Ismail Kadare

The Palace of Dreams

Nënpunësi i pallatit të ëndrrave

Presented by: Ivana Perica

If Kafka's *The Trial* is an allegory of the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy, the surveillance state and especially its legal system, Ismail Kadare's *The Palace of Dreams* is a reworking of this critique, but in the context of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania. The difference between *The Palace of Dreams* and *The Trial*, which was published posthumously in 1925 and only attained public and political significance through its republication in 1963 (which symbolically marked the beginning of liberalisation in socialist Czechoslovakia), is that the political character of the former manifests itself on three clearly recognisable levels (which is why it can be considered a political novel in the strict sense of the word): this refers both to its interventionist intent, the political context of its publication and its public and political impact.

The novel, which is allegorical in a way that it can be decoded as a critique of the regime, was banned soon after its publication. But by the time the Writers' Union met with members of the Politburo in an emergency session and declared the novel "anti-regime", 20,000 copies had already been sold. Nevertheless, the author, who was very active in Albanian cultural politics, and undoubtedly belonged to the establishment, was not persecuted, imprisoned or banned from his profession (although he was sent to forced labour for a short time in the 1970s), but was able to continue writing and publishing in Albania. Far from being a dissident in Solzhenitsyn's sense (in Albania, it is said, not even the slightest form of cultural dissent was tolerated; see Ypi), he did not apply for asylum in France until 1990, after Enver Hoxha's death (1985) and the country's long-awaited and repeatedly postponed liberalisation.

The political context from which the novel emerged is the late 1970s, when the government was campaigning against advocates of liberalism and Western influences. After several concerts that proved too liberal in the eyes of the ruling establishment, many cultural figures and functionaries were arrested or banned from their professions. The whole atmosphere of this campaign was hazy, and Kadare describes it as follows: "What exactly happened that night was never known. This refers not only to the details, but the whole affair remained shrouded in a fog that grew thicker day by day." (Qtd. in Röhm 213) In *The Palace of Dreams*, the central event around which the plot revolves is similarly blurred: the dream of an anonymous greengrocer triggers a state crisis that leads to a carnage in the house of the vizier (a minister in the Ottoman Empire) and the imprisonment and soon beheading of the presumed culprits. It remains unclear what exactly happened in the higher echelons of power. In a state where there is neither democracy nor transparency, members of the polity can only speculate: "There must have been an exchange of blows, a merciless but silent struggle in the innermost sphere of power. What we feel are tremors in the foundations of the state. It is like an earthquake whose source lies deep within the earth." (192)

In *The Palace of Dreams*, Kadare takes the reader to the turn of the 19th century, a time marked by

a crisis in Ottoman rule. During this period, the state bolsters its influence over society by controlling the most unrestrained and consequently unfiltered aspect of individuals' thoughts – their dreams. The central pillar of this control is the Tabir Saray, also known as the Palace of Dreams, a mysterious edifice and the nerve centre of the Dream Interpretation Agency. Under the direction of the Ministry of Dreams, its officials select and interpret the dreams that are dreamed in the empire, focusing on the so-called 'master dreams' that are believed to influence the fate of the sultan and the state.

The main protagonist Mark-Alem, a scion of a family with 400 years of tradition, becomes unintentionally involved in the critical developments. On the recommendation of influential family members, he obtains a job at the Palace, first in the Selection Department (where the dreams are selected) and, after his promotion, in the prestigious Interpretation Department, to become, practically without ambition, the first vice director of the Palace of Dreams. This coincides with the beheading of Mark-Alem's uncle Kurt, who is punished for his controversial remarks about the corruptibility of power and its accomplices: "To put someone in power is above all to make him an accomplice to crime." (65)

In his literary works, Kadare frequently employed criticism of the Ottoman Empire as a veil to critique the communist regime. Yet this does not diminish the fact that *The Palace of Dreams* also serves as a deliberate disconnection from the Ottoman Empire's legacy. Kadare, who harboured a deep-seated disdain for the Ottomans and the 'oriental' influences, therefore effectively parallels the perceived 'Ottoman backwardness' with the political dictatorship. The question is, however, on whose behalf and from which point of view is this critique undertaken? Although Kadare is recognised by some as a proponent of "a great rectification of [Albania's] history that will hasten its union with the mother continent – Europe" (Kadare, *Albanian Spring* 34, qtd. in Apter 133), the mechanism of power is not exposed on behalf of the nation, the people, let alone the many, who are portrayed in this novel as a mass of dreamers completely at the mercy of the state's mechanisms of power. Instead of creating a hero – either an individual or an idea of the nation – the main protagonist is a passive follower of a solid family line of inheritance. His particular insight into the system (which does not amount to questioning it) is made possible by his exceptional background. Moreover, Mark-Alem seems predestined to pass on the family legacy, which includes both higher achievements and sacrificial deaths (his uncle Kurt).

It is symptomatic, therefore, that when Mark-Alem feels overwhelmed by opaque events that mark not only the crisis of Tabir Saray's administration but a crisis of the state as a whole, he first finds orientation in his family's founding narrative: one of his ancestors, Gjon, is said to have participated in the construction of the famous bridge on the Drina river (Kadare refers here to a corresponding legend in Ivo Andrić's *The Bridge on the Drina*, 1945), which is why he took his family name from there. Indeed, the name Köprülü or Ćuprilić comes from the Turkish word for bridge köprü (Serbo-Croatian 'ćuprija') – this genealogy is recounted in Kadare's previous novel, *The Three-Arched Bridge* (1978). In this context, Mark-Alem is attracted to the music of Bosnian travelling musicians – rhapsodists – who always visit the Köprülü family during Ramadan, playing the traditional instrument lahutë (Albanian) or gusle (Slavic) and singing their songs in their Slavic vernacular. Mark-Alem not only passionately advocates the Slavic version of the family epic, but even considers changing his name to reflect his affiliation with the "old motherland" (166): Gjon, Gjergj or Gjorg. The rhapsodists are especially appreciated for singing the epic of the Köprülü family – a kind of "Nibelungenlied" (63) that underpins the Köprülü's prominent social position which even the sultan envies. The family, however, is no rival for the sultan's rule. The Köprülü, who have appointed five prime ministers, serve more as confidants of the regime in one of its dislocated outposts, such as

Albania. As representatives of a branching family tree that ensured the rulers' hold on power during the imperial period, the Köprülü – much like the royal families in the Habsburg or British empires – remain responsible for Albanian territory on the one hand, but relatively distant from the Albanian people on the other. There is a difference between "us" and the "Albanians in Albania" (66), one of the family members emphasises.

This novel is a textbook example of literary agency in times when open discussion is silenced and even brutally sanctioned. However, it is not enough to read it only in terms of a literary speech against 'totalitarianism' and for 'democracy', which would then automatically release the prefigurative imagination so urgently needed for the construction of other political and social landscapes. While *The Palace of Dreams* is a contestation, it is also an account of Kadare's own "insider-outsider relationship with power" (Evans): his alter ego is not only Mark-Alem (a passive onlooker of events), but also Kurt, who half-openly criticises the rule and pays for it with his life – something Kadare risked more than once.

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Special thanks to Tea Hodaj, PhD Candidate at the European Wasatia Graduate School for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Europa-Universität Flensburg, Germany

LANGUAGE: Albanian / Shqip

PUBLISHERS: Shtëpia Botuese Naim Frashëri, Ammann Verlag & Co

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