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What's Behind the Veil?  
The Ottoman Fiction of Ismail Kadare  
by  
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Introduction

Ismail Kadare (b. 1936) is the most famous Albanian writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Inside Albania his works are popular for their practical role in the construction and preservation of the modern Albanian national culture and for their skilled evocation of the historical tribulations, controversies, and occasional triumphs of the Albanian people.

Writing prolifically in a variety of genres, Kadare has succeeded both in gaining a great deal of exposure for his native land and in developing a coherent and compelling artistic treatment of a welter of important historical issues. Kadare's first major prose work was the international hit *The General of the Dead Army* (1963). He then went on to achieve critical acclaim with other novels such as *Chronicle in Stone* (1971), *Broken April* (1978), *The File on H.* (1981), and *The Pyramid* (1991). His main thematic concerns include Albania's experience under communism, the role of women in traditional societies, the nature of myth and mythmaking, the roots of the dispute over Kosovo/Kosova, the classical Greek heritage of today's Europe, the construction of the Albanian national identity, and the historical experience of the Balkan peoples in the Ottoman Empire. (1)

It is this last thematic concern that forms the point of departure for the present essay, which has as its goals the introduction of one of Kadare's richest and most artistically satisfying texts on the Ottoman period and the suggestion of a framework for understanding the story and assessing its significance. "The Caravan of Veils" uses potent and contested images and a gripping plot to drive home the nature of authoritarian rule. Amidst Kadare's diatribes against dictatorship and imperialism and his critique of a Muslim social practice, the careful reader also finds a meditation on the vicissitudes of power. In addition, the reader is prompted to take up challenges like those recently expressed by the Spanish writer and Arabist, Juan Goytisolo, who decries the "daily inanity" of the Western tendency to "confuse the headscarf with the veil, with the *chador*, and even with the *burka* of Afghan women." (2) This view of Islam is the product of outdated and ignorant, but persistent, imagination (3). There has never been a more pressing time than the present to push for more clarity and understanding. The significance of this symbol in this powerful story goes beyond the realm of historical fiction or metaphor: it challenges us to confront what we really know about one aspect of Islam.

Analysis of the Symbolism of the Veil

We begin with an examination of the significance of veiling, which, next to the harem, constitutes the most visible, abiding, and often volatile issue in terms of non-Muslim public

opinion about life for women in Islamic societies. The concept of the “veiling” of Muslim women is an elastic one, at least as used in most non-Muslim countries. Strictly speaking, of course, a veil is a kind of head covering that shields, to some degree, one’s face and hair from view. In religious texts the standard word for veil, from the Arabic, is *hijab*. The word literally means “curtain.” (4) Many synonyms exist in daily use in the various languages of the world’s many different Muslim communities for items of clothing that fulfill the religious and social functions of the veil. The English term “veil” itself connotes an exceedingly wide variety of head coverings of various types. In the paragraphs that follow, an attempt will be made to elucidate the main types of such head-coverings and their regional linguistic variants. But it is essential at this point to underscore another, broader meaning of the term *hijab*: separation or partition.

It is the purpose of veiling, whether it originates in pre-Islamic tradition, certain interpretations of the Koran, or political considerations, to emphasize women’s distinctiveness and hold them separate from men or from public life. The veil is therefore related to the kind of physical isolation called for in the institution of *pardah*, a Persian term indicating the domestic confinement of women, their isolation behind curtains or in separate rooms. A rough Turkish equivalent of this concept is *haremlik*, which refers to the women’s quarters of a (usually upper-class) residence, closed to nearly all males and especially to outsiders. The term *hijab* also has other meanings, important in Muslim theology, such as “illusion” or “that which separates a person from Allah.” Women’s issues, such as the veil, are very important in Islamic societies today because they are situated at the intersection of family, faith, and politics, and hence they are very much a barometer of a given society’s stresses and attitudes towards change. In today’s climate of competition between moderate Muslims and Islamists of various sorts, the public face of women is very much a barometer, a “sock in the wind,” or a “canary in the mine” about the general political drift of a country. (5)

To understand the veil one must also bear in mind the origins of the practice and the extreme variation in its application. First of all, although veiling is widely assumed to be standard Muslim practice rooted in the Koran, it was present in many areas before the arrival of the Islamic faith. This is true of Persia, the Byzantine Empire, the modern-day lands of Saudi Arabia and Syria, and probably the homeland of the Mongols as well. One can argue, however, that the practice may have spread into some new territories by the expansion of Muslim and Arabic civilization. The practice is also not found in Muslim lands alone, since there is some tradition of veiling in Hinduism and, especially, Judaism. In classical Greek and Roman society, veils, sometimes accompanied by a *stephane*, or decorative metal headband, were important, at least for upper-class women. In addition, in early Christian societies, veiling may have been a requirement for women in some places (6) It was also important in later Christian societies, where it was often practiced by women in mourning and by Roman Catholic nuns. Syncretism between certain doctrines of new faiths and pre-existing practices are, in fact, common in both the Christian and Muslim worlds and also lie at the root of other controversial practices, such as female circumcision and polygamy among Muslims. It is possible that the ancestors of the Ottomans in Central Asia did not use the veil. This was specifically asserted by the Young Turk sociologist Ziya Gökalp in 1920. (7), who also wrote that the “ancient Turks were not only the world’s most democratic ethnic group but also its most feminist. (8) Elsewhere it has been asserted that it was outside influences that sapped early Islam’s enthusiastic liberation of women; with increasing asceticism via the “conceptions of the Iranian and Greek Orthodox religions”

came a stronger emphasis on women's inequality. (9)

There is also, not surprisingly, a Koranic basis for the practice of veiling. Two *suras* (sections or chapters) in particular are often cited as forming the justification for the practice. Sura 33:59 endorses partial coverings of women, while in Sura 24:31 women are enjoined to act with physical modesty in public and to keep their "adornments" or "ornaments" hidden except from close relatives or slaves. These passages are hardly categorical or definitive, however, and have been operated on by many interpreters in many distinct contexts; nonetheless, since the Koran is considered to be the literal and direct revelation of Allah, even contested passages carry great weight. But disagreements among scholars of and within Islam remain. One observer has summed up this issue in this way: "While modesty is a religious prescription, the wearing of a veil is not a religious requirement of Islam, but a matter of cultural milieu." (10) This modesty, which is still—or again—an important consideration for many Muslim women, usually consists of covering all of one's body save the face and hands, although, as in the past, the practice admits of great variety in approach. Traditional and conservative supporters of the veil also base many of their arguments on the *hadith*, which are traditional sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and recountings of his activities. There are thousands of these, and they exist in many collections made by scholars over the centuries and are operated upon by various schools of interpretation. Most Muslims regard them as amplifications of the Koran and as sources of inspiration. Still, some Muslim religious thinkers, in our day as well as in earlier periods, have dismissed the need to separate women from men in this way. Veiling was not widespread until the rule of the Abbasids, beginning in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. The growth of the Arab states and the spread of Islam as a religion probably spread pre-existing local traditions of veiling. Meanwhile, in certain places, powerful Muslim men have used curtains or veils to hold themselves distinct from others.

Another point of great variation is the determination of which women should be required to wear the veil. Many historians, chroniclers, and travellers have noted that usage varies not only from country to country but within a given society as well. Initially, wearing the veil was the *right*, not an obligation, of upper-class women in towns and cities, and it was intended to be worn only outside the home. Therefore, as a general trend, one notes that the majority of women—slaves, peasants, and Bedouins—were both less likely to be required to wear a veil and less likely actually to do so (11) Hard physical labor made the wearing of elaborate head-coverings impractical, and women would sometimes simply turn their heads when encountering an unfamiliar man. There are also variations according to age. Since the veil is primarily intended for women of child-bearing age, whether married or unmarried, girls and older women were often exempted from its use. There was also variation in whether married or unmarried women should be covered. Sometimes the donning of the veil served a particular function, as in fulfilling a requirement for travel to a local religious shrine or to Mecca. The degree of severity of a woman's "separation" by veiling could be increased not just by reducing the amount of her body (such as the face, wrists, and ankles) exposed but also by "double veiling," or wearing various layers of similar or varying garments. There are ample examples of noblewomen refusing to wear veils, as part of their negotiation of a more independent identity. There are also cases of groups of women refusing to wear certain types of coverings for fear of running afoul of strict sartorial policies sometimes imposed by local rulers who militated against public ostentatiousness. There also exist male head coverings that serve various social and religious functions in Muslim societies, such as the well-known *kaffieh* or *kaffiya* (headscarf),

the similar *ghutra*, the turban, and, in earlier periods, the fez and tarboosh. The Austrian historian Hammer-Purgstall reports that in early modern Ottoman society, men's head coverings were an extremely important and positive symbol, "because the right to cover one's head by wrapping was prohibited to slaves." The Romans had maintained a similar distinction. In addition the Turks traditionally had no word for freedom other than *serbestiyet*, which Hammer-Purgstall translates as *Kopfgebundenheit* or "the condition of having one's head covered." (12)

Turning now to the issue of the various types of women's head-coverings, we face a bewildering variety of terms. The issue of nomenclature is so complicated here because of the number of languages Muslim communities use in the Middle East, the Balkans, and South Asia; usage also changes over time. Source material for researchers is also not plentiful. When government decrees and religious studies are not abundant, which is often, then scholars must attempt to recreate the sartorial landscape from contemporary traveller's reports and artworks.

Veiling is part of the general issue of outerwear for women, and specific items of clothing correspond to specific zones of the body to be covered. These zones are the hair, the face, and the body. Items that only cover the hair would be simply cloths or headscarves; sometimes this was the only kind of head covering that was worn in Muslim societies by Muslim and non-Muslim women alike. Face coverings were sometimes part of larger garments, but they were often separate items of clothing worn in combination with other coverings. The Turkish words *ya\_mak* (two cloths tied around the head, leaving space for the eyes) and *peçe* (a single piece of cloth only covering the face below the eyes), as well as the Arabic words *niqab* (Jordan), *boshia* (Kuwait), *shaylah* in the United Arab Emirates, and *izar* (Lebanon), refer specifically to this type of veil proper. Larger garments, meant to cover all or much of the body, often take the form of a cloak, shawl, draping gown, or cape extending from the top of the head to the chest or waist, are called *çar\_af* in Turkey and *chador* in Iran, and some approximate Arabic equivalents are the Iraqi *abaya* and the North African *milaya*. A final, dramatic kind of women's outerwear is the *burqa* (alternately, *burka* or *burqu*), found mostly in South Asia. It is draped from a woman's head to her heels, tent-like, and usually contains a grill for the eyes and nose. Such explication is necessary because the word "veil" is traditionally so loosely defined that it covers "a wide range of outer coverings." (13) Other regional variants of traditional head coverings also exist: *bukhnoq*, *ayer*, *dupatta*, and similar social or religious functions of modesty are also performed by other outer garments such as the *thoab* and *rapoosh*. In Bosnia, the veil over a woman's face is called *zar*, while the large coat or cloak often worn with it is a *fered\_a*.

Proper contextualization—not justification, but the scholarly imperative to examine a phenomenon on its own terms—of the use of the veil can show us ways its wearers find it advantageous or adaptable to their own needs. These observations range from the practical and convenient—that it shields the wearer from intense sun and dust, provides privacy for the nursing of babies, and obviates the need for expensive clothes or elaborate make-up—to the potentially subversive—covering up revealing fashions or Western-style accoutrements that would otherwise be forbidden in public. (14) Naturally, a new social language of both beauty and flirtation is possible even with veils, as is patent from the many press photographs and memoirs of our own day highlighting the combination of modern jewelry and coiffures with traditional clothing of women across the Muslim world. The frequency of Ottoman governmental decrees also reminds us that women's fashion was a constantly creative and mutating challenge

to patriarchy in an earlier era. Ultimately, an understanding of the phenomenon of veiling involves more than just attempts at weighing one's freedom of choice in clothing against the power of tradition or patriarchy: one must comprehend that there is an entire spectrum of covering implied in the term "veiling," and that Western or democratic or capitalist societies also have orthodoxies and restrictions and that, in addition, there is an important continuum of adaptation and flexibility within any set of guidelines.

### The Story: "The Caravan of Veils"

Kadare's gripping tale, "The Caravan of Veils," has unfortunately not been published in English translation. (15) The title in Albanian is "Sjellësi i fatkeqësisë—Islamo nox," which literally translates to "The Bearer of Ill Tidings—Islamo nox." This long story was first published in 1984 in the literary journal *Nëntori*. Like most of Kadare's other stories, novels, and poems about the Ottoman Empire, it is both dramatic and highly atmospheric. But it stands out as one of his most outstanding Ottoman works, if not one of the finest works in his entire corpus. This is due both to the richness of its historical perspective and to its unwavering focus on a protagonist for whom the reader can develop a genuine affinity. (16)

Hadji Milet is a thirty-something year old caravan driver for the Supply Department of the *\_eyh-ül-Islam*, the government office that represented the highest religious authority in the Ottoman Empire (c. 14th-19th centuries). He has taken his mules to many parts of the Empire before, delivering various religious items to remote villages and army encampments. But now he has been instructed to travel to the Balkans---Christian Europe, for him---for the first time. He is to transport a highly unusual cargo: a half million veils, produced by Muslim women in tailors' shops in ten Asian and African cities of the Empire, all by government decree. A recent power struggle in the Ottoman government had seen high-ranking Albanians (17) fall from grace, and, in the wake of the pendulum-like power shift, conservative elements had managed to promulgate the "*ferace-ferman*," or decree on veils.

Hadji Milet's caravan, slated to make stops in eighteen cities, will be the first of many to deliver the means of imposing Islamic social practices on the non-Muslim women of the newly conquered province known in Turkish as Rumeli (an Ottoman word that is derived from "Rome" denotes Europe in general). We then learn about Hadji Milet's journey in detail and witness how he is confronted with the effects of the veiling of European women. He is torn between his religious duty and his awe for the Ottoman super-state, on one hand, and his fascination with Balkan women and regrets at being an agent of a fiendish occupying power. In a grim twist at the story's conclusion, Hadji Milet is arrested, tortured, and interrogated by the Ottoman police, who have come to doubt his loyalty. He dies in captivity and, after he is buried in an unmarked grave, the scene shifts to a meeting of the Sultan and his cabinet. The Ottoman ruler and Turkish religious conservatives are celebrating, while the grim Albanian ministers are plotting an eventual return to power and an end to the veiling.

## Kadare and The Turks

In addition to the story under examination here, Kadare wrote a number of other Ottoman short stories and novels. Among the longer fictional works, the 1978 novel *The Three-arched Bridge* (translated in 1993) is arguably the most artistically satisfying. Beautifully translated from Albanian into English by John Hodgson, the novel winds together several intellectual preoccupations and retains the appeal of a strong plot, even if the characterization that distinguishes *Broken April* and *The Palace of Dreams* is absent. Each of Kadare's other "Turkish" novels is of considerable interest to historically-minded readers, but some critics dismiss *The Castle* (1970) as too dry and crammed with military detail. *The Niche of Shame* (1978) contains a great deal of grotesque, almost surrealistic material, and its voluminous semi-documentary disquisitions about Albanian and Ottoman history are too much for some readers.

The *Three-arched Bridge* is actually much more than an "Ottoman novel." It takes a sober and empirical approach to the spreading power of the Sultan, one that stresses both the complicity of local Christian potentates and the gradual and multi-faceted---rather than dramatic and military---nature of Ottoman encroachment. But, beyond these contributions to an understanding of Balkan history, it is also, like Ivo Andri\_'s *The Bridge on the Drina*, a study in the construction and life of a bridge. The symbolism of the bridge spanning a river called "Wicked Waters" is explored in great detail, but Kadare also alters the powerful myths of foundation sacrifice through immurement to explore the nature of the modern era of capitalism. The connection between the theme of the bridge and the theme of the Ottomans (using the Balkans literally and figuratively as a bridge to Europe) is the assertion that every "order" or social system is founded on "blood," or exploitation and victimization.

As an Ottoman novel, *The Three-arched Bridge* proves rich indeed in its portrayal of the nascent conflict between the Turks and the Albanians. In geo-strategic terms, the monk Gjon notices how the "shadows" of the new "forest of minarets" are lengthening over the Albanian lands (18). The symbol on the flags and banners of the advancing forces, a moon, provokes wonder and fear because it rises gracefully into the sky, a force of nature above all lands, and it has the power to lull victims into a dreamy sense of false well-being. (19) It is cold and can be tinged with blood, but it certainly seems to be more powerful an emblem than any wolf, cross, or eagle.

The highest state of alarm is reached in Kadare's unusual description of individual Turks who are beginning to penetrate and traverse the neighboring states, well ahead of any advancing army. Whether they are itinerant musicians, merchants, diplomats, spies, peripatetic mystics, or other envoys of various types, Albanians are filled with anxiety by their "sticky and shapeless" songs that slither past and induce drowsiness, (20), reptilian (21) and whip- or hammer-like language, furtive and languid movements, "deceitful" courtesy, and above all their loose clothing:

It is no accident that their silken garments, turbans, breeches, and robes have no straight lines, corners, hems, or seams. Their whole costume is insubstantial, and cut so that it changes shape continually.

Among such diaphanous folds it is hard to tell whether a hand is holding a knife or a flower. (22)

The final element of this eerie description is the most relevant to the subject at hand: “But after all,” the monk asks rhetorically, “how can straightforwardness be expected from a people who hide their very origins: their women?” This is another specific reference to the practice of wearing *hijab*, or wearing clothes that cover most of the head and body in public, which crops up in other works as well.

The advent of the Turks means much more than political subjugation to Kadare, more than imperialism and the removal of the sovereignty of the Albanian clans and princes. In their wake the monk sees “the scorched remains of men and their chronicles...The plains left without speech. And above all I saw the long night coming, in hours, for centuries.” (23) This is a powerful restatement of the challenge that Kadare claims is the primary forge of the Albanian personality and national character.

Both Hadji Milet and various high-ranking officials mention the spiritual well-being that veiling will bring to Europe. They refer to the benefits for women specifically but also for the whole community. We may safely assume, therefore, that Kadare is raising the specter, whether historically attested or not, of the possibility of mass, forced conversion of women to Islam. The author’s intention here would seem to be to point out the danger of denaturing Albania, changing the basic points of reference of its culture. If imperialism cuts Albanians from their European moorings and runs roughshod over their culture, then assimilation---the real bugbear behind the references to conversion---and their extinction as a distinct people will ensue. One notes that Kadare paints a grim picture of the imperiled national existence of Albanians elsewhere as well; neither the Turks, nor Muslims (24) nor even imperialists (which do also manifest themselves as Venetians, Byzantines, Normans, Serbs, Greeks, Stalinist Soviets, and Maoists) represent the only mortal threats to Albania. For instance, mass emigration from the homeland, especially of youth and professionals, was at the top of his list in 1991 in his testimony before the U.S Congress. (25) Elsewhere he notes with derision the inroads made by vapid and crass consumer culture in Albania in the 1990s and the erosion of the everyday social fabric under the communist dictatorship.

From a historian’s point of view, however, it is important to test Kadare’s hypotheses on the possible massed, forced conversion of Christians and on sumptuary laws. With regard to conversions, it is well known that various types of Christians in the Ottoman Empire, like the Jews, enjoyed the status of *zimmi* (subjects who suffered discrimination, mostly extra financial obligations and limits on social practices, but whose physical existence and revealed monotheism, or status as an Abrahamic faith tradition, were respected). It is also well known that during the initial wars of conquest and during the suppression of rebellions, when the Sultan’s sovereignty was in effect unacknowledged, destruction of life and property, and the discourse that enveloped them, often took on characteristics of what we would call religious warfare. Furthermore, the periodic appearance of rebellious provincial rulers outside the central government’s control and the use of auxiliary or irregular military units resulted in rogue behavior, some of it with negative consequences for religious groups, that was beyond the control

of Istanbul. Many Europeans, of course, did convert to Islam during the Ottoman centuries. In Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, and on the island of Crete a variety of factors came into play, including existing divisions in Christianity, geographical remoteness, conflicts of local populations with outside Christian states resulting in neglect or mistreatment, the desire of rural populations to have the right to bear arms for self-protection, and Ottoman pressure on the landowning classes.

Historians of the Ottoman Empire assert that two Sultans nevertheless considered converting Europeans en masse. One of these was Selim I in 1517. Selim I (r. 1512-1517) was known as Yavuz, the Grim or the Brave. (26) He is known for unseating his father on the throne, establishing the practice of fratricide, and—most importantly here—extending Ottoman control over the holy cities of Mecca and Medina as well as throughout Palestine, Syria, and Egypt. His claim to be caliph, in the face of similar claims by the Abbasids and by Persian rulers, was thus massively strengthened. Leften Stavrianos also names Murad IV (r. 1623-1640), a fearsome traditionally-minded reformer, as another ruler who considered forced conversion, while Mark Mazower mentions the eccentric Ibrahim I (r. 1640-1648) (27) In each case, the sultans' plans met with serious objection from within the Ottoman government. Religious leaders rejected it as an untenable break with the *zimmi* tradition. Financial considerations also played a role: conversion would entail losing the special tax revenues provided by non-Muslim subjects. Stavrianos contends that such plans for conversion would have succeeded “given the defenselessness of the Christians and the prestige and attraction of Islam at the time,” (28) while McCarthy suggests that forced conversion would have brought much grief to the Ottomans and that the peace brought by relative toleration was pragmatic and wise from their standpoint. (29)

One of the fields of Ottoman studies that is advancing the fastest nowadays is social history, and scholars such as Donald Quataert and Suraiya Faroqhi are examining, for instance, trends in sartorial and sumptuary laws that give a picture both of how Ottoman society evolved in a material sense and how notions of hierarchy and propriety were linked to the interests of the religious and economic elite. Sumptuary laws could affect both genders and all ethnic and religious groups. In general, women were allowed more diversity and adornment in their clothing than men but they had stricter religious standards of modesty to uphold. The government's religious representative and the religious authorities themselves (the *\_eyh-ül-Islam* and the *ulema*, respectively) sought to encode markers of social status, both rank and religion, in clothing, but it is nonetheless difficult to recreate these today simply because sources are scanty. The reason for this, as one historian has bluntly stated, is that “the Turks did not write about women.” (30) The twin burdens of universal patriarchy and Western orientalism mean that many potential sources on women's life in the Ottoman Empire are silent or skewed.

We do know that sometimes non-Muslim women were prescribed certain colors to wear, and, in Persia, they sometimes had to affix certain symbols to their *chadors* or even appear in public without coverings, “naked” as this is sometimes called, in an effort to humiliate the men of their family. More concretely, there are records of a significant number of Ottoman decrees dictating women's clothing and permissible public behavior. These begin with the household of Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566). They are especially frequent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, where Faroqhi, for instance, lists five instances or periods of such legislation. Abdül

Hamid II even banned the *çar\_af*, a very important type of head covering, in 1892, shortly after it first appeared. Another historian, Afetinan, lists eight such episodes of sartorial regulation for women ranging from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (31) It has been noted, furthermore, that in Ottoman Armenia, Greece, and elsewhere, “non-Muslim women dressed like Muslims” and their clothing shared the regional variation and social distinctions discussed below. (32)

It is possible that Kadare was inspired to write “The Caravan of Veils” by the events of 1703, although the story itself is not dated. In late 1702, the fourth of the five major Köprülü grand viziers, Amcazade Hüseyin Köprülü, was replaced by Daltaban Mustafa Pasha, partially because the former had been unable to reverse the military losses that had resulted in the Treaty of Karlowitz (1699). Sultan Mustafa II then attempted, in 1703, to concentrate a great deal of power in his own hands through a set of political edicts known as the “Edirne Event” (*Edirne Vakası*). (33) The Köprülüs were of Albanian origin, and although they were generally vociferous centralizers and powerful pillars of the traditional regime, the departure of the last Albanian from this high position may symbolize for Kadare a shift in the internal Ottoman balance of power away from Ottoman interests. In addition, Amcazade Hüseyin Köprülü had acted decisively to improve life for (and retain the loyalty of) the Balkan peasantry, many or most of whom were Christian. (34) This interpretation would certainly mesh with the ending of the story, which invokes the cyclical nature of power relations in the Empire and reveals the Albanian notables awaiting their return to favor. Indeed, Mustafa II soon found himself deposed and disgraced.

Moving now to a consideration of the issue of veiling in Kadare’s work in particular, one can argue that “Caravan” can be fruitfully examined from three different perspectives. First, for Kadare, is the issue of the extension of Ottoman power. This is being carried out by the suppression of indigenous Albanian (and other Balkan) culture. Having already conquered the Balkans militarily, and maintained political hegemony for a considerable length of time, the Ottoman authorities—basically reduced here to the abstract forces of Turkish ethnicity and Islam—are now seeking to impose a new cultural order by altering certain social practices. This will end up reinforcing Albania’s isolation from the rest of Europe and deepen the injustice of foreign rule. Hadji Milet’s murder, the cyclical nature of Ottoman politics, and the enfranchisement of Albanian potentates in the ruling system are important features of Kadare’s overall critique of authoritarian rule.

Second, from a literary perspective, the reader must come to terms with the effects of the mission on the story’s main character. Indeed, Hadji Milet is the only character in this long tale who is developed in any detail. That the decree on veiling places him in such spiritual and, ultimately, physical danger reminds one of the peril experiences by many other Kadare characters for conformity or simply the misfortune of being “in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Ottoman despotism, like other dictatorships, exacts a steep price from its hangers-on, middlemen, and factotums—in short, from average subjects or citizens.

Without doubt, though, this story also operates on a third level: as a critique of a specific Islamic cultural practice. Kadare’s novel *The Wedding* (1968) takes a similar approach. This dovetails with Kadare’s focus, in evidence elsewhere as well, on obstacles to women’s equality. It also gives the story increased relevance today, given the sharp growth of Islamist movements (sometimes referred to as “fundamentalist” movements within Muslim communities) espousing conservative social teachings for their members. For many people, both Muslim and non-

Muslim, the treatment of women is a kind of barometer or code-word for a large number of other issues. Kadare's text could be considered irresponsible or even incendiary today, but he seems to have intended to examine the forced spread of veiling primarily as a metaphor for imperialism and assimilation. That it involved the denaturing or reorientation of Albanian society and that is linked to other Ottoman, Turkish, or Muslim characteristics or practices that he finds undesirable are, however, arguably other aspects of Kadare's overall assessment of the role of Islam in the Balkans.

Muslims often understand the essence of "veiling" in terms of its purpose or effect: the fulfillment of a religious imperative to secure feminine modesty in public by means of covering, separation, or partition. For most non-Muslims, on the other hand, the term "veiling" is usually used in an unspecific way to indicate a variety of methods of covering women's hair, faces, and entire bodies in public. For many non-Muslims, in addition, veiling is regarded as a method of oppressing women. It is linked in Western popular understanding (though not necessarily in traditional Islamic thought and practice) with a whole raft of other complex issues relating to gender roles in both traditional and Muslim societies (female genital mutilation or circumcision, arranged marriages, honor killings, confinement, chaperones, restrictions on property and inheritance rights, lack of voting rights, unequal divorce practices, and limits on public activity) as well as to the supposed unfitness of Islamic societies for peaceful coexistence and democracy (such as the lack of separation between the religious and the political spheres and the contemporary use of *jihād*). Margaret Atwood's immensely successful novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), although targeting social practices of Christianity and not Islam, repopularized the links between dictatorship, religious zealotry, and strict clothing regulations for women that included veils, wings, and wimples.

Advocates of the veil also make the practical arguments that it can help preserve the dignity of women by freeing them from male sexual harassment and that it can serve as an important statement of cultural identity and ethnic or religious difference; some analysts also see in its use important resistance to elite power: in terms of anti-etatist political statements and creative contestations of popular culture such as fashion. Opponents counter that whatever its current usage or legitimization, the veil originated in the stark traditional belief that women are impure and inferior and that patriarchal power continues to deny them individuality and participation in public life.

The veil has been put to various political uses throughout its long history. We are familiar with its value in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a symbol of nationalism or cultural integrity in the face either of assimilation by diaspora communities or of homogenization via globalization in traditionally Islamic countries. In the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century revival of the use of the veil, not all the motives are theological or political, however; historians have noted that men in the growing middle class in the newly independent Arab states of North Africa sometimes—in contrast to the post-revolutionary evolution of government views—come to "seclude and veil their wives" as a symbol of newfound prosperity and social status. (35) Modernizers such as the Egyptian scholar and jurist Qasim Amin (1863-1908) (36) and the military and political leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the post-Ottoman Turkish state (37), were critical of veils. Nationalists and revolutionaries during the various anti-colonial struggles in the Arab world also stressed its importance as a unifying cultural symbol of anti-Western resistance, at once both politically

revolutionary and morally conservative. (38) Veiled women could also sometimes serve more easily than men as couriers for underground movements.

### Conclusion

It remains to attempt a final historicization of the chief subject in “The Caravan of Veils.” It seems most likely that the “veil” Kadare has in mind in this story is the *ya\_mak*. Today’s omnipresent *çar\_af* originated in Syria and was not in widespread use in Anatolia (and thus, one presumes, the Balkans, until after 1870. (39) This older Turkish word denotes a two-part covering for the face and hair that leaves only a woman’s eyes uncovered, but it was not worn alone. It would have been worn in combination with the loose jacket such as the Turkish *ferace*. The *ya\_mak* was usually made of a fine or filmy material and consisted of two separate pieces of cloth that were tied together behind one’s head. Both Faroqhi and Afetinan underscore the prevalence of this combination of clothing items, which gave way in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the two-piece skirt-cape combination, imported from Syria, known as the *çar\_af*. The *çar\_af*, which extended from the top of the head downward and covered most of a woman’s body, was originally worn with a type of veil known as a *peçe*. This was made originally of very heavy cloth and covered the face only from the eyes down, but it quickly evolved into thinner forms more similar to the original *ya\_maks*.

“The Caravan of Veils” is but one of Kadare’s excellent Ottoman works. There are three reasons that Kadare examines the Ottoman period so thoroughly. First, this long period of interaction with the institutions and peoples of the Ottoman Empire, which was the most powerful Muslim state in world history, had a profound effect on Albanian society; in the lengthy span of time between the 14<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a strong majority of Albanians came to adopt Islam as their religion. Albania was, furthermore—to use Kadare’s own sometimes stark terms—sealed off from the rest of Europe by this vast force from the East. The country was thus cut off from its existing, natural path of development. The gulf was deepened, according to Kadare, by decades of tutelage under the Soviets and Chinese communists, and this gap is only beginning to be bridged today as Albania moves—fitfully but hopefully—towards integration with the rest of Europe and accession to the Euro-Atlantic institutions of the European Union and NATO.

The second reason for such thorough treatment of the Ottoman period in Kadare’s oeuvre would seem to be that it was a safe subject to research and write on during Enver Hoxha’s severe dictatorship. Throughout the twentieth century, in authoritarian regimes of both left and right, writers and scholars alike have often turned to older historical topics to avoid censorship and controversy. Exposition of the Ottomans’ methods of rule provided oblique criticism of the Hoxha government and provide an artistic parallel to the analysis of communist practices (such as murder, censorship, rustication, and the erosion of authenticity and intimacy in daily life) in Kadare’s other works over several decades.

The final reason Kadare focuses so heavily on this period is because he believes that many of Albania’s domestic problems and foreign policy imbroglios originated as a result of Ottoman policies. The territorial division of Albania—with losses of land to Greece, Montenegro, and most importantly via Kosovo/Kosova, to Serbia—occurred in the late Ottoman period; more longer-term developments include being exposed to Greek ecclesiastical control

and rivalries with other Balkan peoples, such as the Serbs, over positions of privilege in the Ottoman administration and military.

That Kadare names specific events and trends that he believes lie at the root of misunderstandings between contemporary states is a responsible method of portraying the uniqueness of Balkan societies and politics; it does not indulge in the reductionism and stereotypes of some journalists, sensationalist novelists, and many politicians who ascribe current problems to warrior-like “Dinaric personalities” or to “ancient ethnic hatreds” or to immutable cultural or religious “fault lines.” Furthermore, in a cautious, sober, and workmanlike fashion sometimes reminiscent of Ivo Andrić, Kadare also uses common experiences—in the form of common problems such as economic and imperial exploitation and shared cultural patrimony from epic songs to the symbolism of bridges—to underscore the common humanity of all the peoples of the Balkans. He often subjects states, religions, and social systems to withering critiques, but there is room for individual characters to be encountered simply as human beings and accepted as such, even if their lot is far from happy.

### Notes

1) Although Kadare has long garnered high marks from literary critics, a wider circle of historians has only recently taken up the analysis of his works and their importance. The author of this essay is currently completing the first English-language monograph on Kadare. It will be published soon by the University of South Carolina Press as *Understanding Ismail Kadare*.

2) Juan Goytisolo, “Die Welt nach dem 11. September. Antworten über Antworten.” In *Gläserne Grenzen: Einwände und Anstöße*, transl. Thomas Brovot and Christian Hansen (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), p. 170.

3) Goytisolo, op. cit., “*Die islamische Bedrohung*,” p. 14.

4) Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*. Translated by Mary Jo Lakeland (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 1991), p. 85

5) Jan Goodwin, *Price of Honor: Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World* (New York: Plume, 1995), p. 28.

6) See I Corinthians 11.

7) Ziya Gökalp, *The Principles of Turkism*, translated by Robert Devereux (Leiden: Brill, 1968), p. 112.

8) *Ibid.*, p. 103

9) See *Turkish Nationalism and Western Civilization: Selected Essays of Ziya Gökalp*, translated by Niyazi Berkes (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 254.

10) Cyril Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), p. 413.

11) See Fatma Mansur Coşar, “Women in Turkish Society,” in Lois Beck and Nikki R. Keddie, eds, *Women in the Muslim World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 132.

12) Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, “Schlussrede,” in *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches* (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1963), Volume 9, pp. xl-xli.

13) Dawn Chatty, “Changing Sex Roles in Bedouin Society,” in Beck and Keddie, *op. cit.*, p. 403.

14) Naila Minai, *Women and Islam: Tradition and Transition in the Middle East* (New York: Seaview Books, 1981), p. 117.

15) The author of this essay has translated the work in full from German and hopes that it will appear in print soon.

16) This emotional connection also seems to present itself to readers in the cases of Gjorg Berisha in *Broken April* and Mark-Alem in *The Palace of Dreams*. The strength of many of Kadare’s novels, however, lies beyond the affective domain, in political and ethnographic detail, dissection of the process of mythmaking both ancient and contemporary, and a mix of subtle plots and austere, spectral prose that serve as vehicles for the author’s literary and political preoccupations.

17) Probably a reference to the Köprülü family, which held many important positions in the Ottoman government in the second half of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth. There were five prominent grand viziers from this family, producing popular references to them as a “dynasty” or a “noble” family. They wielded great executive and military power and strengthened the Empire through reforms that rejuvenated traditional institutions. They hailed from the Berat region of Albania and are said to have entered Ottoman service through the *dev\_irme*, or child levy, carried out among Balkan Christian communities.

18) Ismail Kadare, *The Three-Arched Bridge*, translated by John Hodgson (New York: Arcade, 1997), p. 2.

19) Kadare, *Bridge*, pp. 161 and 166.

20) Kadare, *Bridge*, p. 149.

21) Kadare, *Bridge*, p. 183.

22) Kadare, *Bridge*, p. 46.

23) Kadare, *Bridge*, p. 183.

24) Witness these remarks from his introduction to a major recent French study on Islam, in which Kadare criticizes both sides in the supposed “clash of civilizations” in the post-Cold War world:

[The study of misrepresentations] helps us understand that the civilization of Islam is not a doctrine of terror, as it can be presented by superficial propagandists working in the Bolshevik style—any more so than the Christian civilization of the West is really a realm of pornography; the West is not the kingdom of Satan, culpable for the slaughter of Muslims in Bosnia, as the propagandists of the opposite camp maintain, using this same Bolshevik method.

From Ismail Kadare, “Préface” to the *Dictionnaire de l’Islam: religion et civilisation* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997), p. 6.

25) U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Democratic Developments in Albania*, Hearing Before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, One Hundred Second Congress, First Session, May 22, 1991 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991)

26) See Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), p. 48, and Leften Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1958), p. 107.

27) See Mazower, *op. cit.*, p. 48, and also Lord Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire* (New York: Morrow, 1977), p. 315. Kinross asserts that Sultan Ibrahim once intended to massacre all the Christians of the Empire.

28) Stavrianos, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

29) Justin McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks: An Introductory History to 1923* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), pp. 73-74.

30) Fanny Davis, *The Ottoman Lady: A Social History from 1718 to 1918* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), p. 191.

31) A. Afetinan. *The Emancipation of the Turkish Woman* (Paris: UNESCO, 1962), pp. 31-32.

32) Suraiya Faroqhi, *Subjects of the Sultan: Culture and Daily Life in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), p. 112.

33) See Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700-1922* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 43, and Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

34) Kinross, *op. cit.*, 364-365.

35) Beck and Keddie, “Introduction,” in *op. cit.*, p. 9. 36) See Amin’s works in *The Liberation of Women and The New Woman: Two Documents in the History of Egyptian Feminism* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2000).

37) Contrary to popular wisdom, Atatürk did not ban the veil by law. He knew it was an extremely touchy issue and that outright abolition would spark considerable resistance. Instead he sought, as Roderic Davison notes, actively to discourage its use. This is a significant reservation on his part, since he did not shy from using decrees, laws, and force to change Turkish society in other controversial ways. Atatürk is remembered, for instance for latinizing the alphabet, giving women the right to vote, giving women equal rights within divorce and inheritance proceedings, turning marriage into a civil institution, providing education for girls and women, outlawing polygamy, declaring the state secular, instituting the idea of the “weekend,” adopting the Gregorian calendar, requiring surnames, carrying out a census, decreeing the use of Turkish instead of Arabic in public calls to prayer and Koran readings, formulating a new civil code on Swiss, German, and Italian—instead of the Sheriat—model, banning the fez, modernizing communication and transportation facilities, and industrializing his country.

38) Beck and Keddie, “Introduction,” *op. cit.*, p. 9; also Jan Goodwin, *op. cit.*, 30-31.

39) See Davis, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-189 and 197-200.

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