

# ISMAIL KADARE AND AESTHETIC DISSIDENCE IN ALBANIAN LITERATURE

## „LEGJENDA E ROZAFËS“, ZËRI I ROMANIT „URA ME TRI HARQE“ TË ISMAIL KADARESE

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### Abstract

This paper examines the concept of aesthetic dissidence in the works of Ismail Kadare, focusing on his unique approach to critiquing totalitarian ideologies within Albanian literature. Set against the backdrop of communist Albania, where socialist realism dominated the literary scene, Kadare developed an aesthetic framework that subtly defied the expectations of ideological conformity. Through a close analysis of *The Palace of Dreams* and *The Siege*, this study explores Kadare's use of allegory, symbolism, and irony to construct narratives that resist authoritarian control while avoiding direct confrontation with state censorship.

The methodology involves a textual analysis of Kadare's works, supported by theoretical insights from Pierre Bourdieu's concept of a "discursive code" and Czesław Miłosz's notion of "Ketman," a strategy of indirect dissent in totalitarian regimes. These frameworks help illuminate how Kadare creates an independent literary space, enabling readers to interpret his critiques of totalitarianism beyond the confines of socialist realism. Key results reveal that Kadare's work not only offers a critique of the political and ideological oppression of his time but also establishes a new discursive code that emphasizes the importance of intellectual freedom and the enduring power of the individual voice.

In conclusion, Kadare's aesthetic dissidence represents a vital act of cultural resistance, challenging the monolithic ideology of the state through nuanced and layered storytelling. His legacy in Albanian literature underscores the role of art in asserting personal and intellectual autonomy, even under restrictive regimes. This study contributes to a broader understanding of how literature can subvert and resist authoritarianism through aesthetic innovation.

**Keywords:** *Aesthetic Dissidence, Albanian Literature, Totalitarianism, Allegory, Ismail Kadare.*

### Introduction

Aesthetic dissidence, or aesthetic refusal, emerges as a literary response to societal non-acceptance and is realized through creative tools like satire, irony, and paradox (Rugova, 2005). Under the oppressive Stalinist regime in Albania, Ismail Kadare utilized these literary techniques to subtly oppose the state's ideological schematization. Rather than embracing the mandated "new man" ideal of socialist realism, Kadare crafted a distinct form of literature that indirectly critiqued the state while maintaining artistic integrity.

Though Kadare resisted the label of dissident, his works exhibit a form of "aesthetic dissidence," as noted by Agron Tufa (2010), who argues that Kadare's departure from socialist realism reflects a deeper aesthetic and stylistic disagreement. Arshi Pipa supports this view,

<https://doi.org/10.62792/ut.filologjia.v13.i24-25.p2856>

noting that *The General of the Dead Army* defies socialist realism by omitting the Party's presence and focusing instead on a former enemy general. Tufa highlights that Kadare's writing acted as a refuge and projection of individual freedom, embodying a quiet resistance to ideological conformity.

Kadare's career has been marked by both acclaim and controversy; internationally, he has been celebrated for introducing Albanian culture to the world, yet domestically, he has faced criticism for perceived complicity with the communist regime. Described by John Carey as a "universal writer" in the Homeric tradition, Kadare is both a chronicler of Albanian identity and a subtle critic of authoritarianism (Morgan, 2006). His works, such as *Chronicle in Stone* and *The Palace of Dreams*, use allegory to critique totalitarianism, a characteristic that has led scholars, including Pipa, to view him as a nonconformist who critiques the repressive influence of the state over personal and national identity.

## Methods

This study applies a qualitative approach, focusing on the textual analysis of Ismail Kadare's major works within the context of communist Albania. The methodology encompasses a close reading of Kadare's narrative techniques—such as allegory, symbolism, irony, and grotesque—as mechanisms of aesthetic dissidence, with an emphasis on how these techniques subvert socialist realism. By examining primary texts like *The General of the Dead Army*, *The Siege*, and *The Palace of Dreams*, this analysis identifies specific elements that illustrate Kadare's opposition to ideological constraints and support his engagement with intellectual freedom.

The theoretical framework is informed by the perspectives of Czesław Miłosz and Václav Havel on dissidence under totalitarian regimes. Miłosz's (1953) concept of "Ketman," which refers to a form of survival through outward conformity while privately resisting, provides a lens to understand Kadare's complex navigation of artistic expression. Additionally, Havel's (1985) notion of "living in truth" as an act of resistance offers insight into Kadare's underlying critique of authoritarian ideologies and structures.

Through this methodology, the study aims to contribute to the fields of cultural and literary studies by analyzing the ways in which Kadare's works defy and reframe the political expectations of his time. Furthermore, the research seeks to highlight how aesthetic dissidence functions as a significant form of intellectual resistance, preserving not only the author's autonomy but also the broader cultural identity under ideological pressure.

## Results

The analysis of Ismail Kadare's major works reveals that his use of allegory, symbolism, and irony is central to his aesthetic dissidence. By embedding subtle critiques within his narratives, Kadare effectively challenges the constraints imposed by socialist realism and totalitarian ideology. Kadare's use of allegory enables him to construct layered narratives that critique the regime while circumventing direct confrontation. In *The Palace of Dreams*, the institution known as the Palace, or *Tabir Saraj*, symbolizes an authoritarian system that monitors and controls citizens' innermost thoughts by interpreting their dreams. This institution serves as a veiled criticism of Albania's repressive surveillance under the communist regime (Kadare, 1999). Through this allegorical setting, Kadare highlights the regime's intrusive control over personal lives and thoughts, exposing the absurdity and dangers inherent in such pervasive oversight (Hamiti, 2013, pp. 132-135).

In *The Siege*, Kadare uses a historical setting to examine themes of resilience and resistance, portraying a medieval Albanian fortress under siege. This setting implicitly parallels Albania's isolation and the restrictive conditions imposed by the communist regime (Kadare,

1976). Through historical allegory, Kadare reflects on contemporary political realities without overt references, subverting socialist realism's requirement to directly celebrate socialist values and ideals. Kadare frequently employs irony and grotesque elements to undermine the "new man" idealized by socialist realism.

Through characters and scenarios that expose the absurdity of ideological expectations, he critiques the glorification of socialist ideals, highlighting the emptiness and contradictions within the regime's ideological framework. Tufa notes that Kadare's stylistic approach serves as a form of aesthetic dissidence, revealing the inherent weaknesses of imposed ideological constructs (Tufa, 2010). These narrative techniques reinforce Kadare's resistance by subtly challenging the legitimacy of totalitarian values. Each of these techniques demonstrates Kadare's skill in using literary form to embed resistance within his works. Through nuanced layers of meaning, he bypasses censorship, presenting a critical perspective on the regime's control over cultural and intellectual expression.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis underscores Ismail Kadare's innovative use of aesthetic dissidence as a form of intellectual and cultural resistance against the totalitarian state. Through his nuanced narratives, Kadare successfully challenges the framework of socialist realism, employing allegory, symbolism, irony, and grotesque to voice opposition to the communist regime's ideological constraints. By navigating these oppressive boundaries, Kadare not only preserved his artistic integrity but also crafted a unique form of literature that offered a hidden yet profound critique of authoritarian control. Kadare's dissidence aligns closely with Czesław Miłosz's (1953) concept of "Ketman," which describes how individuals under totalitarian rule maintain their internal integrity through outward conformity.

Like Miłosz's subjects, Kadare outwardly conformed to the stylistic elements required by the state, while internally dissenting by embedding subversive meanings within his texts. This approach allowed Kadare to subtly undermine the regime's influence, providing a voice of dissent within the confines of accepted literary norms. Furthermore, Václav Havel's (1985) notion of "living in truth" resonates in Kadare's works, particularly in *The Palace of Dreams* and *The Siege*, where he advocates for intellectual authenticity as a subversive response to ideological falsehoods. In *The Palace of Dreams*, for example, Kadare's depiction of a bureaucratic institution that monitors citizens' thoughts parallels the Albanian regime's surveillance practices. This serves not only as a critique of state control but also as a call for personal and intellectual freedom—a fundamental act of resistance as described by Havel.

In *The Siege*, Kadare's allegorical representation of a fortress under attack reflects the struggles of the Albanian people under communist isolation and repression. By employing historical settings, Kadare is able to bypass direct political confrontation, framing his criticism in ways that resonate universally, thus allowing readers both within and beyond Albania to understand the broader implications of totalitarianism (Pipa, 1987, p.73). Kadare's work illustrates the power of aesthetic dissidence in challenging authoritarian regimes. His subtle yet impactful critique contributes to the broader discourse on the relationship between literature and politics, showing that art can transcend political constraints and preserve the cultural identity of a nation under oppression. Kadare's legacy as a literary dissident thus continues to inspire discussions on freedom, resistance, and the enduring role of literature as a tool for truth and self-expression.

## Discussion of Aesthetic Dissidence in Albanian Literature and the Works of Ismail Kadare

Socialist realism transformed Albanian literature into a tool for ideological reinforcement, severely limiting artistic freedom. As Floresha Dado (2021) notes, socialist realism forced writers to adopt a prescriptive form that promoted socialist values and the Marxist worldview, restricting creative choices to align with the regime's political goals. Within this context, T.W. Adorno argued that true artistic expression under totalitarianism is constrained, as art is permitted to convey "only one meaning and one thought" aligned with state doctrine (Steiner, 1998, p. 96). Kadare defied these constraints through aesthetic dissidence. By embedding allegory, symbolism, and irony, he created narratives that appeared to comply with socialist realist themes but subtly critiqued the regime. This approach allowed Kadare to maintain artistic integrity while engaging in a form of intellectual defiance. As Terry Eagleton observes, literature is an "inseparable part of the political and ideological history of our time," and under authoritarianism, it becomes a site of resistance against hegemonic ideologies (Eagleton, 1983, p. 169).

In Kadare's case, aesthetic dissidence becomes a practical tool for challenging totalitarian ideology, using art to push back against imposed norms. As Czesław Miłosz (1953) describes in his concept of "Ketman," writers in totalitarian regimes often balance outward conformity with an internal autonomy that sustains their sense of self. Kadare embodies this duality in his works, which outwardly adhere to socialist realist expectations while embedding subversive critiques that defy ideological uniformity (Miłosz, 1953, pp. 55-58). In this way, Kadare demonstrates a profound commitment to artistic autonomy, using indirect critique to challenge the regime's hegemonic narratives. Aesthetic dissidence thus becomes a vital act of cultural preservation and resistance, ensuring that alternative perspectives endure despite pressures toward ideological uniformity. This approach not only aids in understanding Kadare's work but also serves as a valuable framework for analyzing other artists who have navigated similarly repressive environments.

### Aesthetic Dissidence in *The Palace of Dreams* and the Allegory of Totalitarian Control

Ismail Kadare's *The Palace of Dreams*, written in Tirana between 1976 and 1981, stands as a profound example of aesthetic dissidence in Albanian literature. The novel was published under two titles: initially as *The Clerk of the Palace of Dreams* and later as *The Palace of Dreams*. This shift from the individual character ("The Clerk") to the institution reflects a central tension within the novel: the struggle between the individual and the system. In the fictional Ottoman Empire setting, the Palace of Dreams serves as an authoritarian institution that controls citizens' innermost thoughts through the interpretation of their dreams. This institution, known as "Tabir Saraj," systematically collects and examines dreams to detect political warnings or signs of potential rebellion. This creates a powerful allegory of the communist regime's pervasive surveillance in Albania, as Kadare explores the mechanisms of control and manipulation that define totalitarian systems (Hamiti, 2013, pp. 133–135).

The novel unfolds primarily from the perspective of Mark-Alem Qyprilli, a young member of a powerful Albanian family who enters the Palace as an inexperienced employee. Through Mark-Alem's experience, Kadare gradually exposes the Palace's complex bureaucracy, which dominates private lives and restricts personal freedom. The intricate structure of the Palace symbolizes the absurdity and terrifying reach of totalitarian regimes, which control individuals through arbitrary and omnipresent surveillance. In this imagined empire, no one can claim prophetic power, as Kadare notes, "Allah casts the warning dream upon the earth in the same imperceptible way as he casts the rainbow or the lightning" (Kadare, 1993, p. 26). Every citizen must record and submit their dreams, which are then examined in the Selection Department for signs that might interest the government.

Dreams containing political warnings are directed to the Interpretation Department, while others are stored in the archives. Weekly, a singular, crucial dream—a "Master Dream"—is presented to the Sultan as guidance for political decisions (Kadare, 1993, pp. 58–59). The novel's tension culminates when Mark-Alem, a member of the renowned Qyprilli family, finds himself entangled in the Palace's political machinations. His family, often at odds with the Palace's power, has attempted to mitigate its influence. Mark-Alem's uncle, the vizier Kurt Qyprilli, strategically places him within the Palace to secure political leverage. Yet, Mark-Alem's lack of experience leads him to overlook the implications of an innocent dream, which is later interpreted as a "Master Dream" suggesting a Qyprilli-led rebellion.

This interpretation brings dire consequences for the family, as the state punishes them based solely on this symbolic dream (Kadare, 1993, pp. 112–115). The culmination of events demonstrates how The Palace of Dreams "deconstructs a totalitarian social system and creates an allegory for the Albanian totalitarian system" (Hamiti, 2013, pp. 133–135). On the eve of Ramadan, as Albanian epic singers entertain the Qyprilli family, the Sultan's men arrive, executing two singers and arresting Kurt Qyprilli without formal charges. These actions underline the irrational and arbitrary power of the Palace, illustrating a society where punishment precedes evidence and where causality is distorted to instill fear.

The Palace acts as a "blind aggressor," capable of targeting anyone without evidence or explanation. In this regime, "A man can be powerful and respected in life, holding important positions and strong connections, but this is not enough... what matters is how [a person] is seen in the dreams of others, in what mysterious carriages with seals or incomprehensible signs they enter" (Kadare, 1993, p. 159). Through this intricate allegory, *The Palace of Dreams* critiques totalitarian mechanisms of control, showing how state power operates through a culture of surveillance and suspicion. Mark-Alem's journey within the Palace exposes a regime sustained by fear and paranoia, where the individual's fate is dictated by the arbitrary interpretations of others. Kadare's work offers more than a simple depiction of a totalitarian state; it creates a "self-sufficient universe," where irrationality governs and the state's control transcends physical actions to invade the personal, internal realms of individuals.

This totalitarian world of *The Palace of Dreams* resembles George Orwell's 1984, sharing a distorted reality with surreal and dreamlike dimensions. Michel Foucault's description of dreams as a place where individuals detach from objectivity to experience "radical freedom" mirrors the unsettling liberation within Kadare's novel (Foucault, 1997, pp. 7–8). Kadare's "anti-utopia" is governed by paradox and irrationality, consistently at odds with "healthy reason" (Orwell, 1949, p. 162). Kadare's *The Palace of Dreams* connects universal themes with Albanian history, placing special emphasis on Albanian characters like Mark-Alem and the "fatal dream" he interprets. This dream, originating from an Albanian vegetable seller and culminating in the suffering of the Qyprilli family, symbolizes the conflict between primal forces and calculated ambitions, embodying a "powerful Albanian allegory reflecting on the nation's history and identity" (Hamiti, 2013, p. 139).

Through the intricate structure of the Palace, Kadare critiques the oppressive nature of totalitarian regimes, where bureaucracy and surveillance penetrate every aspect of individual lives. This institution serves as a metaphor for the regime's desire to regulate its citizens' most intimate thoughts and emotions. The absurdity and paradox that surround the Palace's authority underscore the irrationality of totalitarianism. Here, authority is sustained by fear and manipulation, and individuals are subjected to the arbitrary interpretations of their dreams, revealing a system driven by paranoia. Kadare's use of symbolism, paradox, irony, and allegory together critiques the senselessness and moral corruption inherent in such regimes, illustrating how totalitarian power distorts reality and erodes individual autonomy.

According to Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) concept of a "discursive code," Kadare establishes a new literary framework that challenges the restrictive bounds of socialist realism, creating space for autonomous expression. Bourdieu argues that discursive freedom is fundamental to human liberty, as it allows individuals to communicate beyond the constraints of imposed ideological systems. Kadare accomplishes this by embedding allegory and symbolism in his work, enabling readings that evade official interpretations and subtly express dissent within the regime's strict discursive boundaries. The allegory within *The Palace of Dreams* exemplifies how totalitarian regimes use bureaucracy and information control to manipulate society. This approach aligns with Czesław Miłosz's concept of "Ketman," as described in *The Captive Mind*. Miłosz defines Ketman as a survival strategy where individuals simulate loyalty to the regime while concealing their true thoughts. In totalitarian societies, intellectuals often adopt Ketman, outwardly conforming to ideology while privately preserving their inner dissent (Miłosz, 1953, p. 68).

Mark-Alem's character in *The Palace of Dreams* represents the struggle for survival within a repressive state. His gradual transformation—from a naive employee to someone increasingly aware of the system's cruelty—embodies an inner dissidence that reflects Kadare's critique of totalitarianism. This evolution echoes Václav Havel's notion that "living in truth" serves as "a powerful form of resistance against totalitarianism" (Havel, 1985, pp. 23–96). Through Mark-Alem's journey, Kadare illustrates the psychological toll of life under totalitarian rule and underscores the resilience needed to maintain an inner sense of freedom.

### ***The Siege* and Historical Reinterpretation as Hidden Critique**

In *The Siege*, Kadare explores themes of resilience and resistance through the story of an Albanian castle defending against a 15th-century Ottoman invasion. Told primarily from the perspective of the Turkish general and other Ottoman characters, the novel also includes monologues from an Albanian tower guard, providing a counterpoint to the invaders' viewpoint (Kadare, 1976, p. 89). The plot centers on the Ottoman leaders' growing fears about rain—a threat that would undermine their siege—which ultimately foreshadows their failure. Although set in the distant past, *The Siege* is notably free of specific historical markers, allowing it to transcend any single historical event and instead serve as a metaphor for various forms of siege, whether military or ideological.

This ambiguity invites readers to interpret the novel as a commentary on Albania's own isolation during the communist era. As Kuçuku (2019) notes, *The Siege* "expresses two closely related realities: the historical past and the political atmosphere during which it was written," creating a layered critique of totalitarian oppression (pp. 28–39). Kadare achieves this duality by embedding allegory and symbolism throughout the novel, which prompts readers to see beyond the medieval setting and reflect on contemporary political conditions. Using a technique called "defamiliarization," described by Viktor Shklovsky, Kadare presents historical elements in unexpected ways, making "the familiar seem strange and the strange familiar" (Shklovsky, 1991, pp. 6–7). This approach distances the narrative from its historical specificity, opening it to broader interpretations relevant to Kadare's present.

Through this defamiliarized portrayal of medieval events, *The Siege* becomes an indirect critique of Albania's communist regime and its ideological isolation. Kadare's blending of archaic language with contemporary allusions creates an allegorical world where history and current politics intersect, allowing readers to perceive a hidden critique of totalitarianism. As Václav Havel suggests, "living within the truth" represents a challenge to oppressive regimes; in art, it becomes a "subversive act against oppressive ideologies" (Havel, 1985, pp. 23–96). Kadare brings this concept to life in *The Siege*, where historical allegory subtly defies ideological constraints, demonstrating a commitment to "living within the truth" in his own creative work.

Kadare's choice of language further reinforces this critique. By merging familiar terms that resonate with the isolated Albania of the communist period with exotic, archaic language, he creates a narrative that simultaneously speaks to historical and modern audiences. Thus, *The Siege* is not merely a tale of historical resistance but a layered exploration of the psychological and cultural resilience needed to withstand totalitarianism in any era. In *The Siege*, Kadare uses the narrative of a 15th-century Ottoman assault on an Albanian castle to explore themes of resistance and isolation, subtly critiquing both historical and contemporary oppression. Told mainly from the viewpoint of the Turkish general and his army, the story also includes monologues from an Albanian tower guard, providing a contrasting perspective (Kadare, 1976, p. 89). The Ottoman army's efforts are complicated by their fear of rainfall, an ominous sign that foreshadows their eventual failure, emphasizing the futility of their campaign.

Although *The Siege* is set in the distant past, its absence of specific historical details allows readers to see beyond the Siege of Krujë, envisioning it as a metaphor for other forms of siege, including Albania's ideological isolation during the communist era. This timelessness lets *The Siege* express two closely related realities: the historical past and the atmosphere of the years in which this work was created. By anchoring the narrative in the Middle Ages but guiding readers toward contemporary parallels, Kadare creates a dual critique of oppression across eras.

Kadare's method hinges on "defamiliarization," a technique described by Viktor Shklovsky, which presents familiar concepts in unexpected ways to make "the familiar seem strange and the strange familiar" (Shklovsky, 1991, pp. 6–7). Through this approach, he disrupts straightforward interpretations, inviting readers to uncover deeper symbolic meanings that resonate with Albania's political landscape in the 1960s-70s. For instance, Kadare juxtaposes familiar Albanian terms, such as "Kampi" (Camp) and "Delegacion" (Delegation), with exotic Turkish words like Akıncılar (fighters) and Yeniçeri (Janissary). This mix of languages not only enriches the narrative but also evokes the isolated, closed-off atmosphere of communist Albania, enhancing the novel's allegorical depth.

*The Siege* thus becomes an allegorical critique of Albania's ideological confinement under communism. The castle, a recurring symbol in Albanian literature, traditionally signifies resistance and endurance; here, it mirrors the isolation imposed by socialist ideology and evokes Albania's split from the Soviet Union and eventual isolation from China. In this context, Kadare writes, "Hyper-communist Albania has surrounded and seeks to extinguish its more liberal part. Thus, the besieged and the besieger are the same entity" (Kadare, 2008, p. 78). By layering these meanings, Kadare's narrative transforms the castle into a timeless symbol of resilience and defiance.

Written during the political climate of the 1960s-70s and coinciding with the 500th anniversary of Skanderbeg's death, *The Siege* gained further cultural significance as it was celebrated within Albanian nationalist rhetoric. Yet, as Hans Robert Jauss notes, "the most secure way to determine the role played by a writer's work" within its contemporary literary process is "examining the documents related to the work in question" (Jauss, 1982, p. 192). By embedding layers of resistance, Kadare not only critiques authoritarianism but also reflects a maturing awareness of intellectual autonomy under a repressive regime.

Kadare's techniques echo Roland Barthes' observation that an author is "a spokesperson for the methods and procedures of his era," whether through acceptance or rejection (Barthes, 1977, p. 76). *The Siege* stands as a critique of any system that stifles freedom, using history to critique contemporary challenges to autonomy and expression. The novel's open structure, as described by Umberto Eco, invites readers to search for its concealed meanings, embodying qualities of an "open work" that resists socialist realism's restrictions. In the end, both *The Palace of Dreams* and *The Siege*, with their layered allegories and complex structures, stand as profound testaments to Kadare's dedication to intellectual independence.

Through *The Palace of Dreams*, Kadare constructs an allegorical critique of totalitarian control, revealing the dangers of state intrusion into private thought, while *The Siege* uses historical reinterpretation to mirror Albania's ideological isolation and internal conflicts. The Palace and the castle each serve as symbols of enduring strength and resilience, representing Kadare's identity as a writer committed to challenging oppressive ideologies. By diverging from the constraints of socialist realism through sophisticated language, symbolism, and narrative complexity, Kadare preserves an enduring spirit of aesthetic dissidence within Albanian literature, creating a legacy of resistance and intellectual freedom.

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