the undecipherable dream a plot in the making. Bringing together Albanian and Slav rhapsodists to sing related ballads suggests to the authorities a harmonized Balkan move hostile to the Empire. Albanian and Slav rhapsodists should not harmonize their performance about an episode of the Ottoman invasion, for that could prepare a new Balkan alliance against the Empire. In 1864, a true nationalities dispute led to the famous “Vadrózsa-per” (Wild Rose court case) in Pest, which had to decide whether Romanians or Hungarians invented their immurement ballad first.

Events in *The Palace of Dreams* justify then the Quartermaster’s worries about subversive Balkan ballads, and they reinforce the Balkan view that such ballads have a positive patriotic function. However, the wars of the 1990s forced Kadare to shift from an approval of nationalist ballads to their ironic ridiculing. His *Elegies for Kosovo* (1998) lament *the persistence of chauvinistic songs, not the military defeat*. While the princes of the Balkan unite in an unprecedented effort to resist the decisive Ottoman attempt to conquer the Balkans, the minstrels continue to incite the nations against each other: “The Serbian elders chanted: “Oh, the Albanians are preparing to attack!” and the Albanian lahuta minstrels sang: “Men, to arms! The pernicious Serb is upon us” (16)! Some warriors object to minstrels that fuel internal dissension, but Prince Lazar posts them on a safe mound, for “who will sing our glory” if we lose them?

Fleeing after the lost battle, the disoriented minstrels don’t even know whether they are in Serbia or Albania. The Serbian Vladan sums up their failure: “Serbian and Albanian songs said the exact opposite from each other ... each side claimed Kosovo ... And each side cursed the other. And this lasted right up to the eve of the battle. ... We have been fighting and slaughtering each other for so many years over Kosovo, and now Kosovo has fallen to others.” Vladan, who lost his Serbian gusla, symbolically borrows Gjorg’s Albanian lahuta, and is unable to sing ancient nationalist songs.

A few days later, the fugitive minstrels are invited to sing with other bards in a castle. While the French sing of Roland and the Germans of Siegfried, the Balkan minstrels coming from the lost Kosovo battle continue to sing their hostile songs against each other. One of the guests, a old lady, envisages a larger Europe with a unified Balkan that “would rise from the fog.” She thinks that the Balkan is the “outer court” of Europe and needs help, but her idea does not catch on in the castle, and she dies one day after asking for help from the great princes of Europe. Alas,

the Balkan minstrels repeat their ancient songs at her funeral: “Rise, O Serbs, the Albanians are seizing Kosovo!” – “A black fog has descended upon us, the great lady has died. Rise, O Albanians! Kosovo is falling to the pernicious Serb!” (80).

These are fictional minstrels of the Middle Ages, but Kadare obviously refers to the real poets and writers of the late twentieth century, who still sing their chauvinistic songs and spread, as his article says, “fierce nationalism and monstrous doctrines.”

The Power of the *Kanun*

Different kinds of fog and mist veil the *Rrafsh*, one of the largest European High Plateaus in Albania’s Northern Highlands (2241), where Kadare’s fiction associates the somber climate with ancient ballads and the declining but still powerful ancient Albanian Code of the *Kanun*. Though the *Kanun* is uniquely Albanian, the Rrafsh extends into what Kadare’s narrator calls “old Serbia,” and the ballads are shared by the Slavs, as Kadare’s novel *The File on H* shows by portraying the adventures of two Irish folklorists, who do Albanian research in pursuit of Homer.

In *Broken April* (1978), Gjorg reluctantly avenges his brother’s murder by killing a member of the murderer’s family. The *Kanun* grants him thirty-days to go to the tower *Kulla* of Orosh and pay a blood-tax for the murder. He walks through the misty and foggy Rrafsh:

he could just make out the line of mountains veiled in mist, and through the veil he thought he saw the pale reflection, multiplied as if in a mirage, of a single great mountain, rather than a range of real peaks differing in height. The fog had made them unsubstantial, but it was strange how much more oppressive they seemed than in fine weather, when their rocks and sheer cliffs were plain to see. (327 ff)

Mist and fog cover not just the landscape but also Gjorg’s mind, which suffers from the mountains and the strict *Kanun*. He tried to free himself from the ancient rules by repeatedly postponing the revenge and merely wounding his victim in his first try -- which darkened his father’s eyes with a *veil* of scorn and bitterness.

Songs and literature play an important role in thinking about the *Kanun*. The bookkeeper of the income from blood-feuds in the tower *Kulla* of Orosh thinks that ballads about blood feuds both increased and decreased the number of murders. The story tellers and bards of the Rrafsh are “screw mechanisms,” “transmission belts,” and “gearwheels” of the *Kanun* machine. Poets from Tirana often attack the *Kanun*, but the writer Bessian Vorpsi brings his newly-wed wife Diana to the Rrafsh out of curiosity. Unfortunately, her exposure to this strange world alienates them from each other. Diana is first shocked by the rough region, but gradually gets fascinated by it. Violating all customs, she enters a tower of refuge for men, and she refuses to discuss it upon return. At a brief encounter, Gjorg and Diana are deeply taken by each other. Bessian bitterly concludes that one brush with the High Plateau deprived

him of her. Departing for Tirana, he turns to the Rrafsh, perhaps for the last time, and sees mountains that recede ever more slowly, sinking back into solitude. He too feels lonely next to a wife with whom he lost contact in the “cursed mountains.” A “white, mysterious *mist*” comes down, “like a curtain lowered on the play just ended. For Gjorg – described as a Hamlet figure commanded by an alien *Kanun* machine -- the “play” ends with a deadly shot from his murderer.

The Ghost Rider (1980/2011) focuses on the *besa* law of the *Kanun*. The *besa* demand that promises must be kept leads here a mysterious event. When Doruntine, a girl from an Albanian village, marries a man from Bohemia, Kostandin, her closest brother, pledges a *besa* that he will bring her back whenever their mother wants it. Kostandin and all his brothers die in a plague, but Doruntine, unaware of their death, unexpectedly reappears one night at her mother’s door, claiming that Kostandin brought her back on horseback. The horseman vanishes in the dark, but the dying Doruntine reaffirms to Stres, the local Captain, that he was her brother.

The rest of the novel is a quest for the horseman. Did Kostandin fulfill his *besa* even if it meant coming back from his grave? Such a resurrection legend is totally unacceptable to the Orthodox Archbishop, who orders the Captain to suppress it at all cost. Nobody may claim to “ape Jesus.” The Captain agrees, especially when his deputy offers him the sexual resurrection hypothesis that death itself could not still Kostandin’s incestuous longing for Doruntine. Circulars are sent out to find an impostor, and they finally deliver the Captain an itinerant salesman who first denies he knew Doruntine but confesses under torture that he was the horseman. The Captain issues secret orders to continue the torture, and in a speech to a grand assembly attended by the archbishop and high-ranking officials he reports a weeks later that according to the man’s latest confession, unnamed people paid him to lie. The Captain now reaffirms that the horseman was Kostandin. According to his disciples, Kostandin wanted to replace all the existing coercive laws and institutions with laws coming from people’s conscience. The new system will have to be based on a new concept of the *besa*. Alas, the Captain’s stunning turnaround further confuses matters. In response to the archbishop’s angry question where he himself was during the crucial period he turns white and can only utter he was on a secret mission. He quits his office, and some believe that the Captain himself brought Doruntine back.

Both *Broken April* and *The Ghost Rider* stage clashes between modern and ancient dispositions. *Broken April* shows the *Kanun* in its uncompromising severity, whereas the *The Ghost Rider* offers a vague but more humane revision of it. Could such a rewriting take place after the fall of the communist dictatorship? This is one of the main questions posed in my final text, *The Accident*, which is set after the Kosovo war and deviates from the earlier novels by portraying a love affair with lots of sexual details. Since Besfort, the male figure, works for the Council of Europe, the love affair of the Albanian couple moves through Central and Western Europe as well, but, in the aftermath of the Kosovo war, this wider stage is covered by a new Balkan mist, fog, and obscurity. As in *The Ghost Story*, the plot is so

mysterious that the subject is arguably not the love affair but attempts to dispel the new fog that veils it.

On the way to the Viennese airport, Besfort and his partner Rovena are flung out of a taxi, and the surviving driver can only say that seconds before the accident he saw in the rear-view mirror that they tried to kiss. Serbia and Montenegro ask for permission to inspect the file. As it turns out, they had kept the victims under surveillance because of Besfort's support of the NATO bombing. The Albanian secret service then conducts another round of fruitless investigation, and all agencies soon lose interest in what has become another "ghost story." However, an anonymous researcher spends years to reconstruct the events and "almost" succeeds: "Dark surmises, grave suspicions, ambiguous phrases, obscure scraps of dialogue drawn from half-remembered phone conversations" loom out of the *fog*, yet the matter remains unresolved.

Mist and fog permeate the story. Between exaltation and depression, Rovena inhabits a grey middle zone "shrouded in mist." Besfort is scared of clearing the fog (120), even when a "veil of mystery" covers Rovena's lesbian affair with the pianist Lulu Blumb. He is only interested in the sexual details. Lulu, a pacifist who opposed the bombing of Serbia, accuses Besfort of war crimes, and thinks that Besfort murdered Rovena and accompanied a dummy in the taxi that crashed. The idea of kissing a dummy strikes the interviewer like a secret suddenly appearing out of mist, but after questioning the taxi driver he asks himself: "What right have we got in this pitch-black night to ask about things that are beyond our powers to see"?

A *mist* of jumbled and crammed fragmentary statements, testimonies, documents, and protocols shroud Besfort's final application for a three-day leave. In such cases, the English seek precedents in history, the Muslims turn to the Koran, but the Balkan people reread their ballads. According to the researcher, half of the Balkan ballads include requests for a life extension or for a leave from prison. Besfort's application uncannily resembles Ago Ymeri's request for a leave from prison in a popular ballad. The researcher resists reading the Besfort/Rovena story as a ballad, yet he is obsessed with the image of Besfort riding with Rovena towards an airport/prison. He even asks the stunned taxi driver whether he heard a galloping horse on the motorway.

The researcher finally delivers his dossier to the authorities in exchange for the taxi's rear-view mirror, but fog and mist continue to obscure retrospective views, even after the fading of ballads and a liberation from dictatorships. Neither the lovers nor the researcher find their identity in the free world. The lovers, including Lulu, want to get away from old-fashioned love, but their experiments do not bring them closer to each other. The lovers' disorientation clouds the researcher's view of the past, for Balkan politics recycle old perceptions. Besfort's recollections of alleged conspiracies during the communist dictatorship uncannily resembles the "dense fog" that obscures the events now. Under communism, all lives "were enveloped in lies, like a dense *fog* obliterating every horizon ... plots loomed out of the *mist*, first vaguely ... and then in clear outline." Such maliciously invented

political “plots” resonate in Lulu’s accusation that Besfort had been an accomplice in murdering Serbian children during the NATO bombing.

Ancient ballads and contemporary fiction participate then in the making and unmaking of “distorted histories.” The cautious conclusion of my all too short paper is therefore that Kadare has always recognized fiction’s power but gradually developed a more differentiated view of its value. His essay may indicate an optimistic contemporary belief that “distorted histories” will be corrected, but his fiction admits the persistent power of dark ancient attitudes.