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“Waterloo of the Old Ways”: Women’s Rights in the Fictional World of Ismail Kadare

INTRODUCTION

The title of this essay is a proud comment made by a character in Ismail Kadare’s novel *The Wedding*. The character is a writer who is commenting on the efforts of the Albanian government to eliminate the tradition of under-age betrothals, that is, arranged marriages for girls. The works of Kadare, a prolific Albanian writer born in 1936, highlight many of the social and political problems of women in various epochs in the Balkans and, by extension, in other traditional societies. It is the purpose of this analysis to explore Kadare’s representation of women in terms of three categories: traditional marriage, war, and Islamic social practices. Reference will also be made to several other relevant phenomena such as diplomatic marriages, incests, and linguistic and cultural survival.

Although women’s issues are not a dominant theme in Kadare’s work, they do form an integral part of his overall concern for social justice. Such issues taken as a whole are indeed one of his chief hallmarks. One of his works contains the phrase “on every square foot, a crime”; this conviction that there is much wrong with Albania and the Balkans, even beyond the political realm, forms a leitmotif in his collected writings; elsewhere, he is concerned with issues such as blood feuds and land disputes. Concern for the second-class status of women in the traditional societies of the region fits naturally into this pattern of social engagement. In addition, women’s issues also appear frequently enough in his writings to warrant scholarly attention.

As is the case in much of Balkan literature, women are most noticeable in Kadare’s writings by their absence: from politics, government administration, and the military, for example. These socio-political “spaces” are extremely important in his historically flavored writings. Elsewhere he tends to depict women as typical objects of male desire, hardly empowered in any significant way. But in the many writings in which it is present, Kadare’s thought-provoking approach to injustice towards women parallels his method of dealing with other social problems; Kadare presents the “pros and cons” of traditional practices, and to a certain degree he plays devil’s advocate. In effect, he gives both sides

a hearing and captures the cultural uniqueness and historical moment of many such phenomena, even though his own reputation as a political progressive is secure. Kadare probably takes this subtle, non-programmatic approach to these issues not only for reasons of artistic merit but also for two other reasons: the tricky political scene in communist Albania required finesse, and his own nationalist beliefs precluded his writing anything that could be taken as an across-the-board condemnation of Albanian culture. even though his personal belief in women's emancipation is well known. (1) Once problems are exposed, we find mirrored another device typical of Kadare: amelioration of the problem through local forces of modernization, of which he himself, and his texts themselves, are examples. Another element of plot that plays an important role in many of the works we shall examine are "charged texts." These are documents such as old law codes, letters of denunciation, invitations to illicit trysts, etc., that represent or mobilize negative forces in his writings. They are a kind of condensation of violent or oppressive historical trends and they crop up and galvanize the plot in nearly every one of Kadare's works. An image that the author once used in a poem—the "bleeding seals" on the imperial decree of an invading army—is a powerful evocation of this mechanism in his writing. (2)

The longer texts under review here are the novels *Doruntine*, *Light of the Moon*, *The Wedding*, *Agamemnon's Daughter*, and *The Castle*, but our analysis begins with the short stories "Suzana's Crime" and "Winter Season in the Café Riviera."

EVIDENCE FROM THE SHORTER FICTION

Key to any approach to gender issues and the nature of life for women in Kadare's fictional world is the short story entitled "Suzana's Crime." The plot of this work bears some elaboration here, because the story is not available in English.

This story revolves around a beautiful young woman named Suzana. She is married to a man named Myfit but has attracted the attention of Leza, the local don juan. He ogles her in public every chance he gets and becomes obsessed with "getting his hands on her." (181) He latches onto the rumors circulating in the town that she, as a young bride, is so concerned with her clothes and hair that she must be seeking other admirers. Leza tells his friends over and over that it is obvious that she is a vamp because of the clothes she wears and that she does not have the air of a woman who loves her husband; even her unusual, modern name, he insists, "is like a fine-edged knife that torments you and singes your flesh." (183) The bottom line is that he is so convinced that she is ready to cheat on Myfit that he writes her a letter and has it delivered by a young girl of the village. If she does not show this message, really just a two-line note, to her husband, then she will be sending Leza a clear message. The text was simply this: "Suzi, to be able to sleep a single night next to you, and so much the worse if I am risking my neck!" (184)

The story obviously is set in rural Albania after World War II, because there are references to economic cooperatives, contemporary fashions, and the role of the Communist Party. It is a snapshot of a society in the grips of change, and the tremendous clash at the end of the story reveals how powerful the forces of tradition in the country

still are. Suzana excites the attention of Leza and others in part because she is emancipated, but the violence that ends up surrounding her has its roots in age-old Albanian cultural propensities such as the objectification of women and the valorization of violence.

Neither Suzi nor her husband, Myfit, react to Leza's note, even though she had sent word back to her admirer via the girl that he was a "goofball." While he is planning his next move, Leza encounters a vanful of activists from another part of the country. This team is scouring the countryside locating under-age women who have been forced to become engaged; they are trying to enlist the villagers in helping them denounce and break off these engagements. This activity parallels that of two young women we meet on a journey by rail in Kadare's novel *The Wedding*, which is discussed below. Leza quickly tells anyone who will listen that he supports the "emancipation of women," even though he cannot even pronounce the phrase properly and he is only thinking to himself the whole time that it is a shame that this team did not arrive earlier, in time to have prevented Myfit from marrying Suzana. As a matter of fact, the reader is treated to a flashback in which an old woman of the community accused Leza, at a recent community meeting on this topic, of being like a wolf that hopes for fog; she was certain that a movement that separated young women from their arranged partners would be nothing but a "windfall" for predatory "vagabonds" like Leza. (187)

Leza writes Suzana a second letter and observes once again her and her husband's lack of reaction. Summing up the misunderstandings of a chauvinist or a fool that will serve as the basis for mistreatment of Suzana, Leza notes: ">From the moment that a woman dresses like a flirt, it means she'll accept love letters. And from the moment that a woman conceals letters like that from her husband, it means she'll won't refuse to sleep with someone else." (187)

Shortly thereafter, Leza meets Myfit and his brother in the street. The two men are sitting astride mules and tell him that they are just leaving for the town of Laç, where a cousin of theirs has passed away. Then Suzana sends him a note of her own, telling him to come to her at midnight. To prepare for his tryst, Leza makes a rare visit to the town cooperative's store and buys a clean shirt; the saleswoman's traditional greeting, like that of Myfit's wishing him health and a long life belie the fact that this white garment will soon make him a ready, gleaming target in the shadows of Suzana's autumnal garden. He is distracted and excited in the hours before the rendezvous, incapable of focusing his thoughts or thinking anything through to its conclusion.

When he knocks surreptitiously at the door, a voice greets him with the quiet, repeated words: "Go away! Leave quickly! Don't you understand?" A male voice then challenges Leza from the darkness, and he quickly fires in its direction. As multiple shots are exchanged, Suzana stands by the door of the courtyard, gnawing at her knuckles till they bleed. Then she faints.

She was weak, we learn, from having been denied food and water by her husband and brother-in-law because she was not cooperating with their plan to trap Leza. They wanted

to compel her to write a note inviting him to her house. Myfit even struck her several times for supposedly attempting to protect her “lover.” Suzana had indeed concealed the arrival of the first letter, to avoid pointless controversy. Her husband had then intercepted the second one and learned of the existence of the first. He and his brother Bajram were soon declaiming their own great truth about women, parallel to that of Leza: “A young woman who hides a love letter is a woman who is looking for love.” (191)

She did not knuckle under to their demands, so they wrote the response—really, an invitation into a trap—themselves. She was going to warn the village of the coming showdown, but Myfit and Bajram persuaded her that they would content themselves with merely humiliating Leza. At the last minute she realizes that their promise was a lie.

After the exchange, Leza is retreating from the courtyard but drops his rifle; his white shirt makes him an easy target for Bajram. Although he is kneeling in the dust, Bajram quickly plants himself right in front of the other man and shoots him dead. This is an immediate revenge murder for the death of Myfit, who was struck in the head by Leza’s first shots. Leza’s final two thoughts are that his flesh is now truly being entered by a sharp blade and that Suzana truly was a temptress.

An hour later, the ambulance and police arrive. Amidst the bystanders are the three women and one man of the team that is touring the area to break up engagements with minors. There is a great deal of back-and-forth between the police and the crowd as the investigation is launched. The officials know that this horrible incident will complicate their work, and sure enough, both the arrested Bajram and an old lady in the crowd shout out repeatedly that Suzana is a “dirty bitch.” Bajram claims that is not a political reactionary who opposes the party, but merely an upright individual defending his family’s honor. The old woman maintains, somewhat less convincingly, that “the Party is only up to good deeds, except when it lets these females in heat run through the streets wearing trousers.” (195)

This causes one of the visiting team members to label her a “horrible sorceress,” again—like Leza’s final thoughts, evoking an earlier image of the power of the old ways: Leza kneeling in the dust arms outstretched in the moonlight as if summoning the might of tradition to validate the murder he had committed. The story closes with the two bodies being loaded into the ambulance. Suzana, dazed, stands apart from the crowd, while the team of “emancipators” from the city compares their task to combat and stares at their own subject, Suzana, with “feverish eyes.”

Suzana is thus manipulated by both sides in this fierce debate over the proper role of women in society. But she is truly victimized by only one side, represented especially by her male relatives who have physical power over her; their power is complemented by the power of judgment residing in the old woman and other townspeople who condemn her and, especially, in the ability of lustful Leza to make trouble for her. Her “crimes” obviously have more to do with people’s perceptions of her and with their own conceptions of womanhood. On the one hand, she wears the “wrong” clothes and attracts the reproof of Leza and the old woman. On the other hand, she refuses to conspire to kill

Leza and thereby dishonors her family. Suzana is, in important ways, damned from all angles. It remains to be seen at the end of the story whether the outsiders representing the forces of change (and the benevolent hand of the nearly omnipotent Party) will be able to provide her with the support she needs.

The narrator of the long story “Winter Season in the Café Riviera” (1969) is a young man who gets in trouble with his boss over an issue of women’s rights; this unnamed protagonist is a waiter in a very popular coffeehouse in downtown Tirana, the Albanian capital, and his problems unfold over the course of a month. He is ultimately fired for his pains.

When the young man shows up for work one December morning, everything in the café gives off an air of bonhomie and contentment, from the hearty greetings and pet names exchanged by the workers to the bouncy music on the radio and the pleasant sounds and smells of the espresso machines. The bar is famous for the diversity of its clientele, from students and streetsweepers to sports fans, farmers, and government officials. The staff of the café is used to the fact that nearly every day in winter, it is the site of “joyous occasions,” or celebrations of betrothals. These are meetings of families that have decided to marry off their children to each other, usually without the future bride and groom’s active participation.

The waiter, as well as many café regulars, is amazed that such customs continue to exist in the big city. Indeed, some of the betrothal groups consist of well-educated urbanites with fine, modern clothes, while others exhibit more rustic ways and obviously hail from the countryside. The waiter grows increasingly surly, rejecting tips from such tables. He quickly realizes what the real issue is here:

It was the first time that I had been directly confronted with the Kanun, the old Albanian moral code. Till now I had only read about it and heard lectures on it. But it never would have occurred to me that the old customs would still be practiced so close by. (287)

Whether practiced by rural people or city dwellers, by groups of bourgeois and déclassé individuals or by the Communists that the narrator refers to as “our own people,” the traditions that subjugate women are alive and well in post-1945 Albania.

The young waiter, who just finished high school and is waiting for his university studies to begin, calls a meeting of the workplace collective. The manager makes fun of him. The other employees either do not understand his concerns or are indifferent. Finally, the collective endorses a platitude that it sees as its mission: “to serve the people.” (290-291) Frustrated, the narrator turns to a policeman he knows for advice; this acquaintance tells him there is little the power of the state can achieve here, since the girls are not under age and no one appears actually to be forcing them to marry. Still very passionate about the injustice of the issue, he next urges a local artist who often works at his easel inside or near to the café to paint one of the “joyous occasions” in gloomy, fanatical tones, something along the lines of a modern El Greco. The painter talks with him for a while

and then refuses, noting that, according to socialist realism, it is above all his duty to celebrate the new and the positive and to connect with the “pulsating life of hundreds of thousands of workers in our country”; a work of art created just to forbid one custom would turn the artist into the equivalent of a sign painter making “Do Not Spit on Our Floor” placards.

Finally, a major engagement party reserves tables and the waiter notices how nervous and obsequious both the manager and the counter assistant become. It turns out that this reservation is for the friends of a certain “Comrade Jani,” who is a bigwig in the Department of Commerce and evidently holds considerable power over the operating license of the café. The waiter is shocked to realize that he knows the nervous bride-to-be. She had been a frequent customer in the café in recent months. She had come there with another young man, one with whom she seemed very much in love. The waiter is further angered when he realizes that the fiancé, who seems much less suitable for the beautiful young woman, has one advantage over the other suitor: he is rich.

The fiancée soon realizes that the waiter recognizes her, and she avoids eye contact with him. But as the waiter stares at her—while he is processing his own thoughts—continuously, an almost comical scene starts to play out. One by one, the guests around the young woman notice his stares and fix their own eyes on him; meanwhile, his service gets more and more desultory and even rude. As he turns completely pale, makes illogical demands of the customers, and finally spills a drink, suspicion grows in the betrothal party that the waiter is the young man with whom the bride-to-be was said to have been involved.

After the disastrous celebration, the manager immediately calls another meeting of the work collective. In a manner similar to the “witch hunt” against Marianne in *Light of the Moon* (see below), a variety of charges are suddenly levelled at the young waiter, all on account of his wish to stand up for the young woman and the confusion he himself felt when he realized that he, too, found her very attractive. The waiter was accused of being arrogant and immoral; of having used an official position for personal interests; and of disdainful of the people and labor itself. The counter assistant adds insult to injury by filing a false report saying that he had sneered at a group of young people toasting the successes of the Party. He is fired and storms out of the café.

This story, while noble in its humanistic goal of denouncing archaic marriage customs, does not seem to attain the level of fine literature because, for one thing, the motives of the manager are never exposed. We know only that he does not understand the complicated phraseology of modern politics and that he wants to “serve people” in his café. He is, rather transparently, merely a straw man for Kadare to criticize reactionary elements in his country, including some hypocritical communists. The narrator’s attitude at the very end of the story—as he is approaching the mysterious but bustling Communist Party headquarters with the intention of discussing the issue with the authorities in theoretical terms but not denouncing the manager—is also out of character with his hotheaded nature as demonstrated earlier. The narrator is indeed idealistic, but he does not possess the piety and humility that the actions of the last scene would require. When viewed in the context of Kadare’s other writings, however, we see that “Winter Season”

does provide convincing evidence of the tenacity of traditional views in Albania—views that explode upon the country again in one Kadare’s most prominent post-communist novels, *Spring Flowers*, *Spring Frost*. In addition, this short story underscores the distinction between political and cultural hegemony made by the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), and it is thus a useful source for students of communist ideology in practice.

EVIDENCE FROM THE NOVELS

Doruntine (1979) is one of Kadare’s few works to feature a female character in a leading role. One cannot quite call Doruntine a heroine, or the protagonist, of this novel, however; despite the fact that her name serves as the title (or part of it in translations such as the French *Qui a ramene Doruntine?*). Doruntine’s role is almost completely passive and she dies less than one-third of the way through the book (NOTE: p. 52 of 180 pages of a story that does indeed unfold in pretty much straight chronological order).

Doruntine Vranaj is a young woman from an unnamed town in Albania. The novel is set in medieval times, probably the 11th or 12th centuries AD, since there are specific references to wars against Norman invaders. The countryside of Albania is a patchwork of small, independent, mountainous principalities and duchies; there is no unified state. Doruntine was well known in her community because, three years before the start of the action in the book, she had married a man in far-off Bohemia and moved there; this distant land, said to be six days’ journey distant, was “almost in the heart of Europe,” (11) as the characters say, and this geographical separation presents great problems for Doruntine’s family. Her departure represents a significant break with tradition for the townspeople, who are split over whether their children should marry inside the town or clan or, at most, find other partners from a few valleys away.

Doruntine’s family was also well known for the fact that she had nine brothers, and every one of them died in battle or from the plague in the weeks after she moved north. The mother of the family, a widow, was then widely pitied for having to grieve alone, but it was also public knowledge that Doruntine’s brother Constantine, to whom she was very close, had given his *bessa*, or solemn word of honor, that he would bring Doruntine home whenever his mother needed her. The weight of this traditional Albanian pledge of personal loyalty cannot be underestimated in Kadare’s work in general, and it will certainly play a major role in this particular story. The grieving mother had even visited Constantine’s grave and cursed him after all his brothers had died. She did this because Constantine had reneged on his promise to bring Doruntine home in an emergency.

When this book opens, Doruntine has just returned to her home town. The whole region is abuzz with rumors of who brought her back, especially because both she and her mother were almost immediately found lying gravely ill in the family home. They both appear to be dying of shock at Doruntine’s nearly magical return. It seems impossible that Doruntine came back alone, and the local constable, Captain Stres, is called in to determine if she was kidnapped or if there has been some other kind of foul play. Finally, a suspect is arrested at the famous “Inn of the Two Roberts” in the next county, and the

community breathes a sigh of relief that the mystery has been resolved, even though Doruntine and her mother have both since died and, more importantly, Doruntine has insisted to everyone—including in a major conversation with Stres—that it was indeed her dead brother who brought her back on horseback from Bohemia.

The novel never states with certainty who brought Doruntine home. But we learn that the chief investigator himself, Stres, was once in love with her and grieved at her departure for Bohemia (p. 18). At least as important is the fact that had been out of town for the two weeks prior to Doruntine's reappearance; we learn this in an aside early in the book when he laments being awakened to commence the investigation on his first night back in his own bed. (P. 8) Stres eventually declares, after subjecting the arrested man to several strenuous rounds of torture, that the suspect's testimony is itself suspicious and ultimately discredited. Stres suspects that the Orthodox archbishop hired the man to pose as an itinerant icon-seller who kidnapped Doruntine. The archbishop had, indeed, stressed to Stres how sacriligious it was to have a rival to Christ in resurrection on the loose and how it might be necessary to create the kidnapper if he could not be found. (p. 72)

The two strands of evidence pointing towards Stres as Doruntine's companion catalyze into motives for action when we also discover that he and Constantine were both, in their own ways, reformers; they were both looking for some new idea or activity to act as a social "glue" among Albanians. We know that Constantine felt this way because Stres interrogates the dead man's former boon companions. Then, in a public address at the end of the book, Stres himself states that it simply must be true that Constantine returned from the grave in order to return his sister to the family home. For Stres this issue highlights the significance of the *bessa*, which he extols as the cornerstone of a new Albanian national identity that will provide a strong social and family structure; this new ethos for the society—upon which Kadare expounds by means of later fictional writings in which the Kanun, or traditional law code, assumes vast importance—is necessary because the population's religious bonds are eroding. The competition between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox establishments for the loyalty of the Albanians has led both sides into furious disputes and machiavellian machinations. Indeed, later works of Kadare elaborate this theme by illustrating the additional pressure placed on traditional Albanian identity by the arrival of the Ottoman Turks and the conversion of many local residents to Islam. Stres has, in fact, engineered the revival and strengthening of the mythical power of the *bessa* in order to produce a new factor for cohesion among the Albanians; in the conflicts and changes dawning with the modern era, from the political (Turkish occupation) to the socio-economic (isolation from the rest of Europe, the development of capitalism), Kadare sees this folkloric pledge as the backbone of Albanian culture, one that will allow them to preserve their national distinctiveness and order their underdeveloped society.

The novel Doruntine also addresses the sensitive topic of incest. Constantine reportedly had "an unnatural feeling" for his sister, and letters between their mother and a Bohemian nobleman indicate that separating the two siblings was the main reason for Doruntine's marriage. Thus, yet another explanation of Doruntine's return is launched: Constantine did indeed rise from the grave, but not to keep his *bessa*. Rather, it was his "unsated

incestuous desire” for his sister that drove him to make provisions for their honeymoon in the form of the “macabre escapade.” (111)

This book is, like Kadare’s *Palace of Dreams*, a kind of intellectual “thriller”; it is also a demonstration of the birth of a legend (59; 173-177). The *bessa*, like the traditional law code known as the Kanun in general, is fraught with dangers. It will institutionalize the blood feud, among other things, and Albanians will find its burdens “heavier than the cross of Christ.” (177) But its sanctification and adoption as a moral standard Constantine—and Stres—see as absolutely necessary. Even so, the book unsettles the reader by pointing out two other complications. First, the final two members of the Vranaj family, both women, have to die in order to carry out this plan. This kind of sacrifice in the construction of an important cultural artefact has similarities to the victims of immuration common in Albanian folklore and in Kadare’s famous novel *The Three-arched Bridge*. Second, the fact that a human has come back from the grave creates an occurrence of sacrilege or heresy. One could argue, of course, that this places Stres’ soul in jeopardy, since he orchestrated the affair, but it also raises even bigger historical questions. It reveals the rift between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox hierarchies in Albania, since the dominant latter organization suspects the desperate former group of faking Constantine’s resurrection. It also demonstrates the degree of cunning that religious authorities will use to keep their grip on power.

After all this hullabaloo, Stres expects victory for the revived and expanded *bessa*, but he reasons that “far-off” marriages like Doruntine’s might disappear. The people, he muses gloomily now have a fatalistic excuse for yielding to their “secret longings” for marriages “inside the clan.” (179) But, surprisingly, we learn that this temptation does not prevail, perhaps due to a feminine sense of adventure, and this is perhaps what rescues isolated, impoverished, underpopulated Albania from the perils of inbreeding and incest.

The novel *Light of the Moon* (1985) is another of Kadare’s longer works in which women play a major role. In fact, this relatively brief novel is essentially nothing but the story of one woman, Marianne Krasta, and her persecution at the hands of her co-workers and the Communist Party. Because of the “Mary” in Marianne’s name, the barrettes that shimmer, halo-like, in her hair, and the repeated references to her suffering and forgiveness having cleared the way for a general reconciliation in the lab, and the fact that, at the end of the book, she gives birth to a baby although the reader had been led to believe she was a virgin, and there is no definite sign of a husband or boyfriend, the book has at times been interpreted as a religious allegory. Following Kadare’s own hints at interpretation, however, it seems more likely that Marianne is supposed to represent the fate of the independent-minded artist, or even the beauty of art itself, under dictatorship.

The story traces the growth of a “collective psychosis against Marianne” (57) centering on the prestigious government-run chemistry lab where she works. Marianne is described above all as very attractive, but we also learn that she is poised, independent, and irreproachable in her job performance. In other words, she is beautiful and professional and emancipated. A misunderstanding—born of impulsiveness or perhaps flirtatiousness—results in some awkward moments one night with a co-worker named

Gazmen outside her apartment building; this brief verbal encounter in the moonlight of the title comes back to haunt Marianne over and over, because it feeds the jealousy of Gazmend's future fiancée. This woman, Nora, who is described as "simpler" in various ways than Marianne, accuses Marianne not only of trying to seduce Gazmend that one night but also of continuing to try to attract him in order to destroy her engagement. There is no evidence that this is taking place, however, but a kind of conspiracy, or witch hunt, against Marianne grows rapidly at work. Nora's thoughts run amok and she even comes to believe that perhaps Gazmend did actually make a play for Nora, but that she found him beneath her—though not beneath Nora!

Other people, we learn, dislike Marianne for other reasons, and now a large number of rumors begin to circulate about her; Nora manages and expands the conspiracy and her parents get on board as well, writing a pathetic letter to the local party. In addition, someone is obviously using his or her professional connections in other offices to encourage other of Marianne's co-worker to make her life more difficult.

For instance, one woman at the lab shares Nora's envy and is convinced that she cannot compete for men with the beautiful Marianne; she thus blames Marianne for her own unhappiness. The deputy director of production is furious with her for questioning his technical decisions and—supposedly—for circulating a written critique of the operation of the lab and sharing it with journalists; three members of his clan also work there and make his grudge against Marianne their own. Another high-ranking director is told that her niece can only get into university if a certain professor's niece can have Marianne's job. An engineer "opposes" her because he intensely dislikes one of the Party officials who actually likes her. A lab assistant who balks at drawing up a list of Marianne's favorite books and music for an investigation of her virtue and reliability is called to a meeting with the director of personnel at which she is reminded that her family's history is perilously stained: one of her uncles had collaborated with the Italian occupiers during the Second World War. Another female lab assistant is told that her application for an apartment to rent would be expedited if she lent her support to the anti-Marianne motions to be discussed at an upcoming Party-led meeting at the institute.

Even Marianne's three main supporters in the lab, the unnamed narrator, another man named Lad Kroi, and a third male identified only as César, are subjected to harassment by the resident Party chief. They are interrogated about trivial utterances and practical jokes they were responsible for while drinking heavily at a recent company party. The head of personnel himself has a friend who is on bad terms with Marianne's father, while yet another female co-worker is incredibly exercised over a particular raincoat that Marianne wears in the fall.

An example of the types of provocation to which Marianne is subjected takes place one day in a poorly lit hallway of the building. A colleague pats her buttocks and addresses a lewd comment to her, and when she defends herself by slapping him, she notices that two of his friends have appeared and are observing them. Someone then calls the police, but Marianne is persuaded by Lad Kroi not to file charges, for fear that the fake witnesses will collaborate with her attacker to make her the object of a nasty public scandal. As a

matter of fact, she is already damned in a way: people are talking about why the man accosted her and not some other woman, and they speculate about her motives for not wanting to file charges.

Finally, a general workplace meeting is called. Although there is no evidence of any actual wrongdoing on Marianne's part, her reputation is shown to have suffered greatly: she now had a "shadow" over her and was known as a "loose woman." (70) At another meeting, a document issued by the local Communist Party is discussed. This document is a study of rising divorce patterns that encouraged greater vigilance to prevent divorces; the "attack on the integrity of the socialist family" is fueled by an excess of "sexual liberty" that, in turn, is one of the "bourgeois-revisionist influences (74, 81) threatening the country. The institute's leaders clearly believe that Marianne is this kind of corrosive influence, and so they announce that she will be transferred to another branch of the operation. Then a third meeting is called to pronounce the ultimate verdict "on the principal question: Marianne's morality or lack thereof." (78) At this final meeting, a travesty of an open discussion is carried out. The administration has even planted someone in the audience to ask seemingly hard questions that Marianne's accusers then twist to their advantage.

Marianne's friends bring up certain points in her favor. They compare this persecution to the machinations of the former Albanian Minister of the Interior and notorious Stalinist from the late 1940s, Koxi Xoxe; they speak in favor of the emancipation of women and note that calumny is often a "manifestation of the class struggle." (87) Still, the tenor of the meeting is such that Marianne's friends know that she is "irremediably sullied." (90) They begin to grow concerned that this bad reputation will "bespatter" them, too, so several of them urge Marianne to fight fire with fire and prove that she is not "thus," meaning that she is not a "slut." Marianne's reaction is astonishment: how can my friends and colleagues not believe me on this point of honor?

Finally, a crucial turning point is reached when one of Marianne's male friends decides to speak for her. Against her wishes, he stands up and says: "Can one accuse a girl of...immorality, immorality in the way the term is being used here...if she has never had physical relations with a person of the opposite sex?...This is something that can be verified...There are procedures...There are doctors for it." (93) The narrator, who we find out now once dated Marianne but broke up with her because she would not sleep with him, finds the suggestion a barbaric, disgusting, medieval "outrage against the dignity of woman," but he does nothing to stop the process. (95) At this point, the meeting is temporarily adjourned and the workers are enjoined to reassemble later in the afternoon. At first no one knows why the break has been called, but then we see that Marianne has agreed to go to a clinic for an examination.

The verdict is to be announced before the workday ends, but Marianne does not return from the hospital. The scene in the clinic is heart-rending, as she approaches a doctor and nurse at random and explains to them what sort of attestation she needs. The doctor writes a memo stating that she is indeed a virgin, although he never actually completes his examination of her, and she walks out of the clinic holding this document. Kadare

notes that Marianne “held her honor in her hands,” and she well knows that “this miracle, this reversal of the situation would be the work of this puny little piece of paper, or, more exactly, the work of this word borrowed from a dead language for the purpose of restoring her honor.” (114) Standing in the street in the autumn rain, she then folds the note in half, twice, tears it to pieces, and tosses it into the gutter. Evidently her friends, who had accompanied her to the clinic but whom she had then dismissed, were watching her and were ultimately impressed by her action, which they first considered “unheard of” and then “omnipotent.” (115)

Somehow, the original scandal is then forgotten. Marianne continues to work briefly at the lab until she gets pregnant and gives birth to a baby boy. We are left in some doubt as to the exact denouement of the book, which has four alternative endings and includes a rumor that Marianne had a brief affair with an unknown man whom she then spurned. But the tone at the close of the book is one of forgiveness and beauty made possible by this “serene, smiling new Virgin Mary, come to earth at the moment when she was least expected.” (125)

That the travails of an emancipated woman in a traditional society would form a metaphor for a study of the perils of artistic integrity in a dictatorship is in many ways less unusual than the religious tone of this book. Kadare, who comes from a family of Muslim heritage in southern Albania, uniformly criticized Albania’s three religious traditions (Islam, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Roman Catholicism) in nearly all of his earlier works; after 1990, when Kadare was in self-imposed exile in Paris, he came to view Christianity as Albania’s most “natural” spiritual connection with the rest of Europe, although he also spoke out against the assumption that Islam is inherently intolerant or anti-modern.

As a piece of “domestic fiction” about the workings of communism in Albania, *Light of the Moon* above all underscores many of Kadare’s general concerns with the power of men over women, the hypocrisy of the Party, the force of rumor, and the abiding strength of traditional views.

As an artistic manifesto, it also reveals—in the year of the death of Albania’s reptilian tyrant, Enver Hoxha—Kadare’s growing impatience with his role as doyen of the Albanian literary establishment. Kadare’s critics have typically had little patience with his complaints of how hard artists must struggle to maintain and prove their “virtue” under the communists; for well over two decades, Kadare was neither an exile nor a full-blown dissident, although some of his works were banned and others can fruitfully be interpreted as critiques of one-party rule. Kadare operated in the space bounded by three poles: regime author, international wunderkind of Balkan literature, and independent, nationalist-minded critic of the past and present shortcomings of his own society.

The Wedding (1968) is one of Kadare’s earliest works. Although it contains the kernels of many of his later thematic and stylistic concerns, it is also burdened with a fairly heavy dose of “socialist realism.” This set of artistic principles or requirements, commonly found under Stalinist governments (in the USSR, for instance, until the mid-1950s, but in

Albania until the mid-1980s), placed a premium on a clear plot line with unmistakably delineated and antagonistic characters or ideas representing good and evil. Such novels also exhibit characters who serve no purpose other than to illustrate some positive or negative ideological point. They are also famous for “boy meets tractor” preoccupations that crowd the pages with examples of socialist virtue and of the concrete socio-economic changes afoot in a modernizing economy under Leninist direction. This particular novel also contains awkward, fulsome praise for the Albanian dictator, Hoxha, and it celebrates the hypercharged revolutionary rhetoric of a Stalinist regime bent on forging a new social consciousness with slogans, new labor-derived holidays, etc.. (NOTE: Opposite of...as does the novel Agamemnon’s Daughter (see below)).

To deal with the other rather heavy-handed faults of this work first, it is regrettable, if amusing, that a novel by the illustrious Kadare should display sentences such as “The people’s intellectuals should sleep at regular hours,” (p. 167) and, in a conversation among a roomful of rifles hanging on the wall during a wedding celebration, ““A rifle that does not kill, readily becomes stale.”” This from the carbine belonging to the man with the lump.” (175) Naturally some of the difficulty in appreciating these sentences might lie in the way they were translated, but it is probably not the fault of the translator that we are presented with moralism of the following sort: “Some people like to fondle their pangs.” (64)

The book is also loaded with frequent references to new industrial works (nitrate fertilizers, hydroelectric power, asbestos boards, brewery, printing, oil, phosphates) and construction sites (concrete plants, tunnels, radio stations), new railroad lines, the pride of newly trained cadres of workers and technicians, and greatly increased circulation of population from one area to another. The dramatic events surrounding this “modern” wedding even unfold in one of the scores of newly built villages dotting the countryside. This village in particular is so new that it has no name and no police force! Another inauspicious debt of the book to its times is its ferociously critical attitude towards religion. Both Orthodox Christianity and Islam are excoriated as humbuggery and hypocrisy. Monks, isolated in their formerly wealthy mountain eyries, are not only determined advocates of reactionary ideas that brake Albanai’s socio-economic progress, but they also pray on girls and yong women in particular by manipulating various traditions of soothsaying and marriage. Written in the late 1960s just as Albanian was lurching into its “Cultural Revolution,” inspired by close relations with Maoist China, the novel is also peppered with visiting Chinese workers and officials who remind the reader of the unique nature of the late 1960s in Albanian history.

The plot of *The Wedding* is simple: in a new town on Albania’s interior industrial “frontier,” a new type of marriage ceremony is being held. This is a marriage of choice between two equal adults; a worker named Xhavid is marrying a worker named Katrina. This new marriage is referred to as a “socialist wedding” (60) or, more interestingly, an “anti-wedding,” (93) since rituals such as nuptials are the outgrowth of specific cultural and economic traditions and people have a hard time imagining that everything could be changing at once. The celebration serves as a kind of magnet attracting all sorts of guests

representing various social groups and world views. The wedding itself symbolizes all the processes of change ongoing in socialist Albania—collectively these are the “Waterloo of the old ways” (57) of this essay’s title—because it is wedded to the bold new activities and attitudes of the younger generation and, ominously, to their rejection of the age-old customs of the land: arranged marriages of very young brides, the greed of the village go-betweens and local priests, and the brutal punishments—including death by rifle shot—for disobedient women. These unjust traditional strictures are embodied, as in so many of Kadare’s works, in the medieval law code known as the Kanun. (Here this code is called the Canon.)

Katrina’s father attends the first half of the wedding festivities, but then leaves mysteriously. He has spent most of the time there remembering what his own wedding was like: the rituals involved in transferring the bride to his own family and the blood feud that erupted that very day between his family and that of a drunken guest who killed his brother. That both the wedding and a blood feud murder occur on the same day is no accident, because characters in the book have already mused that the two most notorious elements of the Kanun, the medieval law code, are the sections dealing with women and feuds. (81) The same combination of events is threatening to occur on the day of Katrina’s wedding, as the father and other mysterious figures who oppose the break with custom rove through the area in the dark. The connection established between these two phenomena is also important because it links the wedding to a general view of Albanian conditions, new and old. To the father and many villagers, the betrothal of ten-year old girls to seventy-year old men is part and parcel of a whole way of life.

The Kanun’s impact is enormous, since it is linked to so many other institutions and legitimizes so many various forms of behavior. One character in the novel notes that it

is not a book. It’s a monster in book form. People imagine monsters with all sorts of tails, claws and horrible heads. This is a monster of a new pattern. Paragraph after paragraph carefully written in concise terms. (148)

Its provisions are carried out by generations of “intermediaries,” or male village match-makers, who roam the countryside “like spiders.” But, in a Freudian metaphor of great impact, Kadare notes that a specifically male form of control and violence also backs up the Kanun; when the women of Katrina’s work battalion think of breaking with tradition for good, they couch it in these terms:

Before us lay the terrible Canon. To leave the fold we had to trample it. It lay prostrate at the threshold threatening us. Hundreds of rifles waved us back, threatened (sic) us if we dared to step out. (72)

That the system has economic underpinnings is manifest in Katrina’s remark that

Some of us had been bought for cash, some had been exchanged for cows, sheep, horses, sacks of corn and even for shepherd’s

dogs. We were a herd exchanged for another herd. The only difference was that we wore no bells on our necks. (72)

This builds a direct parallel to the discussion both of the brutal treatment of sex slaves in *The Castle* and also of the ruling elite's vested interest in keeping blood feuds alive in what is possibly Kadare's greatest work of all, *Broken April*.

One of the most unique features of this novel is what one might term Katrina's "song of liberation." It consists of two chapters (NOTE: "Katrina—I" and "Katrina—III," pp. 66-76 and 173-179, respectively) and conclusively links the emancipation of women to the industrial transformation of Albania and the construction of a modern, unified national identity in the country. All three of these processes take place under the guidance of the Party of Labor, as the Albanian communist party was known. For Katrina, emancipation is a very concrete thing. It means not only liberation from patriarchy but literacy, technical training, a job in a different region of the country, train rides, an appreciation of the beauty and diversity of the country and its landscapes, solidarity with other young people, and even hot showers, clean underwear, and radios. As she herself eloquently puts it, personifying the old order in the figure of the village intermediary:

He wants to give me a half-lit nook and the solitude of subjugation to a forty-year old man I have never seen. He wants to deprive me of my bobbed hair, clean underwear, wall bulletins, books and songs, and in their place to give me a black kettle, a lash rope to haul firewood, filth, and beatings. He wants to snatch away socialism from me. (178)

But the Kanun and its defenders have competition. As in the short story "Suzana's Crime" (see above), a team of modern-minded activists from the capital is circulating through the region, educating the population about the perils of under-age marriage and mediated betrothals. The wedding ceremony in the new style goes off and is celebrated with great fanfare, despite the presence of various threats. At one point during the night, a watchman exchanges gunfire with some trespassers; they escape, dripping blood, but sabotage the new rail line as they leave the area. The still-drunken wedding guests flag down the oncoming rail traffic and start to fix the tracks themselves. On the one hand, then, the anti-wedding rituals (and the new social and economic conditions) have established themselves. On the other hand, though, the forces of reaction are still out there somewhere, in the mountains, and the final showdown with them must await another day. Meanwhile, at least as troubling, the local authorities seem to misunderstand who damaged the tracks. Someone told them that it was the partygoers, and that might have been an effort to discredit the work of the new cadres.

Another novel highlighting a woman character is *Agamemnon's Daughter* (c. 2003). Written in Paris, where Kadare has spent much of his time since 1990, this unusual work combines Kadare's dual fixation with the *realia* of recent Albanian political history and with classical themes. The name of the woman in question, Suzana, or Suzy, obviously links the book directly to the fiery short story "Suzana's Crime" discussed above, with its

explosive misogyny and violence. But this work contains an argument that is at once much more nuanced and wider-ranging. Suzy, whom we only meet in the memories of the unnamed narrator, is the daughter of a powerful Communist Party official who is close to “the Guide,” a reference to Albania’s longtime dictator, Enver Hoxha. She has recently broken off her relationship to the narrator, a free-thinking intellectual who is constantly being labelled a malcontent and a revisionist by his friends, colleagues, and relatives.

For the duration of the novel, the narrator, who works in radio and television like so many of Kadare’s somewhat autobiographical protagonists, is watching the official May Day parade in downtown Tirana, a massive display of the regime’s power and, supposedly, its legitimacy and popularity; as he watches, he reflects on the nature of politics and intellectual life in Albania. He decides that Suzy is like Iphigenia, the daughter of the great Greek military leader Agamemnon: she was sacrificed for the success of the state. A specifically classical context is thus found for the same idea embodied earlier in the story “Winter Season in the Café Riviera.”

The narrator finds the motive for the sacrifice, whether for a military campaign (against Troy) or for an idea (socialism) immaterial. In the case of Albania, ideology has threatened not only to swamp people’s personal lives and happiness, such as by separating them from their loved ones, but it has also threatened to extinguish the nation as a whole by entrenching fanaticism and poverty in it and separating it from its European roots and current neighbors. At the end of the book, Kadare compares “the Guide” to Stalin and to Agamemnon and then, in very frank terms, ponders the sexual aridity of authoritarian rule, a topic in which he also indulges in another recent novel, *Spring Flowers, Spring Frost*. To overcome tyranny, human beings continue to revel in true intimacy and never allow oblivion to overtake the crimes of the dictators.

One of the most sombre depictions of the role of women is found in the novel *The Castle* (1974?). This dramatic and fairly lengthy work is a detailed treatment of the brutal siege of the Albanian fortress of Krujë by an enormous Ottoman army in the 1440s. The book contains a number of fascinating insights on both the Albanian ethos of resistance to foreign invasion and the nature of Ottoman politics; in addition, as in the outstanding novel *Broken April*, this political and ethnographic material is woven gracefully into the narrative, providing considerable historical punch (in a way that makes the book both useful for students and appealing to professors) without detracting from its literary worth. Above all, though—and almost uniquely among Kadare’s other works—the book stands out as a war novel, almost a thinly disguised treatise on military history. The book is a compendium of fascinating details on the nature and operation of the medieval Ottoman forces, from the various interest groups represented in the commanding Pasha’s Council of War to provisioning to the bewildering diversity in function and origin of the numerous military units. It is against this backdrop of soundly researched military history that various groups of women appear in the novel.

The fewest references are made to a group designated by an Ottoman character as the “old hags of Roumelia.” (25, 83, 87) These women are European Christians. They

apparently come from a number of Balkan ethnic or national groups, since “Roumelia,” deriving from the word “Rome,” or “Roman Empire,” was the Turkish word for Europe in general. One of the few adjectives used to describe these women is “swarthy,” a word which Kadare probably uses with the intention of distinguishing them from Albanian women, who are constantly praised in the book for being “fair” of hair and skin. These women were pressed into temporary service for the Ottoman legions. Their work is described thus: in a fenced-in area, they labor with boiling cauldrons, pots, and mortars and pestles to “prepare poultices for wounds, especially for bruises and burns.” (P. 26) The only comment on this forced labor registered by a Turk is a brief lament on how many Turks are likely to suffer physical pain in the coming battle.

A second group of women receives slightly fuller treatment in the book. They are at the center of a set of tragic and gruesome developments. An expedition of special troops called *akindjis* has gone out on a mission with a double goal: to strike terror into the local Albanian population outside the castle and to forage and plunder. One of the types of loot that they are expected to bring back to the vast encampment is Albanian women, who are to be raped and traded among the soldiers. The legendary beauty of the brash, unveiled local women only heightens the customary frenzy of soldiers facing death and hardship a long way from home. The story of the plans to capture sex slaves and their actual fate is dribbled out over many pages in the novel, yielding great emotional effect by the time their unspeakable suffering is concluded.

We first learn that the *akindjis* are preparing one of their notorious punitive expeditions; they do this, of course, in accordance with the decisions on strategy taken by Tursun Pasha, the expedition commander, at his contentious Councils of War. The popular trade in sex slaves, however, follows no formal administrative procedure but is tolerated by the officers. It flows through channels that Kadare refers to as “the market of the captives.” (101) Tremendous numbers of soldiers of various types—only the elite Janissaries are forbidden from having sexual relations—basically contract with the *akindjis* to bring back as many Albanian women as possible. This market introduces variables into several aspects of the enterprise: the general issue of supply versus demand, largely determined by how many captives the *akindjis* are able to locate; the unpredictable desires of the soldiers, who “came from remote parts of the empire” and had “tastes and preferences [that] varied with the countries they came from.” (102) Finally, there was a market in dresses peddled by the quartermaster or camp followers.

What the soldiers are planning with the captured women is both sinister and pathetic. Here is a description from the point of view of a Turkish janissary named Tuz Okchan:

He had heard the veterans say that after the return of the *akindjis*, the camp was usually transformed into a big slave market for some days. Soldiers, with their unpolished tastes, would hurry to procure printed dresses for their women captives. They thought the girls would still look beautiful in their new robes, and could be sold at a reasonable price even though they had slept with them. And with

this new money they would try to purchase a new girl. And so on till their flames of lust were consumed. (p. 101)

Later we learn that Tuz, like other Janissaries, has discovered a way to circumvent the chastity order and enjoy “the pleasures of the gay market.” (102) He was able to pool his resources with some other poorly paid soldiers from different units; they could keep the woman in their quarters but he could visit whenever he wished to rape her. A final sobering practical detail that we learn is that “an average girl” would probably cost 400 aspers, a large sum given the average biweekly pay of the soldiers, but one that paled beside the price tag of a blonde Albanian woman: 1,200 aspers.

When the *akindji* expedition returns, the whole camp is swept by confusion, for they have only brought a tiny number of captives. As we learn elsewhere, Albanian men fight very resolutely versus the Ottomans, and Albanian women are said often to choose suicide over capture. As a result,

[t]here were seven fifteen-year old girls, bound with cords. White, possessed with fear, they looked at the thousands of sweating and sunburnt faces under the turbans, at the greedy faces which stared at them with lustful eyes...(118)

The chronicler then correctly predicts their fate:

‘They are like a drop of water in this desert of thirsting desire,’ said the chronicler. He felt the joy of being still alive grow slowly and get the upper hand over his spirit. ‘This evening they will die. They won’t see the morning sun.’ (118)

An old soldier who overhears him puts it even more crudely:

‘Don’t you know?...It’s always so, when there are not enough to go around for all. They don’t last till evening, or at best, till midnight.’ (118)

Later, another group of women confirms that this is indeed what happened: “They lived for only one evening in our camp. At the break of day they buried all seven of them.” (145) This observation on the women captured for the “sex market” stems from a conversation between the women of the commanding Pasha’s harem, who form the third group of women in *The Castle*. Tursun Pasha is the Ottoman general in command of this large expedition. He has taken this assignment with considerable misgivings, because of the Albanians’ fearsome reputation and the likelihood that, if he fails to pacify this once-conquered and now rebellious region, his career will be ended, either by a forced early retirement or by his own execution.

Indeed, Tursun Pasha, an illustrious veteran commander, goes so far as to wonder if he has been set up by his rivals at the court. Have they persuaded the Sultan to send him on an important mission? Much of Tursun Pasha’s behavior is governed by a sense of

impending doom. He cannot decisively side with either of the philosophically opposed groups in his Council of War (the modern, empirical engineers and quartermaster versus the traditionalist mufti and astrologer, backed up by the hodjas and dervishes in the ranks) for fear of offending these groups' respective patrons back in the capital. Tursun Pasha's doubts about the campaign and his own fate also cloud his relations with his harem.

We learn in the first chapter of the book that Tursun Pasha has brought four of the youngest and healthiest members of his eighteen-woman harem with him from his home in Bursa, in western Anatolia. Superstitious Ottoman commanders often took no concubines with them into the field, fearing that it brought bad luck. Most others who wanted female companionship during a campaign relied on local women captured from the enemy. The author reveals a good deal about Tursun Pasha's attitude towards politics and the war when he describes his departure from Istanbul:

the Grand Vizier, who had come out to salute the troops, noticed the small coach with the latticed windows and asked Tursun Pasha why he was taking the women along to a country renowned for its pretty girls. The Pasha, avoiding the piercing eyes of the Vizier, said that he did not want to share the women captives with his soldiers, who would win them with blood and toil. (13)

But the reader already knows that Tursun Pasha's

“close friends, those who had advised him to take women with him, had also said that it was not easy job to make captives in that country. The girls there were of great beauty...white-skinned like the dreams of dawn, but unfortunately as inaccessible and fleeting as the dream itself. Many a time had they been seen hurling themselves from the high crags down to the abyss below, when they found themselves in danger of being captured. (13)

Shortly after setting up camp around the Albanian castle, the Pasha sends for sixteen-year old Edjer, who is curious about the war but, not surprisingly, is mostly eager to please the general. Midway through the novel, several months later, we meet Edjer and her colleagues again. From their famous lilac tent next to the Pasha's, they discuss Edjer's pregnancy along with various aspects of the war. Several of them admit to a fascination—even a sexual one—with the renowned fighter Scanderbeg, yet the women also fear being captured by the Albanians and suffering torture at their hands. The naivete of their discussions—isolated as they are from anything but rumors and second-hand news—is disclosed when they speculate that “wars are fought because of women.” The possible classical reference to Helen of Troy notwithstanding, this statement is sadly ironic, since the administration and armies of both sides in the war are exclusively male; the issues at stake are borders, the official state religion, and political authority; and the women must that the pain and blood associated with birth itself might predispose male (but, somehow, not female) babies to be future warriors. For the women of the harem,

who had no official political role in the Ottoman Empire, “war was a hot tent and vomiting” (143) and rumors.

Edjer appears once more by herself, briefly, when the Pasha is despondent at the Ottomans’ failure to take the castle. He has his eunuch, Hasan, awaken her in the middle of the night and he instructs her to name the child after him if it is a boy.

The final appearance of Edjer, Leila, Aisel, and the fourth, unnamed woman, occurs in the book’s last chapter. The September rains have brought an end to the siege. The Ottoman efforts to wear down the defenders by hunger and thirst have not succeeded and the army must head back to Istanbul now before winter sets in. As the Albanian defenders celebrate their victory over “the most powerful monster of the time” (253), Tursun Pasha lies dead, poisoned by his own hand. The four concubines relate that they have been very anxious about their fate in the hands of Tursun Pasha’s subordinates. These officers might have killed them in retaliation for the bad luck they supposedly brought. Indeed, many acts of superstitious revenge and scapegoating occur throughout the book, from the flogging of malfunctioning cannon to the gory execution of supposed spies. The women’s tent is packed up and their coach is rocking along the long road home, past endlessly repeating scenes of mountains, barren field, and Albanian villages. The women realize how little they have actually seen of Albania and the war and how much they miss the deceased Pasha.

Edjer is hoping for a boy, apparently as a gesture of love for Tursun Pasha, but she miscarries during the journey. The women’s sense of their own powerlessness is underscored by their further fears that they might be sold to another officer who would then “make this journey again.” Indeed, Leila had already been on one such major campaign before; she had earlier belonged to a Grand Vizier who was killed in battle. This consciousness of the cyclical or repetitive nature of history and politics is a familiar chord in Kadare’s works. Especially in this case, it heightens the women’s sense of being trapped, though sometimes, in other works, it also opens the prospect of shifting fortunes and (temporarily) improving conditions.

CONCLUSION

In his critical writings on world literature, Kadare has stressed that women as mendacious, disturbed, or deranged “sinners” have much greater literary value than typical heroines. Thus, it is Lady Macbeth, Helen of Troy, Madame Bovary, or Dostoyevsky’s Nana who provide “fertile” ground for the development of plot, character, and ideas, not the Virgin Marys and Beatrices. (Memoirs, 86-88)

In his own writings, however, Kadare does not create this type of woman character. He is, rather, much more concerned with elaborating female characters in their traditional settings with their traditional burdens and moving them towards gradual, communal progressive improvement. It is in this way that Kadare’s writings on women fit into his general concern for justice. Indeed, the subjugation of women and the enshrinement of the blood feud are the most prominent parts of his progressive ethos. Ultimately they are

joined, as well, by other concerns, such as the rejection of both religious fanaticism and nationalist extremism. The Kanun, so much the target of criticism in many of his writings, also has its good sides, Kadare would assert, such as its emphasis on secular institutions instead of religious ones (NOTE: Albanian nationalism typically eschews...three dividing....) and its ability to impose limits on violence that, being unavoidable, might otherwise be uncontrollable.

For the historian, Kadare's studies of conflicts involving women chronicle the changes in Albanian society in the 20th century. In addition, there are many other shorter, but sometimes even more poignant, portrayals of women in his works; one need only think of the beleaguered Vassilika, wife of the doomed rebel magnate in *The Niche of Shame*; the misunderstood, restless, young bride Diana in *Broken April*; the ethereal, brilliant foreign noblewoman in *Elegy for Kosovo*; and the anonymous old women of Kadare's poems who are the final preserve of the Albanian language after political terror brings cataclysms to their desolate fields. But Kadare's portrayals of women also provide food for thought about power relationships, and as such they are instructive to students of politics in the same way as his writings on the Ottoman Empire.

NOTES:

- 1) Elena Gushi-Kadare (b. 1943), the author's wife, is one of the few prominent Albanian women of letters. Her novel *A Difficult Birth* (1970) was the first novel by a woman to be published in Albanian. Although one of her later novels exists in French translation, none of her longer works are available to English readers. An excerpt of her work can be found at the web site of the prominent translator Robert Elsie (www.albanianliterature.com).
- 2) "Arrivée du décret impérial" in Ismail Kadare, translated into French by Jusuf Vrioni, *Oeuvres: Tome onzième* (Paris: Fayard, 2002), ed. Eric Faye, page 143.

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