

The Treatment of Ottoman Empire Period in Ismail Kadare's Literary Work

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Abstract: The period of the Ottoman Empire is specific for the traces and turns it caused throughout the history of Albanians, other European peoples, and beyond. Given the long stretch of time, with all its specifics, the interest of various intercontinental writers and scholars is great. Therefore, out of this conglomeration of interests and treatments that have been conducted in different times, the contribution and outcomes is diverse, too. However, during the scientific treatment of this historical period, many difficulties have risen, causing perplexities, inaccurate interpretation, one-sided evaluation that are also reflected in literature and other fields of arts and sciences.

A masterful, complex and multifaceted treatment of this period is reflected in the literary work of our great writer, Ismail Kadare. The works of this author about this imperial period have been written at different times, but these should not be analyzed in a straight line, according to the years when they were written and published, but rather in a comparative plan with the historical chronology. In treating this as a central theme, it connects the Era of Gjergj Kastriot Skanderbeg with two other eras, that before the arrival of his era and from the hero's death until the beginning of the 20th century, with the disintegration of the empire.

Ismail Kadare through his literary work consisting of all genres, with artistic and philosophical mastery, breeds his convincing opinion regarding this historical period by giving messages of peace and freedom among people. This multi-layered work engages other readings that are also related to other current events. Therefore, I maintain that the treatment of this intriguing and interesting topic from different points of view, is important to the field of literary studies, and that through it there can be enlightened other cultural aspects as well, especially the relationship between history and literature.

Key Words: *Ismail Kadare, literature, history, Ottoman period, Skanderbeg.*

1. Introduction

The period of the Ottoman Empire is specific for the traces and turns it caused throughout the history of Albanians, other European peoples, and beyond. Given the long stretch of time, with all its specifics, the interest of various intercontinental writers and scholars is great. Therefore, out of this conglomeration of interests and treatments that have been conducted in different times, the contribution and outcomes is also diverse. However, during the scientific treatment of this historical period, many difficulties have risen, causing perplexity, inaccurate interpretation, one-sided evaluation that are also reflected in literature and other fields of arts and sciences. A masterful, complex and multifaceted treatment of this period is reflected in the literary work of our great writer, Ismail Kadare.

The interest of scholars, meanwhile, covers a wide range of time and space. The (Ottoman) imperial period is mainly understood as the longest historical period of the centuries-old Ottoman rule of Arberia, of the whole Balkans and beyond. This historical period has aroused interest for a long time, not only in the field of historiography, but also in that of literature and other fields, therefore the exchanging interests are communicative with mutual interrelationships. Thus, to Albanians this period stands out as the most glorious, most interesting, most specific and most attractive, a period which in literature and historiography is often rightly referred to as "The Era of Gjergj Kastriot-Skanderbeg". In all Albanian literature, a specific and masterful treatment, with complex and multifaceted nuances of this period, generally with enduring actions, perhaps glorious, but also tragic and painful at the same time, is reflected in the general work of Ismail Kadare (i.e. not only in his literary work), covering a period of more than half a century. (Sinani, 2009)

The Ottoman imperial period as a whole in Kadare's literary work has as a central theme the Skanderbeg era, which is inextricably linked to the other two eras, forming thus the period of three eras. which can also be called: the pre-Skanderbeg Era, the Skanderbeg Era, and the post-Skanderbeg Era. Of these three eras, the Skanderbegiana (not only to Albanians) is the most important and glorious period during the long centuries occupation of the Ottoman Empire, therefore the interest in treating this era, the hero and his role, has been ongoing for a long time. Thus, regarding this treatment, sometimes unscientific conclusions appear, with conjectures, claims, different tendencies, denials, speculations, or even falsifications of various authors, mainly foreign, but also deniers, "Albanian deniers" as the author calls them. This often led to the writing of tendentious and unscientific works of historiography or literature of a distorting, non-argumentative, appropriating and pretentious character with falsifying elements. And this direction of distorted treatment, has the other side of the defenders of truth, of the just. In this direction stands out, above all I. Kadare with his work, as the greatest defender, the most persuasive, the most argumentative, the most persistent, the most agile, or the most representative of this issue. And the calamity that will be severely manifested in these places, has been treated by him, covering a period from the second half of the fourteenth century. And the woe that will be severe to these countries, begins to be addressed by him, covering the period from the second half of the fourteenth century, a time when the incursions of the Ottoman Empire were becoming more frequent everywhere for an invading penetration with wide spatial extent, including not only Albanians.¹

¹ First, the Ottoman Empire represents a political formation, for a period of more than 500 years, including in its bosom all Albanian areas. Second, the Ottoman Empire was a military formation that constantly and seriously threatened Western Europe. It managed, with its political and military power, to become a very important factor

Works concerning the period

The period of the Ottoman Empire in Kadare's work is treated with the correlation of the situation of the pre-Skanderbeg era. It begins with the presentation of the state of Arberia in the early Middle Ages, as the radiance of a civilized nation with modern developments and mentality for the time, mainly European-Western mentality. The Arberian principalities had a perfect organization for the time, which was in step with Western civilization. Brilliant princes, counts, barons, dukes, bishops, prelates, monks, lahutars, folk healers, historians, monasteries, churches, assemblies, parishes, docks and noble customs, amazing and special clothing, are found everywhere in the works of I. Kadare. Above all, the free spirit of the Arberians stands out, the legendary pride, self-government, non-submission and friendship, generosity and faith as unique Albanian and European phenomena, human dignity and freedom, civilized women and the respect for them. Therefore, as such they stand in stark contrast to the distant Asian world.

All this light-filled view is to be elucidated in a number of Kadare's works, among which there stand out: "The Ghost Rider" (Kush e solli Doruntinë) and "The Three-arched Bridge" (Ura me Tri Harqe) These works of artistic and philosophical layers, which are included in a general way within this corpus of this artistic projection, carry long collisions in the extensive treatments conducted, and are also presented in other forms in poems such as: "The defeat of the Balkans by the Turks in the Field of Kosovo in 1389", "The arrival of the imperial decree", "The eagle and the crescent", etc. where different cultures clash intertwine. Cultures that are being fought to be broken, changed and replaced on the one hand, and protected and preserved on the other.

Other works that are directly related to the figure of Skanderbeg and his era, which can also be called "Skanderbegiana", are also some poems that are found in the poetic volume "Sunny Motifs" (1968). The following poems are part of this theme: "The Ballad of the Exhumation", together with other poems, "Portrait of Skanderbeg", "Embetha", "The Escape of Moisi Golemi", etc. Two years later, in 1970, the novel "The Siege" (Kështjella) was published, which is directly related to the heroic resistance of Skanderbeg and his comrades. A work that deals with the theme of one of the 24 battles of the hero, in a general way, with brilliant artistic imagery and craftsmanship. It is a novel concerning this period as are a number of poems that fall into this classification. There are also other ongoing treatments, such as literary essays, interviews, etc.

This multidimensional and multifaceted split is made to finally bring a single plan in which Kadare's further fulfillment for the central figure of the time, Skanderbeg, is focused. Thus it gives due importance to the side not sufficiently noticed until this examination, namely that of a political being. With this treatment he creates a new image for him, both earthly and heavenly and transcendent. In his treatment of this issue of the period with its characters, in the literary essay "The Dispute" (Mosmarrëveshja), he looks at it quite differently from the others as they had treated it for a long time:

"The story was old. Its prologue was on a gloomy morning in late November 1443, when General Skanderbeg, not at all "like a written dove", as the poet describes it, but more like a black cloud, loaded with storms, arrived in front of the gates of Kruja to bring a new, incredibly dramatic message. It was simple; wage war against the Ottomans. Dear or alive. No turning back.

in the political balance of forces in Europe in the VI-XVII centuries and a very important factor in the political shaping of Today's Europe. Third, this empire with a continental reach forms a very important part of world history, as it experienced the Late Middle Ages, the New Ages and the Modern ones and, thanks to its geopolitical position, controlled the major trade routes of the world. (Robert Mantran, "The History of Ottoman Empire", Dituria, 2004, p. 15.)

The choice, too, was clear: Either huddled in the wasteland of Asia, eating the bread of the slave until extinguished or readily armed, saved or not, but part of Europe." (Kadare, 2010, p.44).

Here his return is also heavenly, something majestic, not like a written dove, but like a black cloud, laden with storms, which would sweep Arberia for a quarter of a century. And the author thinks whether there would be any solution to this:

"Such a thing can never be said. The other two solutions: peace with the Ottomans or a neutral stance in the Europe-Ottoman state match, would be nothing but the same solution, in two miserable variants. The peace for which today's deniers sigh so much, remembering the benefits that the country of Albanians from the Ottoman Empire would enjoy, would be nothing but the slow, irreversible extinction of Albania. While standing aside, watching the fall of Europe, and especially participating in its drowning, as a vassal of the sultan, would be death upon death. Just imagining the other side of the Adriatic, like the Ottoman coast, that is, captivity and after captivity again captivity, would be the end of the world.

Kastriot started his action in a tragic condition. His adventure was mortal, but the only alternative." (Ibid., 43-44)

He was aware that he could liberate the country for a while, but he was also aware that without the help of Europe, he could not stay long in front of the huge Ottoman Empire. He therefore set out on agreements, aid, and alliance efforts. His help with the army, the bringing of European soldiers to fight in Albania, was his European vision, and there was no other way for the Balkan chieftains to remain outside the European file, therefore, the author sees Skanderbeg as a link of a knot: *"He set a knot between him and Europe, a noble relationship, one he knew better than anything else in this world: war." (Ibid., 127)*

Post-Skanderbegiana, marks the great tragedy that had already occurred with the death of Gjergj Kastriot-Skënderbeu, in January 1468. The Asian night was foreboding in Fushë-Kosovë, and indeed after facing 25 years and 24 battles led by Skanderbeg, the Ottoman Crescent flag arrived in Arberia. These events would go on for centuries, desperately and with constant effort, "three hundred uprisings in four hundred years." The overview of these events is given in the period after the death of Gjergj Kastriot-Skënderbeu, in the works: "The Palace of Dreams" (*Pallati i Ëndrrave*), "The Church of St. Sophia" (*Kisha e Shën Sofisë*), "Notes from the Port Authority" (*Shënime nga Kapiteneria e Portit*), "Secret Report" (*Raporti i fshehtë*), "The Blinding Order" (*Qorrfermani*), "The Theft of Royal Sleep" (*Vjedhja e gjumit mbretëror*), "The Traitor's Niche" (*Kamarja e turpit*), "Removing the craftsmanship of the miners" (*Heqja e mjeshtërisë së munxadhënësve*), "The Celebration Commission" (*Komisioni i festës*), "Farewell to Evil" (*Lamtumira e së keqes*), "The Dark Year" (*Viti i mbrapshtë*).

Also, this period is treated in many other works, where it is not described or treated as a direct topic, but that alludes to it and to its ongoing consequences, related to time contexts and other reports. It is also worth noting the conclusions with the numerous messages that pervade the entire work of this author, which always come out clearly crystallized with peaceful messages. All of these works span a creative period of more than half a century in different perspectives, always trying to resolve long-unresolved issues. This presentation, in all his works, in some form is directly related or felt in indirect connection with the glorious era of Gjergj Kastriot, as a temporal and spatial orientation. Among these works should be singled out: "The Church of St. Sophia" (*Kisha e Shën Sofisë*), "Secret Report" (*Raporti i fshehtë*), "The Theft of Royal Sleep" (*Vjedhja e gjumit mbretëror*), "The Palace of Dreams" (*Pallati i ëndrrave*), "The Traitor's Niche" (*Kamarja e turpit*), "Farewell to Evil" (*Lamtumira e së keqes*) etc.

"**The Church of St. Sophia**" is a short novel in conception, but with a very wide range of treatment of an important event for the entire Ottoman Empire and beyond, which is also related to

other multifaceted reflections. The author deliberately does not specify to the end the purpose of the strong siege of Constantinople, close to two months from April 6 to May 9, 1453, nor the final attack of May 29, when this city is conquered. He concludes with the purpose of the occupation and the proclamation of Sultan Mehmed II that "from now on my capital is Istanbul" (Runciman, 1965).

With an artistic and philosophical transformation of knowledge about the general circumstances of the history of the time and especially of the Ottoman Empire, which he knows quite well, here stands out an event that happened in history. Kadare, shows the fate of the nine hundred year old civilization of this city, the center of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. He, in a brilliant presentation both artistic and complex, at the end of this novel, does not absolve himself of the responsibility and guilt of the Byzantine Empire. It is the concluded agreements, recognition and other advantages that the Ottoman Empire gives, after the conquest, to the Orthodox Church to the detriment of the Catholic Church.²

"Secret Report" is also a story that captures previously unknown multi-dimensional moments. Kadare, as usual with his mastery of determination and security, with his historical observation transformed into the artistic and philosophical one, deals with some complex issues, which are still with many questions. These issues, at first, seem detached, or random, however, they have a logical connection and significant weight. The narrative, however, presents the significance and dimensions of the drama of a tomb caused by the failure to find Skanderbeg's remains. The mystery of this tomb, since that time, is with disturbing loads and which constantly become transient. This anxious mystery goes so far as to reflect anxiety, insomnia and turmoil not only to the Vizier of Order, but also to the head of the empire himself.³

The secrets of that tomb, with its debauched chronicles, with its many and varied legends, with its strange superstitions, do not provide solutions, but remain forever mysterious. Therefore, all this action, is in an enigma, is the mystery of not finding. So, the "Secret Report", presents many secrets for Albanians, which still remain unknown and unsolved.

"The Blinding Order" in direct reading, refers to the manifestations of surprising actions and the next absurdities, not with military methods, invasions or quick punishments, but with other forms of torture, not only physical, but also psychological. In this case, in another reading, the backstage of the war between the clans is also set in action. Here are presented the desperate efforts of Albanians who had long lived in the imperial state, nostalgia for the ancient homeland, and as a consolation to the soul - the dangerous efforts to preserve the identity and the thin thread of hope for a possible return, which was rather merely wishful and fictional.

Other stories such as "The Theft of the Royal Sleep" also deal with important and secret issues in the continuation of the sultans' rule and the desperate efforts and tragic fates of the people throughout the imperial space, such as the case of Ali Pasha Tepelena in the novel "The Traitor's Niche", especially in the novel "The Celebration Commission", in the middle of the 19th century. It is Kadare's artistic testimony for a tragic, heavy and painful fate for all Albanians. It is the great, bloody ploy that comes treacherously to the massacre of about five hundred Albanian leaders, summoned from the center of the Ottoman Empire, ostensibly to a common feast of reconciliation.

As a conclusion to the series of works of the period of the Ottoman Empire, the story **"Farewell to Evil"** presents an imaginary event masterfully handled by the author, narrating the time

² The Ottomans officially recognized the Orthodox Church, suppressing the Catholic Church throughout their reign. All these factors are important to explain the ease and speed of Ottoman expansion in the Balkans and the reason why the peasantry did not join their chieftains in resisting the Ottomans. (H. Inalxhik, *The Ottoman Empire*, Focus, Shkup, 2010, p.31.)

³ "That the grave confined in itself an evil, one could see this from afar. What one could not see was why his evil had managed to disturb the sleep of the vizier of the Order. The Sultan's sleep was still far away, however, not so much as to seem inaccessible." (Kadare, *Secret Report*, Tiranë, 2008, 443.)

on the threshold of Albania's independence, after a long period of about five centuries of severe captivity. It is a sudden arrival of an imperial missionary done with the aim of bringing something designed, targeted, or surveyed into the very capital of the Ottoman state that was already crumbling. Knowing that the Albanians would also gain independence and return to Europe, a *black imam* must be inaugurated at the head of the Albanian state, to whom the secret services would have constant access.

2. Conclusion

In the corpus of Kadare's work concerning this nature, there are attentive, careful, logical and protective treatments of truths not only for Albanians, as Kastriot had acted incessantly in defense of freedom, not only for his Albanians. Also, in the prism of all this magnificent treatment of our hero, it is easy to notice the radiance of a multifaceted care for all those who deserve this greatness and respect. And also from all this wide presentation, where perhaps, of course, there could be insults and outbursts from the most diverse and extreme, as would often happen in the presentation of other writers' works, the ethics and aesthetics of Kadare's presentation, it is elegant, kept clean and quite humane, in all cases and also in almost all circumstances. He never, under any circumstances, shows the feeling of submission, inferiority, immersion in the nostalgia of false identities, or possible flattery. He is a vertical wrestler, who does not stop the arrow of literary blows, in the right targets for all those who trample on others.

Kadare's works, which deal entirely with the coming of the period of the Ottoman Empire and give action with their extension, also in the spaces of this empire, may have other readings that enclose the later times of dictatorships in communist regimes. These have also been revealed by various authors: Alain Bosquet, Shaban Sinani, Eric Faye, Matteo Mandala, Behar Gjoka etc. The escape to another time, perhaps even to distant times, or the change of times in literature has often served as a good refuge to indirectly express the violated free thought about the state of a temporal actuality. This kind of literature occurs and is encountered mainly in totalitarian, non-democratic countries. Ismail Kadare has been served by this alternative of the artistic game, which he has used masterfully, especially in those works that in the first superficial reading reflect the imperial periods and especially that of the Ottoman Empire. He breaks the pre-coded templates and strict restrictions, ignoring the permanent danger and the strict punitive measures of the time. Therefore, these works have a direct, superficial readable text, but they also carry other subtexts and readings, sometimes multi-layered.

The work of this great writer, has a special and distinctive approach from others. The treatment is of a deep knowledge, with mastery of argument and logic, of historical facts, of an academic information and extraordinary ability of literary accomplishment. In works of this kind, the consequences that this empire left on the peoples of the Balkans, especially the Albanians, are revealed with the damages caused, the most monstrous rapes, numerous tragedies, prohibitions and coercions for even more basic rights, changes in beliefs and mentalities, extermination of the disobedient, violent conversions, etc. Especially from all this, the approach to Albanians is painful. They were forbidden to use their own language, customs, culture, and among them the basic rights, education and religion, for more than four centuries. Thus, through these actions, the denial and forgetfulness of their identity is ultimately intended.

Therefore, based on all this artistic work, which is also specific, we can say that in Albanian literature, but also in world literature, Kadare is unique. It is rare for a single author to have given almost the entire history, in its most essential points, the moral and customary codes, ballads, legends, psychology and culture of a people, in a time span stretching from antiquity to the present day, especially the Period of the Ottoman Empire.

By way of conclusion, Kadare's work recreates in art the culmination points of Albanian history. He also manages to generally analyze the Balkan psychology and mentality, and through this he gives peaceful messages all over the Balkans and beyond. With this he reveals another dimension of his art; a foresight and an all-time message, in the name of peace - understanding of coexistence and a common future.

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