

Kafkaesque Style in Ismail Kadare

Gayathri M V

Assistant Professor Amrita VishwaVidyapeedam Amritapuri Campus Kollam
India

Abstract

Ismail Kadare is an international literary icon and a cultural ambassador of Albania and a recipient of awards such as the Man Booker International Prize, the Prix mondial Cino Del Duca and the Prince of Asturias Award of Arts. He has also been a candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature several times. Often considered a literary successor to George Orwell and Franz Kafka, the work of Ismail Kadare is as imaginative as it is philosophical. In its persistent pursuit for truth and justice it engages with history and politics in a radical and dynamic manner. Kadare's fictional and poetic narratives explore historical and mythological contexts of fables, myths and folklore, while at the same time seeking to represent the social and political history of his fellow Balkan people. Speaking and writing against the tyrannical political establishment of his native Albania, Kadare's storytelling is stemmed from his passionate interrogation of the injustice in found in the political sphere. This paper focuses on Kadare's work *The Palace of Dreams* and the literary techniques in that novel which he borrowed from Franz Kafka.

KEYWORDS—communism, dictatorship, dream, castle, anti-hero, isolation, binary discourse

Many critics have considered Kadare's literature similar to that of George Orwell and Nikolai Gogol. The dark irony of deformed reality, the political context of presumably non-political Works, and the masked harsh criticism are characteristics present in many of Kadare's books. However, more than an endeavour to imitate the some of the foremost figures of world literary wealth, this should be considered as the inevitable result of the vocation of the intellectual, always in opposition to oppressive ruling powers. This similarity in style with a number of eminent writers is the result of Kadare's deliberate choice, to revitalize his native culture. Aware of the fact that the ancient tradition of Albanian people had been negatively affected by the Ottoman invasion, was ruthlessly victimized by the Stalinist communism, and was endangered by the cooperation with the China of the Cultural Revolution, Kadare attempted the encompassing of Albanian tradition in his work. By selecting a number of themes and motifs compatible with the ones used by the affirmed geniuses of letters and by frequently borrowing from their techniques, Kadare achieved two of his goals. First, he promoted Albanian culture, both its oral and written tradition, suggesting its existence inseparably from Western tradition. This not only enabled him revitalize his native culture, but also connect victimized Albanian community with the desired

West. Second, Kadare succeeded to introduce literary techniques previously inexistent in the national literary wealth of his country.

It is essential to emphasize that Kadare borrowed the most from Franz Kafka. While his parallelization to Orwell is primarily related to their shared opposition to the transformation of communism into an oppressive ideology and his parallelization to Gogol is related to his attempt to destroy any type of prohibition, Kadare remains Kafkaesque in style. He borrows from Kafka a high number of motifs and techniques, which are more easily retrievable in his novel *Palace of Dreams*. First of all Kadare shares Kafka's personal positioning as an intellectual and as a writer. Like Kafka, Kadare created literature under a system that approached the intellectual who rejected to be 'intoxicated' by the state propaganda with contempt and suspicion. Similar to Kafka, Kadare indirectly opposed the rule with his literary work, to which *Palace of Dreams* is the most evident example. This similarity should have been nurtured by the fact that Kafka and Kadare also share their antagonism, which was directed towards the same type of system: totalitarianism. While Kafka wrote witnessing the rise of ultra nationalistic Nazism, Kadare wrote monitoring how the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha became more severe and restricting every passing day. They were present and bound to observe the victimization of their countries and communities under these oppressive regimes, a fact that has strengthened their resemblance in style.

Another feature Kadare borrows from Kafka is the structuring of the anti-hero. Probably due to his obligation to be indirect, like Kafka's, Kadare's anti-hero is never the individual. As hinted above, his anti-hero is a power, a difficult to-be-defined abstract entity. This enables him to demonstrate the character of the totalitarian regime of Albania, as well as to oppose any oppressive regime that incorporates these features. This characteristic equips Kadare's works with a universal dimension, like the one in Kafka's books, especially *The Castle*. To illustrate, in *Palace of Dreams*, the feared power that takes the lives of non-conformist intellectual Kurt and of the two Albanian rhapsodists is undefined and unapproachable, the way the chief of the castle in Kafka's *The Castle* remains a mysterious creature.

The third Kafkaesque technique Kadare applies broadly in his work is the rejection of reality. He underestimates crucial concepts of social realism such as the time concept, chronologically loyal development of stories, contemporariness of plots, and glorification of the conformist protagonist. In compliance with Kafka, who maintains that "[t]rue reality is always unrealistic", Kadare turns back to history in order to reject the viability of this world and manages to reinvent a different imaginary world beyond reality. This is clear when a bureaucrat in *Palace of Dreams* observes: "Who can say it's not what we see with our eyes open that it is distorted, and that what's described here (in the dreams) isn't the true essence?" (P 121).

As analyzed above, similar to Kafka, Kadare makes use of world history as well as mythic characters, themes, and motifs to build the foundations of his reality negating novels. In *Palace of Dreams*, one of Kadare's favourite 'stops' during his journey in time, in order to find a universal symbol of totalitarianism, is the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire besides being a well-known notion for the international reader is very familiar to the Albanian one, too. Considering its long-term rule over the Balkans and its 500-year long invasion of Albanian geography, the Ottoman rule was not widely appreciated either by the Albanian audience or by the nationalism-preaching communist dictatorship. This seems to have saved Kadare from the reinvention of a new 'enemy'. Besides the indirectly imposed conversion to Islam, the totalitarian character of the Ottoman Empire was revealed through its banning of the writing of Albanian language and the compulsory gathering of a number of male children to be raised as janissaries for the Ottoman army. Kadare incorporates these phenomena in his work and highlights their dehumanizing dimension to criticize the forced atheist laicism, indoctrination, cultural regress, and oppression practiced by the communist dictatorship. The communist totalitarian regime, the same as the Ottoman Empire, is an invention coming from the East. This turns the Ottoman Empire into Kadare's ideal anti-hero to symbolize and criticize the communist regime of Albania.

Similarly to Kafka in his unfinished novel, *The Castle*, Kadare in *Palace of Dreams* attempts to build a paradoxical world of absurd existence where irony dominates. This attempt enables both Kafka and Kadare to demonstrate the paradoxical nature of totalitarian systems and to emphasize its futility, relying on irony. In *The Castle*, the creation of the absurd starts with the permission necessary for K to stay in the inn, continues and becomes stronger with his relationship with Frieda and his jobs as land surveyor and caretaker in the school, to end when the unfinished novel stops. In *Palace of Dreams* the absurdity is created around the Tabir Sarrail, the institution aiming to control the uncontrollable, and its mission to shape the Empire's decisions according to the Master Dream:

Allah looses a forewarning dream on the world as casually as He unleashes a flash of lightning or draws a rainbow or suddenly sends a comet close to us [. . .] It is up to us to find out where the dream has come to earth [. . .] For the interpretation of that dream, fallen like a stray spark into the brain of one out of millions of sleepers, may help to save the country or its Sovereign from disaster; may help to avert war or plague or to create new ideas.(572)

It should be emphasized that, in order to build a state of suspense and uncertainty that would convey the reader that message of human loss, Kafka uses even techniques in *The Castle*. Kadare evolves these same techniques in *Palace of Dreams* in order to create the same state of suspense and awaken his oppressed native reader. The most obvious technique is the incorporation of superstitious motifs. The villagers in *The Castle* are fascinated with the castle;

they superstitiously fear it. The idolatry of the indoctrinated village inhabitants reaches such levels that they marginalize protagonist K and limit communication with him, as they do not know the Castle's approach to him.

It is evident that superstition stands for the blind submission of people to a power and the power's 'blinding' propaganda. This motif is also present in Kadare's works. For instance, the novella *The Blinding Order* (1999) turns around a new fireman / order to be employed in a distant region of the Ottoman Empire after this region becomes the site of successive accidents. A commission gathered on the issue agrees on the blinding of the people who supposedly have an evil eye. In this novella, Kadare, thus, suggests that the 'blind' superstition rooted in ignorance and fear leads to the literally blinding of people. Figuratively, people's submission –voluntary or not- has turned them into inept subjects of absent rights. Similarly, in *Palace of Dream*, the interpretation of dreams in order to establish the empire politics and its consideration as crucial in governing demonstrates the dominating superstitious atmosphere. In relation to the Master Dream, Mark-Alem is taught: "A dream like that, with its significant omens, is sometimes more useful to the Sovereign than a whole army of soldiers and all his diplomats put together"(573).

Another motif present in Kafka's *The Castle* and prevailing in Kadare's *Palace of Dreams* is the dominating state of fear. Both authors attempt to demonstrate the fear that rules everyday life in a totalitarian suppressive system. The whole village fears the Castle. This becomes evident when the landlord is reluctant in allowing K pass the night in his inn without permission from the Castle, whereas in *Palace of Dreams* Mark-Alem is obsessed with the fear of making a mistake. Even though sometimes he was convinced it was impossible to do anything else. This fear not only leads to complete obedience, but demonstrates how people are dehumanized by being robbed of their freewill. Moreover, it is this fear of the undefined supreme power that conducts the people under oppressive regimes to be even more radical and more fanatical of the system than the governing rule itself. In *The Castle* this radicalism is apparent in Amalia's story. She and her family are excluded from the community and abandoned to cruel poverty by the village inhabitants for the simple reason she arrogantly denied the message posed to her by the messenger of a second hand castle bureaucrat. Even though no particular command exists and although her brother serves as a castle messenger, the villagers deny the whole family acceptance.

This story emphasizes the extreme fear dominating among the people governed by this sort of system. In *Palace of Dreams*, the fanaticism rooted in fear becomes clear when the bureaucrats are eager to fabricate dreams and to create absurd connections between them and state politics.

It should be noted that the fear is mutual; it is the ruling power obsessed with fear that finds it necessary to oppress the subjects with fear and brainwashing propaganda. Both in *The Castle* and *Palace of Dreams*, in compliance with the reality of totalitarian systems, the most feared subjects are the intellectuals: those who show their nonconformist attitude by daring to think and pose questions. As obvious in the capital letter standing for his name, the symbol of the intellectual and the personification of Kafka in *The Castle* is K, who is taken along a descent that finishes in the underworld, due to his natural wish to reach the castle and the questions he poses to understand the logic of the system. Yet, due to his intellectual background, he is denied every piece of information. As previously highlighted, the intellectual symbol of *Palace of Dreams* is Kurt, whose arrest and presumed death point to how eager the regime was to eliminate the disobedient intellectual.

Another feature Kadare borrows from Kafka in order to create a suspense atmosphere is uncertainty: lack of faith in the future and the present. While in *The Castle* K's position currently changes and his fate is determined by unknown invisible powers that take away his individuality, in *Palace of Dreams* the power controlling the whole empire are coincidental dreams, whose ambiguity is strengthened by their doubtful references. As Mark-Alem is told, "(A) Master Dream can bring about great changes in the life of the State [...] the Master Dream is sometimes a complete fabrication"(577). This insight emphasizes two different accusations directed at the regime. The first one is that the totalitarian state would fabricate any kind of impossibly sustained 'proof' to achieve its goals of maintaining and strengthening its rule as well as of eliminating its non-submitting antagonists. The other implication is that the fate of the country or its political strategies could not possibly be comprehended by anyone, the way the fate of any subject living in under such a regime is unpredictable. This is the result of living under a dictatorship that would govern the country based on unfounded, presumably political decisions. This shows that the fate and life of a people is in the hands of a man who would make impulsive decisions based on his own illusions.

Another important motif Kadare borrows from Kafka and encompasses in his work is isolation. Isolation stands principally for the isolation oppressive systems need to survive. Isolation denies people the opportunity to compare their regime with others, simplifies the spreading of the propaganda, and prevents both the developing and exchanging of ideas. In Kafka's *The Castle* isolation is everywhere. K is denied information about what the whole village knows. Amalia and her family are isolated from the community life. The village is isolated from the world and the castle is isolated even from the village. In Kadare's *Palace of Dreams* isolation is obvious in the absolute secrecy reigning over the Tabir Sarrail. Mark- Alem observes: "It (Palace of Dreams) stands alone and apart from human turmoil, outside all competing opinions and struggles for power, impervious to everything and

without contacts with anyone”(578). Yet, Kadare’s isolation in *Palace of Dreams* is not stable, it constantly deepens and enlarges. This is clear in how Mark-Alem is continuously dragged to more profound solitude as the novel develops.

The fifth technique Kafka relies on in order to create a full suspense in *The Castle* is the binary discourse. On one hand, K impatiently waits for his faithful assistants to come, on the other the arriving assistants are appointees of the Castle and strangers to him. Nevertheless, this is not depicted as an event surprising K. Additionally, K baptizes his assistants as ‘attentive observers,’(579) a phrase that defines the twins as both humble and devoted assistants to K and as loyal spies to the Castle. The assistants, together with all the castle officials of indefinite function, point to the incapable and inept bureaucrats preferred by oppressive systems; due to their inability to think critically and their blind fidelity in executing orders, this type of bureaucrats are indispensable for the establishment and continuity of the regime. In *Palace of Dreams*, Kadare makes use of the same technique when a ranked bureaucrat tells Mark-Alem that he suits them (580). The suitability of Mark-Alem, who has never been employed before, has neither the adequate education nor the vaguest idea in relation to dream selection and interpretation, could be explained in two ways. He is considered suitable for a position in *Palace of Dreams* either because of his connection with the Quprilis and the letter of recommendation the vizier provides him with, or because his inability to deal with dreams. These two characteristics are probably also the reasons of Mark-Alem’s hasty promotion. Binary discourse also aids both Kafka and Kadare to deliver the message of how unprofessional, corrupted, and inept the state represented by these officials is, to strengthen the uncertainty dominating within oppressing systems, and to demonstrate the gloomy horoscope the regime has prepared for the people and especially for the intellectuals.

The gloominess of the system, the two writers indirectly criticize, is part of the settings in both Kafka’s *The Castle* and Kadare’s *Palace of Dreams*. *The Castle* is a winter- cold snowy novel. The days are short, almost non-existent and lack sun in the village. Likewise, almost all essential events and discussions in the novel take place at night. K waits for and talks to the castle bureaucrats in cold winter nights. All the written messages reach him at night. His encounter with Frieda and his long talk with Amalia are all nightly events. Kafka seems to have ‘darkened’ his novel immensely not only to strengthen the prevailing feeling of suspense, but also to emphasize the gloomy atmosphere dominant in totalitarian systems. The atmosphere in *Palace of Dreams* is not different. Unlike *The Castle*, *Palace of Dreams* does not develop at night; in fact, in this novel, the days are endless but the gloomy atmosphere that prevails over Tabir Sarrail follows Mark- Alem everywhere, taking light away from his days. This gloominess is strengthened by the increasing absence of

pedestrians in the streets, the constantly lowered voices, and the growing similarity among people as a sign of the monotony and lack of development under totalitarianism.

The final technique Kafka uses in *The Castle* and Kadare borrows from him to make use of in *Palace of Dreams* is a pessimistic 'rustic irony'. This irony that reminds the reader of Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* is obvious in the words of the conformist-depicted and indoctrinated characters or the way the intellectual-defined characters such as K and Kurt approach them. By encompassing a double meaning, various characters' insights fulfil the writers' goal to evasively criticize the target systems. For instance, in *The Castle*, Amalia, with a rural philosophy based on life teaching, points out that, in her restricted world, "illusions are more common than changes"(581). In *Palace of Dreams*, the wise-fool vociferous character is Mark Alem's mother. The single female character in the novel points out that, "The Tabir Sarrail had recently been playing a more important role in matters of State" (582) as if to predict the calamity of losing Kurt and the happiness of Mark-Alem's promotion as head of the Tabir Sarrail, an accidental Master Dream would bring.

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