



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.2.,2016 (April-June )

ISSN  
INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE CITY WITHOUT SIGNS

GAYATHRI M.V.

Research Scholar, School of Letters, M.G. University



GAYATHRI M.V.

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the Albanian writer Ismail Kadare's attitude to Communist regime through his early written novel *The City without Signs*. The novel contains themes of modernism, alienated youth, disillusionment and cynicism influenced by post-war existentialism. In it Kadare reveals himself to be a young writer of imagination and audacity, fresh from Moscow, well disposed towards the modernization of his country but increasingly aware of the negative aspects of communist progress. In this work, there emerges the image of an "other" Albania different from that of the regime. The young writer becomes aware of aspects that he cannot integrate into a positive, let alone a socialist realism. The relationships between ideology and power, the rejection of the Albanian past as the "new Albania" and the "new man" are created, and the potential of the regime itself to become the inner monster - these themes cohere during the 1970s into a set of literary ideas which not only express opposition to the regime and its vision of the new Albania, but also penetrate to the heart of the dictatorial system.

**Keywords:** Socialist realism, Albania, class-consciousness, careerism, inauthenticity, dictatorship

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Ismail Kadare emerged from a childhood of occupation, war, and anarchy, and experienced the early years of the post-war order as a freeing up of opportunities for self-development and even self-fulfilment. Kadare and his generation heard the message of European existentialism filtered through Italian films, French and American novels, and Soviet youth culture, and interpreted it in terms of their own concerns. With its focus on the uniqueness of individual existence and relegation of social considerations, existentialism proved powerful in encouraging the post-war generations of Europe to disengage from the problems and history of their parents' generation, and to focus on self-realization and the future. Kadare was alert to these movements of post-war youth culture and literature in Russia and in Albania.

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Kadare began *The City without Signs* in Tirana, and worked on it at the Gorki Institute in 1959 where he tried composing directly onto audio tape as an experiment in modern composition, before finishing it in writing after returning to Albania in late 1960. The text was later revised and an excerpt was published in the literary review *Drita* in Tirana in 1961. The story contains themes of modernism, alienated youth, disillusionment, and cynicism influenced by post-war existentialism.

In the novel, *The City without Signs*, told in the third person, themes of artistic creativity, careerism, and cynicism are brought together in a similar plot. The protagonist of *The City*, Gjon Kurti, is sent out as a newly trained teacher to the provincial town of N... for his first teaching position. He is unwilling to leave the capital, his girlfriend, his friends, his philological research and hopes of an academic career, in order to face the daily grind of a class of unruly and provincial children suspicious of his citified ways and clothes. Gjon soon falls in with the local bohemian intellectuals, the poet Eugjen Peri and the chemistry teacher Mentor Rada, both of whom had also studied in Tirana and, like Gjon, miss its urbanity and student life. In Tirana they can discuss art and formalism, subjectivism and history, and recite poems such as Eugjen's "A Sunday in the Country" with its suggestive modernist metaphors of escape.

Early in the novel Gjon has already let himself go and is imagined as the survivor of a shipwreck, only just clinging to life. At twenty-three he sees himself as a failure, and regards with envy the gifted young poet of the town, alter ego of Kadare, who has gained a certain notoriety in the capital, Tirana, and repudiates his provincial origins. Gjon is faced with two possibilities: either to accept his role in modern Albanian life and set about contributing to the provincial environment as a teacher and Party member like his friend Mercure; or become an embittered exile from the cosmopolitanism of the national capital, sinking into drinking and depression with an unsavoury group of friends. However, a third option occurs to him as a result of a chance comment by one of his pupils - a criminal careerism which will enable him to become professor of Albanian philology at the Academy in Tirana. Teaching his class about the importance of the earliest Albanian texts Gjon realizes that it would not be difficult to falsify such a document, and he sets about doing so with the help of Eugjen and Mentor.

The town's young people Gjon meets up with are clichés of disaffected youth, influenced by western popular culture. Gjon wants to escape provincial mediocrity, not Albania or communism. The socialist-realist world of work, optimism, and productiveness is barely perceptible in this environment of parties, alcohol, jazz, and sex.

The depth of the cynicism with which the young protagonists face their future is striking. Careerism lies at the heart of *The City without Signs*. Gjon succeeds because he can work with the system. He is not a natural talent like the local poet who has won acclaim at an early age. Unlike his friend Mercure, the devoted Party-member and committed intellectual, he does not accept communism as an ethical-political system or as a nationalist-modernizing ideology.

Gjon suggests to Mentor and Eugjen that they collaborate - the philologist, the poet, and the chemist - on the falsification of an ancient document. The argument is insidious, as Gjon deliberately blurs the distinctions between ideology and historical fact in order to sway his friends. Having convinced Mentor, the two of them set to work on Eugjen, who is shocked at the thought of taking the history of their country so lightly.

Gjon's plan is to write in Tosk, thus giving primacy to the southern dialect spoken by the majority of the upper-level Party members, drawn from various primarily southern and Gjirokastran clans. The decision to forge a non-religious text would give a strongly secular cast to the origins of written Albanian, given that the earliest extant document in written Albanian is a baptismal prayer, and the earliest printed book, the fragmentary *Missal* (1555) of the northern Albanian Catholic priest Gjon Buzuku, is a liturgical piece associated

with the northern Ghegs and Catholicism. Through the agency of the monk, the forged letter will plead the cause of the impoverished peasants to a bishop and feudal landholder, implying the early existence of a national identity brought about through class struggle. The lowly monk would be the only literate figure in this environment. The date would be 1387, several years before the earliest extant document in written Albanian, and just two years before the Battle of Kosovo. The Albanian nation thus would be shown to pre-date the Ottoman occupation. This letter is the work of the philologist, Gjon a second document, a ten-line fragment from the lost work, *Songs and Tears from the Great War* by the Albanian poet and patriot, Andon Cajupi (1866-1930), would be fabricated by Eugjen, reinforcing the message of the letter, that it is the exploitative classes, not foreigners, against whom the Albanians should wage war. Both documents would be transcribed using paper and inks prepared by the chemist, Mentor.

The boys agree to collaborate on a line which would be welcome to the powers-that-be in the Academy of Sciences, namely that the beginnings of a class-consciousness could be demonstrated among the southern Tosk peasants rather than the northern Ghegs. This document would support the work of the current president of the Academy. Gjon has clearly learned the lesson of speaking lies to Power in order to become powerful himself.

Gjon has learned the language of party-line altruism, giving the discussion something of the flavour of a sitting of the Union of Writers. The three young men judge the mood of the regime and project their forgery skillfully into the ideological debates in such a way as to reinforce the orthodoxy.

Under the influence of his pupil and lover, Stella, symbol of well-meaning ordinariness and communist innocence, Gjon momentarily reneges, conscious of the damage done to history and his nation. However, his doubts are quickly dispersed after he is attacked by a couple of thugs at the behest of his ex-girlfriend, Luiza, from whom he contracted syphilis and whom he was obliged to identify as his partner in order to gain medical treatment at the local clinic. After the death of Mercure in an industrial accident, Gjon returns to his cynical and ambitious plan, rejoining Mentor and Eugjen to visit the monastery of St Trinity where they plant their forged documents. Kadare makes Gjon's motivation absolutely clear at this point: he is intelligent and ambitious, but uncommitted to the socialist project and frustrated and lonely in the provincial town, where he finds no-one other than the naive Stella, and where the one positive hero and believer, Mercure, has died midway through the novel.

The discovery shoots the three young men to fame as the party journals and newspapers, in particular the youth magazine, stress the social and political import of the discoveries, and the President of the Academy of Sciences and the professors follow suit in exploring the indications of democratic-revolutionary and anti-fascist tendencies in this earliest piece of Albanian writing, Cajupi becomes an Albanian precursor of Lenin and his plea, "O lowly and poor people's | Of Serbia and Russia, | Turn your arms against your rulers" (*The City* 145), is interpreted as an ancient call with contemporary relevance, to transform imperialist war-making into civil uprising against class oppressors. Careers are ruined and political mileage is made as the discovery becomes a cause of local and national celebration. Gjon is offered a professorship at the Academy in Tirana but is tortured by fears of exposure. He dreams that his dead friend, the true believing socialist Mercure, has sent him a telegram of congratulations from beyond the grave. Gjon leaves the one person he loves, Stella, and boards the bus for the capital. The story finishes with an epilogue in which Eugjen, plagued by guilt, hesitates in front of the post office with a letter of confession in his hand. The final image is of the wet, cold, and grey communist every day, the world that Gjon wants to escape, and that Kadare would return to in 1960.

Gjon Kurti is ambitious and frustrated. Careerism is his only way out. The means he chooses are criminal, and hence extreme even in the Albanian context. However, Kadare's point is that the structure which ordained Gjon's fate as a provincial teacher creates its own contradictions. The centralized, bureaucratic structure which has decreed Gjon's fate is the force behind the action. Gjon Kurti, like most heroes of Soviet socialist realism, goes through a process of discovery of self and the world. But unlike them, he does not come to find harmony between his own desires and the demands of his nation and the ruling party. Far from accepting his iconic role as a cog in the machinery of communist modernization, he becomes a careerist,

whose success is based on personal weakness, ideological cynicism, and criminal forgery. In this sense the novel is a critique of a corrupt political system, rather than of generational conflict, as in Russia.

When Gjon first discusses his plan, Eugjen cites Yevgeny Yevtushenko's 1957 poem, "A Career". However, Yevtushenko's poem pits careerism against truth, criticizing the structures of power, and the opportunists who exploit them:

In Galileo's day, a fellow scientist  
was no more stupid than Galileo.  
He was well aware the earth revolved.  
But he also had a large family to feed.  
Stepping into a carriage with his wife,  
after effecting his betrayal, he believed  
he was launched on a career,  
though he was undermining it in reality. (63-64)

The dualism of this poem, its opposition of ideology and truth, strikes at the heart of communist ideology by positing a scientific truth beyond class-consciousness. However, the moral of Yevtushenko's poem is lost on Gjon, who proceeds to argue the opposite, namely that the forgery is an existential act free of obsolete morality. This is the life of the careerist who will vote with the party against Galileo. Gjon was to reappear in various forms in Kadare's novels as the opportunist, the weakling or coward, the power-hungry bureaucrat or the humiliated yes-man.

Kadare's novel reflects aspects of Soviet youth literature in its most radical phase. The episode in *The City* in which the boys discuss brothels and masturbate over pictures of Bardot and Lollobrigida reflects the tone of this Soviet literature. However, Kadare does not redeem his disillusioned young men. The renewal implicit in the rediscovery of socialist ethics, which is central to the socialist realist novels of the younger generation of Soviet authors, is absent from *The City without Signs*. In its place is a nihilism and moral and ethical emptiness which explicitly refers to the romantic despair of Byron and Lermontov and to the decadence of Wilde, but which lacks the sense of individual authenticity of the former, or the social provocativeness of the latter. The revolutionary romanticism is missing and the stories of alcoholic binges, sex, venereal disease, and prostitution are sordid. The redemption of the young people does not take place. They remain deeply compromised by a youthful rebelliousness which becomes criminal in the socialist environment and all too easily uses nationalist-communist dogma to achieve its ends. Even the good young communist, Mercure, is tainted. He participates as an intellectual and a worker, and advocates openness in the spirit of the 20th Congress of the CPSU in which debate and discussion take the place of doctrine (*The City* 55-56). But he criticizes Eugjen's poem as reactionary and identifies the spirit of capitalism in his peers' attitudes and behaviour. In response to Luiza's appreciation of Eugjen's modernist metaphors, Mercure replies: "Are you trying to say that it would have been good to mention the brand of the cars as well?" (*The City* 56). He too, is ultimately an inflexible ideologue who places socialist doctrine above individual freedom.

Written partly in Moscow under the influence of Dudintsev's critique of Soviet bureaucracy and corruption in *Not by Bread Alone* (1956), *The City* uses the current forms of youth literature to launch a powerful critique of socialist careerism and hence of Albanian socialism. Even at this first stage of his adult writing career Kadare refuses to make reconciliatory gestures to socialist realism and the Marxist-Leninist view of history that could render this work acceptable to the regime. There is little romanticism and less naivety in Gjon's youthful rebellion, and while he finds the possibility of redemption in Stella, the naive, provincial girl who believes in communism, he abandons her for his life of inauthenticity as a professor and Academy member in the national capital. The theme of careerism and inauthenticity inverts the central tenet of socialist realism, namely that the link between existence and activity be meaningful, bringing together ideology and praxis in authentic, lived individual life. While the story remains focused on the youthful protagonist's frustration, the target of the novel remains the environment "without signs" after which the novel is named. For unlike the Soviet environment, in which a generation moulded by Stalin was rejected by the young

intellectuals of the 1950s, in Albania there was no possibility of such rebellion. Not only was the generation of the Stalinist fathers still in the process of consolidating its power under the patronage of Enver Hoxha, but the sons were without any signposts for their rebellion other than those of Western European existentialism.

*The City without Signs* establishes three important early themes in Kadare's work. The first is the theme of authentic versus inauthentic life. The cynicism, fatalism, and sense of loss and wasted opportunities of the young people evokes questions of what an authentic life is under socialism. Gjon, Eugjen, and Mentor reflect the frustration of youthful hopes of achievement and advancement. Between the traditional world of family and honour and the communist world of productivity and unquestioning belief there is little to appeal to them. The egoism which renders them such modern figures finds no outlet. The good communists, Mercure and Stella, are, as their names suggest, distant from the reality of Albanian everyday life. The second theme, of the rebel without a cause, which underwrites much of post-war youth literature and film, expresses the lack of direction which resulted from the disintegration of belief systems over the previous century throughout Europe and America. The borrowed Westernisms of Kadare's young people are an empty response to disillusionment at the new communist state. In Kadare's southern Albanian environment traditional life and values had depended on structures of Ottoman civilization. The communism which was imposed after 1945 offered little by way of cultural depth. It was, from the beginning, a crude dogma relying on jingoistic nationalism and fear, and masquerading as a pure ideology in a corrupted world. There were few realistic identificatory structures for young people. Those who entered the bureaucracy and the Nomenclature did so in the understanding that this was a powerful new class entirely in the service of the regime. The themes of careerism and rebellion are associated with Kadare's third theme, Albanian identity and the function of literature. The betrayal of Albania, which lies at the centre of the hoax in *The City*, contrasts strongly with the redemptive rediscovery of the Soviet motherland by the younger generation of socialist realist writers. This theme will become more prominent as Kadare comes to see himself competing with the dictatorship for the soul of his nation.

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