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Repression, Ethnicity and Identity- A Reading of Ismail Kadare's *The Palace of Dreams* as a Political Allegory

- Kaushik Hazarika

Abstract: The most widely translated and globally recognized Albanian author, indeed the only one to have gained an international reputation, is Ismail Kadare. Kadare is a superb master of employing myths and historiography to create the paradigm for the Albanian people to forge their unique national identity. An outstanding characteristic of the Balkan postmodern novel is its preference for historical evocation, a quality that distinguishes it from other European works in postmodern prose. His historical evocations and tales are meant to give a metaphorical representation of Albanian people along history and in contemporary times. Kadare's fictions are political allegories of the most powerful intensity where he assumes the role of a guardian commentator on situations and conditions both historical and contemporary. The following essay surveys Kadare's disillusion with the totalitarian regime that marks the beginning of his secretly dissident status. Situating his narrative in an allegorical Ottoman empire, the chapter also looks into how he comments about maintaining one's pure ethnic identity by shredding the Ottoman Shield.

Keywords: Political Allegory, National Identity, Dreams, Ethnicity, Totalitarianism.

Ismail Kadare's 1981 novel *The Palace of Dreams*, easily his most daring novel upto date, paints a sinister and weird picture of a political edifice whose foundations are built upon the collection and the interpretation of dreams. Banned shortly after its publication, the novel is considered to be the most vicious attack on a totalitarian repressive regime. Although Kadare's novel is placed in an imagined late Ottoman Empire called the UOS (United Ottoman States), there is little of the color the Ottoman Empire in this novel. It reads very much as an allegory of post-war Central and Eastern Europe with parallels between Hoxha's regime in Albania being unmistakable. The present chapter shall deal with the political functioning of a state that differentiates itself by its proximity to be irrational and regressive at the same time and how Kadare charts out its workings in his allegorical Ottoman Empire situating its mechanisms to communist Albania. The Tabir Sarrail or Palace of Dreams, presented as the 'one of our great imperial state's most important institutions'(18) is based on the belief or rather blind faith that dreams have the supreme

power 'to save the country or its Sovereign from disaster; may avert war or plague or to create new ideas. (19) Situating the tradition and importance of dreams, the apparatus traces deep down to the Oracle of Delphi in ancient Greece, and the famous soothsayers of Rome, Persia and so on to justify this strange practice. The reasons that the official furnishes behind the formation and the formulation of the Tabir Sarraïl goes as

The idea behind the Sovereign's creation of the Tabir is that Allah looses a forewarning dream on the world as casually as He unleashes a flash lightning or draws a rainbow or suddenly sends a comet close to us, draws from the mysterious depths of the Universe. He dispatches a signal to the earth without bothering about where it will land; He is too far away too be concerned with such details. It is upto us to find out where the dream has come to earth, as one might look for a pearl lost in the desert (19)

As a result of this belief in dreams as some sort of divine markers for future events, the Tabir Sarraïl operates a colossal machinery where dreams are collected, selected and interpreted which foretells and decides the course of upcoming proceedings and the measures required to tackle them. This results in that the essential decisions of a vast empire are based on fantastical dream omens rather than political pragmatic observation. Ani Kokobobo remarks “By means of this highly symbolic, bureaucratic apparatus commissioned to transform dreams into political edicts, Kadare meditates both on Enver Hoxha's repressive regime in Albania, but also, and perhaps more importantly, on the commodification of art in repressive regimes in general.” (Kokobobo 2011: 524) Kadare familiarizes the workings of the Tabir Sarraïl through the naïve eyes of Mark Alem who has recently been employed in it. Through him we are intimated that the Tabir Sarraïl is all pervasive, its boundaries stretching to all corners of the vast empire. People residing in every nook and corner of the empire are obligated to record their dreams and get it delivered through carriers dispatched for the purpose. Large stack of these dreams are then read and selected for further analysis based on their supposed importance by numerous men employed in the Selection Department, while the less important or innocuous ones are dumped into the Archives. The Department of Interpretation then analyzes those selected dreams and study for any political warning or developments that may be contained in them, out of which a single outstanding 'Master Dream' is selected to be presented to the Sultan every week to guide him in his political decisions. The 'Master Dream' as Mark Alem's companion at the coffee suggests “is sometimes more useful to the sovereign than a whole army of soldiers or all his diplomats put together”(34) The 'Master Dream' is believed to be invested with special powers with regards to bringing tremendous changes in the life of

the state. As per popular conception it was a 'Master Dream' that led to the great massacre of the leaders of Albania, the change of policy towards Napoleon or effecting the fall of a Grand Vizier. What Kadare thus achieves through the presentation of dreams as premier governing agents in the Empire is to provide not only a dark criticism of the socialist regime's utopian inclinations but also facilitate meditations on the dislocation of reality from political judgment in the system. Spelling the distinctiveness of the empire from the entire contemporary world in terms of its political affairs and associations he writes "Our imperial State is the first in the history of the whole world to have institutionalized the interpretation of dreams, and so to have brought it to such a high degree of perfection." (19) 'Institutionalized', here stands for the process of embedding the practices of the Empire in the form of the Tabir Sarraïl as a norm in the consciousness of the people. The Tabir's enormous influence over affairs of state and the fate of individual citizens can be felt throughout the novel especially in the life of Mark Alem. Like a symbolic maze of a giant monster, he gets lost inside the Tabir Sarraïl again and again, feeling trapped among its circuitous corridors, winding stairs and never ending rooms of the same shape and texture. The authority wielded by the Tabir over the lives of its citizens is absolute, alluding to a parallel equivalent regime marked by regressive dictatorship where all individual rights and freedom are curtailed. The consequences are stretched to such a level that there takes place even an indoctrination of one's imagination as Mark Alem realizes that he cannot dream like before, now that he interprets their meanings on a daily basis as a part of his job at the Tabir Sarraïl. Moved away from his job at the Tabir Sarraïl, he finds his earlier life insipid, the daily occurrences of life and the world around him frighteningly dull and doubts whether few years from now "neither the wonders nor the horrors of this world would have any effect on him" (111)

Kokobobo observes "This institution may be compared to a blind aggressor whose powers can be manipulated to deliver blows to anyone, at any time, and without any explanations; there need be no proof, all that is needed to destroy a person is a mere suggestion, a loosely interpreted dream." (Kokobobo 2011 : 526). In the novel, we come across this tendency of the sovereign through a number of instances. Though the Tabir proclaims impartiality and fairness yet we learn that in the Tabir dreams are plotted and fabricated to gain political upperhand. It was such a 'Master Dream' implicating the Quprili of a rebel against the Empire that led to the arrest of Kurt Quprili, Mark Alem's visionary uncle and the execution of the Albanian rhapsodies. As the Vizier relates to his nephew that "whoever controls the Palace of Dreams' possesses the keys of the state"(113), Mark Alem realizes the real reason of him being

placed at the Tabir Sarraïl and the force behind his rapid promotions up the ladder of the Tabir. The gruesome picture of the all- controlling Empire is no way better presented than the description where the dreamer of a particular dream is brought to the Tabir Sarraïl for further explanations of a particular dream, locked up for months at a stretch, being subjected to the psychological torture of ceaseless questions regarding the conditions of his dream, with reports running to thousands of pages, for so long that he cannot remember the dream anymore, until a black coffin is carried out from his room.

At first blush it all seemed absurd and inexplicable, but there must be more to it than that. What was involved was undoubtedly some kind of imprisonment. But for what purpose? The copyist had said it was obvious the prisoner couldn't remember anything about the dream. That must be the real object of his incarceration: to make him forget it. That wearing interrogation night and day, that interminable report, the pretence of seeking precise details about something that by its very nature cannot be definite- all this, continued until the dream begins to disintegrate and finally disappears completely from the dreamer's memory, could only be called brain-washing, thought Mark Alem(83)

Political arbitrariness marked the reign of Hoxha; hence Kadare's allegorical Ottoman Empire where punishments and pronouncements are meted out on the basis of dreams is not that removed from reality from the numerous unreasonable and unfounded political blunders that defined Hoxha's regime. As Bernd Fischer argues, Hoxha conceptualized Albania's political reality as that of a 'state under siege', a paranoid political construct that gave birth to a world governed by the secret police; a world in which executions, midnight arrests, labor camps, and internments to remote parts were frequent, and often unjustified, events. (Fischer 2007: 241) In the novel we come across a bizarre story of a group of blind men who at one time could see and did not have any physical infirmity. However, their eyes were deemed to have a baneful effect on the state, and the Ottoman Empire decreed that their eyes had to be put out. These obvious parallels between the arbitrariness of the Tabir and the unpredictability of Albanian socialism have led critics to view Tabir as a compelling symbol for Hoxha's regime and to interpret the novel as a thinly veiled political fable. The French scholar Alain Bosquet reads the novel as the parallel history of two tyrannies, one Albanian and the other Ottoman. Along these lines, the Australian scholar Peter Morgan considers the novel to be an allegory of the ways in which Central and Eastern European communist dictatorships functioned. (Morgan 2002 :46) The Albanian critic Bashkim Kucuku furthers this idea by drawing a parallel between the Tabir and the Albanian Secret Police (Sigurimi). It is a sinister macabre world where punishment precedes crime and causality is divorced from logic, a world

which remains baffling and inexplicable to Mark Alem though he works in it. He utters his predicament in the text where he opines that the arcane logic employed in the Tabir puts it far beyond him to understand its mechanism, while at times it seems to him that “the whole thing is pure folly” (73). Even his visionary uncle Kurt shares the opinions that it is an absurd world divested of logic of all kinds

“All the same”, he said, “I think it's the most absurd institution in the whole Empire.”

“In a logical world it would be quite absurd,” said Kurt. “But in this world as it is it's quite normal!” (57)

Exhibiting further avenues of the distinctiveness of Albanian politics, Kadare explores the theme of ethnicity that he has dealt with in his other works as well. As Peter Morgan comments “Kadare identifies ethnicity as a category of social and individual identity in the context of communist Central and Eastern Europe and thereby foregrounds ethnicity as a central factor of social change in post-communist societies.” (Morgan 2002: 45). Kadare's exploration of ethnic consciousness and the politics of empire reveal ethnicity to be a powerful force of individual and group identity as against the consideration of ethnicity as a susceptible and unacceptable category in Enver Hoxha's Albania wedded to the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. The novel's hero Mark Alem is a member of the Quprili family, a family of Albanian origins that has held various high positions at the service of the Sultans for generations. Though shown as a passive character embroiled in the life of a bureaucrat within the gloomy walls of the Tabir, Mark Alem, nevertheless, is strongly conscious of his Albanian heritage. Mark-Alem's younger uncle Kurt was the one who awoke his consciousness of their family's ethnic identity. For generations the Quprili family kept the tradition of inviting the Bosnian bards to sing and celebrate their glorious family history. Kurt, however, broke the tradition by inviting the Albanians bards. This was a politically significant event, because it implied that the Quprilis were dropping their Muslim religion for their Albanian ethnicity as the paramount identification. At the time when all the Balkan Orthodox nations, including the Greeks, the Serbs, the Bulgarians and the Romanians, were fight for their independence, the Muslim Albanians' identification on the basis of their ethnicity was a viewed by the Ottoman Sultan as a dangerous signal to the complete disintegration of the Empire. The dream Mark-Alem was not able to interpret was interpreted by others as the Quprili family siding with the nationalist Albanians who had been stirred up by the folk music instrument *Lahuta*, which represented the Albanian culture and spirit. Therefore actions were taken according to the dream. The Albanian rhapsodists were killed and Kurt was arrested. The Vizier reacted immediately to the disaster by asking for help from foreign countries such as Austria. On the morning of the first day of joining office

he goes to his bookshelves and takes out his family history that traces his roots back to Central Albania and their connection with the building of the three arched bridge in central Albania from where they got their name. We are told that he “set great store by his Albanian origins and automatically registered anything that concerned Albania” (41). Against the confinements of the Tabir, Albania, for Mark Alem, serves as a source of entry to another world which promises escape, freedom, and fulfillment. It is a consistent longing he experiences time and now, for the distant world of snow that he associates with Albania, his native land on which has never set foot.

He felt as if someone were hailing him from a long way away, sending out some strange, faint, doleful signal like a call for help or a sob. What is it? He wondered. The question soon absorbed him absolutely. Without knowing why, he looked at the high windows. It was the first time he'd done so. Beyond the window panes the rain, so familiar but now so distant, mingled as it fell with delicate flakes of snow. The flakes eddied wildly in the morning light, now distant too—so far away it seemed to belong to another life, another world from which perhaps that ultimate signal had been sent out to him. (36)

For Mark-Alem ethnic identity is imbued with the spirit of freedom. He saw the ideals of ethnic nationalism and reclaiming his roots in the figure of his uncle Kurt. However, this dream of ethnic liberation and self-fulfillment is killed before his eyes and held up as a trophy to the politics of dictatorial, centralized power. He found his dreams slashed with the capture and execution of his flamboyant uncle. The dream grew more and more distant, leaving only a trace of it towards the end.

As for Albania [...] It grew more and more distant and dim, like some far cold constellation, and he wondered if he really knew anything about what went on there [...] He sat there uncertainly, his pen growing heavy in his hand, until finally it rested on the paper and instead of writing “Albania” wrote: There. He gazed at the expression that had substituted itself for the name of his homeland, and suddenly felt oppressed by what he immediately thought of as “Quprilian sadness.” It was a term unknown to any other language in the world, though it ought to be incorporated in them all. (188)

He could manage only a feeble 'there' in place of Albania realizing that Albania, the romantic homeland, has become only an undefined, unachievable vision. And this suppression of identity leads to his experiencing a phenomenon which he terms 'Quprilian sadness'- a sense of loss and melancholy brought about by the recognition that he would not be able to reconcile with the ethnic roots that his family has traded for gaining political power and position. The Quprilis are identified in terms of their split identity: as Albanian, originally Christian, on the eastern fringe of Europe, the creators of the three-arched bridge symbolizing the land of Albania itself on the one hand, and as Ottoman, converted

Muslims, at the centre of the Empire, having betrayed their ethnic origins on the other. However they are also linked with the betrayal of their native land Albania symbolized in the bridge and the blood on it that has bore their destiny for generations. The change of the family name from the Albanian *Ura* to the Slav Quprili or the figure of the immured man walled up in the foundations of the bridge symbolizes the repression of ethnic identity in this family who created a bridge to pass through central Albania and thereby opened up their land to the Empire—and the Empire to themselves. At the end, Mark Alem reflects nostalgically on his desire to throw off the “Islamic half-shield” of Ottoman identity superimposed over the original language, religion and culture of the Albanians, and resume his ethnic identity, understood as his original, “native” identity after all these centuries.

Mark-Alem knew all about this, but remembered how on the fateful night he had longed to throw off the protective mask, the Islamic half-shield of “Alem,” and adopt one of those ancient names which attracted danger and were marked by fate.

As before he repeated to himself: Mark-Gjergj Ura, Mark-Gjorg Ura [...] still holding the pen poised in his hand, as if uncertain what name to append to the ancient chronicle [...] (189)

But in the end, of course, he does not. Mark-Alem retains the Islamic “shield” and remained in the service of the Sultan: fear, power and prestige have overridden ethnic identity and the desire for freedom which it expresses. Mark-Alem does not succumb to the pull of his Albanian origins to become a champion of ethnic identity and national separatism like his uncle Kurt. Mark-Alem does not succumb to the pull of his Albanian origins to become a champion of ethnic identity and national separatism like his uncle Kurt. However, we are left with the image of the tears of a crying Mark Alem, his melancholy rising from the killing of his desire for freedom in the struggle between ethnicity and empire which the novel so powerfully evokes.

Like in his novel *The File on H*, Kadare also employs epic poetry to manifest elements of ethnicity as also epic poetry as a matter of contention and conflict. Mark Alem belongs to the only family in the world 'who are the subject of an epic (58) and the Quprili's Quprili's have celebrated their power and influence in the Empire by inviting Bosnian Serb bards to visit the capital and recite a heroic song in which the deeds of this Muslim family are glorified. It also surprises Mark Alem when he learns that they are mentioned in the Slav epic and not in the Albanian version, although it being their native land. To this discussion Kurt replies that it is because they have betrayed and this points to their own suppression of their roots in the cause of their political gains with the Empire. This theme of the Albanian epic versus the Serb epic introduces us not only to a new level of complexities between the two nations; it also