

Kadare and the Theater

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Abstract

The transformation of a literary work into other artistic and cultural dimensions is always intriguing and challenging. This transformation is frequent in cases when a certain literary work is brought to the theater through dramatization and staging. A constant debate among theater, film and literature artists is that of dramatization and staging of a literary work in the form of a theatrical performance or some other artistic medium. The arguments and counterarguments are numerous and are usually based on personal experiences or on the outcome and quality of a play or film emerging from the dramatization of a literary work. Perhaps due to the low output of theatrical productions in Kosovo or lack of creative ideas, the dramatizations of literary works into a theater plays are rare in Kosovo's stages. In spite of cases being sporadic, some attempts at theatrical productions deriving from dramatization of literary works do exist and the most serious among them are those based on the literary works of authors such as Ismail Kadare, though not always possessing the qualities that characterize the original works. By approaching Ismail Kadare's work from a different angle, that of its dramatization and staging for theater, I aim to contribute to the recognition of the Albanian literature in another dimension, namely that of playwriting and theater. This will be achieved by illuminating the principal and fundamental issues of the relationship between the literary work and the theater, focusing on the particular potential Kadare's work has for staging.

Keywords: literature, Ismail Kadare, theater, dramatization

Introduction

Kadare and the Theater

Dealing with Ismail Kadare's work today may be considered a privilege. Due to his artistic and personal aura, one tends to feel rather small and thus in a constant struggle to make their own work match that of his name. You research, seek, read, then write words, lines, pages, while constantly puzzled as to how much you have managed to do justice to Kadare.

His figure opens up many opportunities for multidimensional treatment and research, with different approaches and from different perspectives. His figure may also be subject to study by scholars of different profiles, not necessarily those coming from the field of linguistics or literature. Kadare's life, work and activity can be studied by dramatic artists, such as theater directors and playwrights, as well as philosophers, historians, politicians, sociologists, pedagogues, etc. This is due to the deep and multilayered content that composes Ismail Kadare's figure as an author and a personality.

His literary works can be studied as a whole or one by one, with distinct approaches and from different viewpoints. The artistic viewpoint consists of the artistic values contained in his work, its relation to other arts and the opportunities it opens up to interacting with other artistic forms. Philosophers would find infinite material within Kadare's works, with sentences that carry powerful philosophical messages. Historians might treat Kadare's work from the viewpoint of the time period when they were written or the periods of events in his works, or study him as a personality of literature and art. Politologists may deal with the political line that Kadare deals with in his most prominent works, as is the case with the "Palace of Dreams" and at the same time with Kadare's stance in relation to political developments. For sociologists, Kadare is a very stable source, offering them a unique material for the cultural and social specifics of Albanians and other peoples of the Balkans or Europe. This is because Kadare is a good connoisseur of the antiquity and tradition, the mentality and the emancipation level, of the artistic word and history, politics and philosophy.

The experience of reading Kadare's work is extraordinarily similar to that of reading a drama or a dramatized text. The experience obtained from reading his work is also attained from watching a theater show. The dramaturgic twists, the diverse structure of dramatic actions, the different perspectives on the human world in relation to the plot and the setting, the powerful historical and antient elements and metaphors, make Kadare's work be naturally experienced on a theatrical stage. The whole plot unfolding in the novel involves a structural stage logic and, without much effort, can be transferred into a staged event. In this regard, Kadare's work, especially his novels, can be read with a different approach, seen as dramatic works with good potential of being staged for theater.

In dramatic and theatrical terms, the geographical areas in which Kadare sets his stories and characters, provide ample and varied opportunities, often resembling monumental stages in which situations and events may range from microstaged locations to macrostaged ones. This is because Kadare describes and treats his geographic settings almost as ready to be placed on the theater stage. The settings of stories in Kadare's works have multidimensional and deep meaningful elements, giving theater artists opportunities for creative choices and solutions on the stage. These spaces often appear as metaphorical and symbolic locations and, at the same

time, convey powerful messages. The setting of the novel “Chronicle in Stone” in the stone city of Gjirokastra is unique and at the same time highly artistic, giving the impression of a mythical staging, expanded into monumental dimensions.¹

Characters and events in Kadare’s work have special spaces and, as such, their extension and development have creative potential to be staged on a theater with all the elements required for the realization of a theatrical performance, such as: a genuine plot, the characters’ drama, the dramatic gradation and twist, the culmination and the catharsis, these being fundamental elements for a classical drama.

Kadare’s works, apart from having a dramatic structure, may be freely experienced as dramas ready to be dramatized and staged. This is because Kadare presents clear dramatic ideas in the foundations of his work. The ideas that Kadare creates and develops in his work include personal and collective drama. Many of the situations in his novels are created based on the particular drama his character undergoes, challenged by being placed between life and death, between reality and imagination, between dream and truth.

In the novel “Doruntine,” the dead brother brings the living sister home from the distant Bohemia on the back of a horse to fulfill his given word.² Although common sense would exclude the possibility of such an event ever happening, the spiritual side emerging from a mentality built on canonical grounds, in which the cult of *besa* (the given word) possesses the sublime power of a religion, makes it possible to accept it as a real event, whereby the canonical code can be treated as an Albanian religion preceding the era of Christ. This spiritual effect we encounter in the canonical code has had a fundamental function for an authentic Albanian “religion.” To prove this, we might take the case of provoking a devoted Christian on the history of Christ, unfounded on common sense or scientific logic, and say to them that it is not possible for Lazarus to have died and raised from the dead, or for a blind person to have had his sight returned, or for Christ to have been born to a virgin, etc. Even if we reason that common sense does not accept any of this, we would be considered blasphemers in the eyes of the devoted believer. Doubts based on common sense and science are considered acts of provocation and offense to them. The same logic we encounter in the Albanian canonical code, applied by a medieval society with traditional emancipation and considered a religion and a way of life.

Myth and religion are built on non-ideological principles and elements that are employed when logical and scientific reasoning is exhausted, when one strives for a higher, deeper, and more spiritual reality. The novel “Doruntine” is built on this very absurd reality, whereby the code of the given word is bound to be fulfilled by life or death. It is this realm that the character of Constantine is constructed; unable to predict his future, he promises his mother that alive or dead he will bring her

¹ Ismail Kadare, *Kronikë në gur*, Onufri, Tirana, 2007

² Ismail Kadare, *Kush e solli Doruntinën*, Onufri, Tirana, 2008

daughter, namely his sister home whenever she needs it. This *besa* has a totalitarian and unimaginable power, since for the sake of his mother Constantine challenges death with the promise “alive or dead.” Because of Kadare’s unique construction of the novel, Constantine’s given word confronts death and he is forced to fulfill it although dead, as he has not been able to do so while alive.

Here, the author collides life with death by means of a mythical artistic structure, giving a simple man supernatural powers so that he can fulfill a promise based on a canonical and very tragic code. Undoubtedly, *besa* has a religious weight for Albanians; by swearing it, a simple man assumes the role of a demi-God because his act carries him beyond the logical boundaries set by life. In order to have the proper weight and importance and to adhere strictly to keeping his given word, the simple man confronts death and life.

This collision between life and death is also visible in the novel “The General of the Dead Army”, in which an Italian general searches and excavates on the Albanian soil the remains of his soldiers killed during World War II.¹ He visits all the sites of previous battles and combats with the aim of finding his killed army and returning the bones to their homeland (Italy). This metaphor on the eternal combat between life and death, day and night, world and chaos, this the struggle for existence is presented clearly and powerfully in this novel.

In this context, Ismail Kadare in his literary works uses the extraordinary archetypes of the Albanian tradition while at the same time making us aware of the forgotten part of the Albanian existence, its heroic and its tragic sides. Kadare made it possible for us to recognize the collective Albanian spiritual memory, the anxieties of the antiquity, the dark and bright historical developments, the ideological and political changes, the moral and national stunning, by journeying through different historical periods.

By means of myths and legends hidden in the dark corners of history, canonical codes, offices and palaces filled with dreams and mysteries, streets filled with sadness brought by rain, provincial cafés filled with tense atmosphere and tobacco smoke, embodied in performances of his characters, Kadare rediscovers a large part of our current existence or the one lost through centuries. Among Kadare’s characters one finds the typical Albanian with atypical circumstances and actions, the mythical Albanian who constantly fights against time moving in an opposite direction, the stubborn Albanian unwilling to adapt to the demands of the foreigners who have come uninvited to his home.

In Kadare’s work we also see special and unique elements of dramatics, the opposite effect of a certain action. This we find in his work where the head of decapitated Ali Pasha Tepelena goes from one inn to the other, one continent to the other, in order to

¹ Ismail Kadare, *Gjenerali i Ushtrisë së vdekur*, Onufri, Tirana, 2007

stir up dread among others who have aspirations for rebellion against the Ottoman power. Nevertheless, through the genius of Kadare, the opposite effect is achieved; instead of the effect of dread from Ali Pasha's cut head, he creates a sense of miracle from those seeing that head.

In the multilayered reading of Kadare's work, we find a powerful dramatic layer that keeps one under tension, intrigued and often shocked. Such a dramatic layer can be encountered in classical and antique dramas, and especially in Shakespeare. Structurally, Kadare's works incorporate a clear dramatic structure with a deep content serving the drama, with a conflict energy required by the literary genre of drama, with tension always in the verge the explosion. Based on conflict, the author's dramatic layer is always present. The chaos that endangers order, seemingly helpless at first, but which puts the existing order into panic, creates stable grounds for the dramatic scene to function.

Protagonists or antagonists, Kadare's characters through their actions are built upon conflicting foundations. Like all the characters of great drama, Kadare's characters are complex, yet with defined goals, often contradictory to circumstances and order, and radiating anxious energy with their deeds. Their complexity has a good mental and moral nucleus, while their emotional and spiritual structure is presented through conflicting relationships that the character undergoes through his actions, often in opposition to the order created by others. Also, Kadare's characters have a psychic world created on the principles of drama, built so that the character can be found between two states, be they moral, mental or emotional. The character is in constant conflict within himself, in different dimensions, where the conflict either experiences that development or breaks out, and after the dramatic boom, the character undergoes extreme decadence.

This dramatic scheme of the psychological development of Kadare's characters is especially encountered in the great plays of the geniuses of antiquity. Most Kadare characters carry a great dramatic baggage, or even a tragic guilt, obliging them to feel something contrary to what they do, or to do contrary to what they feel. Sometimes his characters impose morbid actions, such as the character of the novel "The General of the Dead Army" or the character of Tunxh Hatai in "The Large Elayets." Although seemingly stable and determined for their actions, with one seeking to find the remains of his soldiers killed in a foreign land and return them to their homeland, and the other seeking the head of the rebel Ali Pasha Tepelena, both characters also come up with moments of human crises. Had Kadare presented these two characters only in the context of their morbid actions, they would appear monotonous and unbelievable. But Kadare with an extraordinary sense for drama, presents the General and Tunxh Hatai also in moments of crisis, with human emotional outbursts, experiences that make them more complex and more believable. In the General's case, Kadare achieves this by describing the character's inner conflicts, his spiritual dialogue with the priest, presenting another side of the General, which is not part of

his military uniform. The same goes for Tunxh Hatai, who turns into a caring parent having been a terrible state official, carrying the head of Ali Pasha Tepelena, to spread dread onto others.

As for the characters' actions, Kadare develops characters with certain performance, which are part of a complex acting mechanism. The same development we find in the characters of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Dante, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Camus, etc. To support this argument, we can draw a parallel between Kadare's character of Ali Pasha and Aeschylus' character of Prometheus, since their tragic death makes the overthrow of two rebellious titans monumental. Also, the courage of Ali Pasha's character for rebellious actions gives him something Promethean, raising him to a mythical character, because the dimensions of his rebellion and later suffering because of it exceed the boundaries of humanity. Kadare combines the characters with those of antiquity drama even in the novels "Doruntine" and "Broken April." Apart from creating a conflict by confronting two cultures or two mentalities that reject each other, he creates a conflict of mythical dimensions. We see this in "Doruntine" with the relation between life, death and after-death, or in "Broken April," where social order is governed and led by sublime canonical codes.¹

To continue, in "Doruntine," in spite of Stres' attempts to investigate the legend, by constructing, destroying and rebuilding numerous hypotheses, Constantine remains intact by his logical actions. Constantine remains a simple man of mythological features acting in harmony with the myth of the given word or *besa*, eliminating any possibility for alternative solutions. Raising him from the grave to fulfill the promise, Kadare confronts two extremes of the existentialism in human being, death and life. The same performative principle is also encountered in the character of Xhorg, who due to the obligations arising from the canonical code, without any motive or personal reason must commit a murder. Due to the absolute system of the Kanun, the Albanian canonical code, he turns into a dedicated mercenary, accomplishing the action according to fatal dramatic structure. Within him is something deeper, more substantial, with many centuries-old roots, totally unreasonable from the viewpoint of common sense. Besian Vorbs' attempts to find scientific explanations and logical arguments for the demystification of these kinds of actions have ended without yielding results. Although difficult to accept, we can conclude here that when the archetype gives an order for action, logical or scientific explanations carry no weight. Perhaps because they are old moral schemes inherited with the entire darkness they contain. In this regard, both novels provide great creative opportunities to develop into dramas for theater, having a very good structure of conflict between the intellect and the traditional spiritual world, between reality and myth.

Maybe due to my professional subjectivity, Kadare's works, especially his novels, I see more as dramas than other forms or genres of literature. This is because they have a

¹ Ismail Kadare, Prilli i thyer, Onufri, Tirana, 2009

typical dramatic structure with conflicting content. His characters can be analyzed as complex drama characters, and in most of them we encounter what is considered "homo dramaticus specific."¹ To sum up, Kadare's approach in his novels gives ample dramatic acting space and as such they should also be read and treated as dramas – dramas that the Albanian literature of our time unfortunately lacks.

About the Author

Theater and film director, human rights activist. Born in Pristina, Kosovo where he also finished primary and secondary school. He studied theater directing at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Pristina, where he also finished Master's degree in 2007. During his professional career he was involved in theater productions at the National Theatre of Kosovo as well as in other local and private theaters. His most successful performances are: "Underground man" (Hristo Boytchev), "Open Couple" (Dario Fo), "Closer" (Patrick Marber), "After Ms. Julie" (Patrick Marber), "Caligula" (Albert Camus), "The Merchant of Venice" (William Shakespeare), etc. As a director, he is known for avant-garde and innovative approach. His performances are evaluated positively by critics and have been well received by the audience. He also took some important awards, among which is the Annual Award for Directing and Best Performance in Kosovo for the year of 2013. He is also engaged as a director and producer in film and media productions (TV series, short films and documentaries, marketing campaigns, etc.). The most important among them is the production of narrative documentary films "People and memories talk" regarding civic victims from the latest war in Kosovo and throughout the region of ex-Yugoslavia. He is member of the Executive Board of Kosovo Association of Theatre Artists and organizer of several festivals in the country and abroad. As a human rights activist, K. Koliqi since 2003 is Executive Director of Integra NGO, which is focused on the field of dealing with the past and transitional justice, human rights, culture, civic activism, critical thinking and writing, regional cooperation, democratization and integration.

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¹ From One-to-One Psychodrama to Large Group Socio-Psychodrama, 2012, Zoli Figusch, LuLu