

## Myth and History in the “The Three-Arched Bridge” and “The Bridge on the Drina” of Ismail Kadare and Ivo Andrić

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### Abstract

*In this paper, we will make a comparative study between the novels “The Three-Arched Bridge” (1978) authored by the Albanian writer Ismail Kadare (1936-) and “The Bridge on the Drina” (1945), authored by Bosnian writer Ivo Andrić (1892-1974) by elaborating on how myth and history, two key components of these two literary works are two different starting points to them; Kadare begins with the Myth and views History through it, for Andrić, history is the starting point whereas myth of sacrifice in the bridge, and the bridge itself is just a structural knot which makes in one the story of four centuries of Bosnia’s history. Myth, it is greatest meeting point of these two authors, while history (power, money, etc.), will be pointed out as the issue these two authors have different perspectives, in accordance with their cultural and literary background, and what is more important, in accordance with their artistic genius.*

### 1. Introduction

Comparative studies on contemporary Balkan literature today, have as their primary objects important texts of Balkan authors that serve as a starting point to study how the Balkans is perceived and how are the regional archetypes described. The comparative approach to important works of authors from Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and the countries of former Yugoslavia has urged constantly researchers to conduct comparative studies intended to elaborate upon the relationship between literary and cultural texts and how they serve as meeting points among oral and written narration, uncertainty of memory facing modernity and post modernism to the point where each of them become one up to the point where it becomes impossible to distinguish, as the Greek word “Mythistorema” means in the sense of the narrative of the history of a myth. Whenever it is done a comparative study of important Balkan authors, the comparison between Kadare and Andrić in general, (“Chronicle in Stone” and “Chronicles of Travnik”), novels “The Three-Arched Bridge” and “The Bridge on the Drina” in particular, it is intriguing and challenging for scholars of comparative literature.

Ivo Andrić (1892 -1975) was a novelist, poet and short story writer who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1961. His writings dealt mainly with life in his native Bosnia under ottoman rule. Nobel committee awarded him the prize for “the epic force with which he has traced themes and depicted human destinies drawn from his country’s history”.<sup>1</sup> Ismail Kadare, (1936-) a Nobel candidate for decades, winner of the first Man Booker International Prize, he is Albania’s best poet and novelist and is acclaimed worldwide as one of the most important writers of our time. Translations of his novels have published in more than forty countries. Kadare is among the most important European writers today, famous for literary mythical and historical tales, for creating with his works “An eternal Albania” and for the search of idioms to characterize Albania’s European classical past and its late totalitarianism.

### 2. Pre-literary Genesis of the Two Novels

Both of these works utilize the metaphor of Albania and Bosnia as a bridge between East and West, and refer to the pan Balkan myth of immurement of the female body in a bridge, a myth that exists in many versions in the Balkans, and that raises a number of questions for study, especially if we consider the traces of this myth in other mythologies such as Greek and Indian.

Andrić’s novel was written after World War II and was published in 1945, together with two other novels, “The Chronicles of Travnik” and “Misses”, part of a trilogy, two of which are chronicles of Bosnia and its history where the

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1961/andric-bio.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1961/andric-bio.html)

author describes the life of a region made up of different nationalities and religions, an area in which East and West clashed for centuries. Kadare's novel was published in 1978 as part of a collection of novels (a triptych and an interlude), under the common title "The Three-Arched Bridge" in 1978. Legend of immurement was mentioned in another triptych novel "Twilight of Eastern gods", as one of the most beautiful legends of Albania, together with the legend of "bessa". While the legend of bessa (the fulfilled promise) was transformed into a literary work in the novel "Who brought Doruntina?" the legend of immurement became a novel with the title "The Three-Arched Bridge".

Kadare's great attraction after legend of immurement, was shown also in the book of essays "Autobiography of people in verses", a book in which the author meditates on authorship or co-authorship of the people of Balkans (mainly of Albanian people) in creating the treasury of Balkan legends and folklore by arguing against the Slavic claims of authorship, which he opposes, bringing arguments pro the Albanian authorship of these legends, among which, Kadare distinguishes the legend of immurement (Castle of Shkodra) and the Legend of the Word of Honor (Besa), (Constantine and Doruntina). According to Kadare "Both served to world literature to create poems, plays and novels in several languages. It is known that Goethe was astounded when he heard them from Vuk Karadžić while for the Legend of Immurement Jacob Grimm wrote that "It is one of the most moving songs of all peoples and all times".<sup>2</sup>

This legend according to Kadare is Albanian because: The historian Marin Barleti writes at the beginning of the sixteenth century that he read the legend in the chronicles written in the language of the natives; in no other region of the Balkans, this legend is faces as densely as in Albanian territories or populated by Albanians; the motive of bessa encountered in the ballad, a motive that is one of the most powerful acts of the drama constitutes the main difference and according to Kadare "In the Slavic version, which claims to be especially called a mother variant, in the verse "Two brothers broke the bessa," the words "vjeru pogazio" makes no sense in the context of the ballad. This because the words "vjeru pogazio" are a mistranslation of the words "broke the bessa" of the Albanian ballad, where the word bessa, which lacks its genuine counterpart in Serbo-Croat language, is mistakenly substituted the word faith (religion), a word with which it has no relation. Such a borrowing is of one of the key moments of the drama is in favor of the thesis that the original variant in this case is the Albanian and the Slavic".<sup>3</sup>

According to Kadare "Legend of immurement is, first of all, as its name and subject indicate, a legend of masonry. The ballad is constructed as a shocking, vibrant narration, something that is expressed impressively in the verses: *As I shudder at the wall /May this bridge shudder*, verses found only in Greek and Albanian variants. Only the mason rhapsodists who knew the secret of "building", continues Kadare his argument for this legend in "The Autobiography of People in Verses" written in the 1970's, "might have noticed that the bridges, even stone buildings, the same as any other building, have a slight vibration. Only the mason rhapsodists can create such a powerful poetic image, which establishes a direct relationship between the vibration of the body of the woman in the agony of dying and the eternal vibration of the bridge. Vibrations of the body agony of the sacrificed woman pass into the bridge not simply as a curse, much less as a wish, they pass to it, first of all as a reality. And this static aspect of the bridge could be known only by the building rhapsodes. Without this vibration; this poem would be just a repetition of the well known routine of sacrifice of different epochs and nations. Exactly this material and simultaneously spiritual vibration that alloy of the living body of the sacrificed human being and the stone that mud and concrete, that mixer (vibrator) conceived and maintained erected this immortal legend".<sup>4</sup>

At "The Three-Arched Bridge" Kadare returns to these arguments through his characters. In Chapter XXX, monk Gjon in his conversation with a collector of tales and popular traditions narrates:

*"Although all insist it is theirs, our monks said that it [the ballad] was born here, and this, not because the event really happened in this country, but because only to Albanian the meaning of bessa has taken such a grave connotation".<sup>5</sup>*

Again, later in this chapter of the novel we read:

*"I wanted to tell him that, the same as in the case of the first legend, even here the motive of bessa, proved according to our monks, ballad's Albanian authorship, but in his face one could notice was, I do not know how to say, a fatal hustle, that pushed me to speak quickly. This was the time to explain him that namely the words "they broke the bessa" in the*

<sup>2</sup> Ismail Kadare, *Autobiography of People in Verses*, [Autobiografi e popullit në vargje] (Onufri Publishing House: 2002), Tirana, pp.23.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>4</sup> Ismail Kadare, *Autobiography of People in Verses*, (Onufri Publishing House: 2002), Tirana, pp.31-32.

<sup>5</sup> Ismail Kadare, *Three Arched Bridge*, [Ura me tri harqe] (Onufri Publishing House: 2004), Tirana, pp. 75.

*Slavic variant of the ballad was "vjeru pogazio" which meant they lost faith, words that do not make sense in the Slavic variant and this is because they are a mistranslation of Albanian word "bessa" with "faith, religion", but he did not let me do that". He was holding my hand and with a whispering voice, as if he was asking me to discover a secret, asked "and what happened then?"<sup>6</sup>*

On the other hand, Andrić's novel at its pre literary form, according to scholars who studied his life and work think that its starting point is encountered in his PhD thesis entitled "Development of spiritual life in Bosnia under the influence of the Ottoman regime" a defended in 1924 in Graz, Austria. This thesis in German helps us to understand his research of human existence through Bosnia's history, something which later was transformed into a literary work. The scientific research and the literary works have many things in common: the epic tone, the feeling that events occur more often than they do, the ability to summarize the story in confined local spaces, by giving to the general human value, the deep seeds of hatred and conflicts between Muslims (Bosniaks), Turks, Serbs, Croats, Jews at the regional level, and the conflicts of the war-battered Europe in a wider dimension.

All the roots of Andrić's literary motifs can be found as historical arguments of a history paper which are then transformed into an epic novel. "The Bridge on the Drina" itself was firstly published as a fifty-page novel titled "The Bridge on Zepa" which deals with various aspects of the topic of immurement and constitutes an earlier form of the authorial prior creative process. Regarding the novel's form of "The Three-Arched Bridge" it was conceived at the beginning by Kadare in the form of a file, where parts of the chronicle would be combined with various documents, technical calculations, drawings of the project, pieces of tourists' conversations later on its feet, the biography of British aviator who hit with a bomb during the last war, pieces of the old ballad, etc., etc. According to the author, out of the first file of "The Bridge" were saved a few things: a sketch of it, as well as tourist's conversations, but not a thousand years later, as he thought, but immediately after the establishment of arcs.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Converges into Myth

The main converges of "The Three-Arched Bridge" are obvious in the first chapters of the novel "The Bridge on the Drina". In Andrić's novel, each chapter or story is in a way related to the bridge. It is the focal point of the town of Visegrad, and the most important events are related to it. Such a structural choice contributes to the literary work, which describes the development of a series of historical events. The transference of the chronicle in four centuries is not homogeneous. The first major event for inhabitants of Visegrad is the bridge construction in the middle of the sixteenth century which is described in details in the first three chapters. The first three chapters are the chapters where we see the biggest converges between the two novels. Here it is described construction of the bridge over the Drina while Kadare describes the construction of the three arched bridge.

The atmosphere of chaos that such an enterprise brings about is reflected in the entire Visegrad while to Kadare, despite a physical disorder there is also a spiritual disturbance to local residents, whose spokeswoman becomes Ajkuna, an old woman who embodies popular mentality throughout the whole novel.

In Andrić's novel, local people are forced to work there either through employment or by force, while at the end there are gossips that master Rade has exploited them by profiting from their work. In Kadare's novel, the start of the bridge construction is dominated by legend tones; the construction company realizes the scene of the collapse of a "passerby" because of the epilepsy, and spread the interpretation of this event as a divine sign from the Almighty, that the bridge ought to be constructed as soon as possible. This popular belief was utilized by them for economic profit to achieve a goal that will make another company go bankrupt. In Andrić's novel the construction of the bridge is opposed by Radislav from Unishteja, a small village just above the town, a village whose people had embraced Islam and felt oppressed and isolated. He summons secret gatherings and opposes the construction of the Visegrad Bridge. Radislav tries to make it collapse at night while it is spread the version that *villa* (the river's spirit) destroy at night what was built during the day and does not want to allow the construction of the Drina bridge. Words are spread that the construction will never be finished due to the villa.

In both novels, during the building process of the bridge, after the spread of legends that the bridge construction was opposed by the spirit of the river, the first damages are noticed. In "The Bridge on the Drina", after much effort, the defector is caught and publicly executed, in the eyes of the entire population of the town. His scroll in hell by ottomans is

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, pp.76.

<sup>7</sup> *Ismail Kadare, Invitation to the Studio [Ftesë në studio] (Onufri Publishing House: 2004), pp. 64.*

one of the most gruesome scenes of the novel. After execution his body thrown to be "eaten by dogs" but the executioner is corrupted and his body is buried according to the Christian burial customs and later words are spread that his body was buried the river's villas and he is already a saint in the mentality of the people. Even to Kadare, when the bridge building starts, words are spread that river's "souls" oppose the construction of the bridge. For Kadare, money, property and economy play a primary role in explaining the conflict. Bridge builders had paid initially a lunatic and a traveling fortune teller, to pronounce the proposal of building the bridge, and the company "Passage-boats and pontoons" pay two itinerant bards, to spread the idea of its destruction. The fight between two companies is a fight for economic profit.

"The Three-Arched Bridge" in Arbëria is built in the wake of the onslaught of the Ottomans in the Balkans and more than a union bridge, it is a bridge that separates two civilizations, a bridge between Europe and Asia through which Asia would conquer and alienate Europe. Myth of the bridge permeates the subsequent events, it is the main axis, and messages that come from the sacrifice in the bridge and "calamity" it foretells are a proclamation through which History of Arbëria (Albania) is decoded while it is opposite to the Asian apocalypse that risks its being.

In "The Bridge on the Drina", traditions and legends are associated with the construction of the bridge, fantasy and reality, truth and dream, are combined in an inextricable strange intrigue.<sup>8</sup> After the third chapter, it is recounted how the bridge was built and Andric gets away from myth in order to penetrate deep into history. Bridge in Visegrad is a bridge between Muslim Turkey and Christian Europe, a yarn through which Andric knits the chronicles of Bosnia's history. This is the point where the spyglasses of the two storytellers reflect different perceptions of history.

Meanwhile, "The Three-Arched Bridge" constantly relies on myth. The bridge itself becomes the greatest myth and the monk Gjon together with residents of the principality speculate about its positive effects as a link between East and West and the devastating effects as well, grim intuitions invade residents living in its shadow. The text formulated as a double coding, as a real chronicle written in an old Albanian dialect. The ancient ritual of sacrifice, immurement of the human being at the foundations of an edifice or a bridge, has all the features of a symbol. Ismail Kadare returns to this topos not to explain it to the end, not to reveal, but to charge it with other strata of meaning.<sup>9</sup>

The novel has also an allegorical dimension, which focusses on the author's idea that the country's fate is determined by geographical location. The country has always been a bridgehead, "a three arched bridge", each arch established by foreigners during the long Roman, Byzantine and Turkish occupations. The immured mason symbolizes the persecuted Albanian people. The medieval conflict between the Byzantines and Ottomans resembles the antagonism between the Soviet Union and China over Albania.

#### 4. The Bridge as a Witness of History and History Itself

The building of the bridge in the novel "The Bridge on the Drina" is related to History. Its genesis is linked to the abduction of a local boy due to the "from the right of blood" by the Ottomans who conquered Bosnia and kidnapped Bosnian boys in order to send them to Istanbul, where this kidnapped boy, now in the service of the Ottomans, the Grand Vizier Mehmed Pasha Sokolovic decides to build a bridge in memory of his childhood in Bosnia while he never returns to the land of his ancestors, as he lives in the service of the sultan as Vizier until prosaically dies from stabbing murder of a vagrant dervish. Ottoman Empire has already conquered Bosnia. The author refers to Bosnians as "Turks" and the establishment of the bridge is considered as a bridge that connects the inhabitants of Visegrad (city on the border with Serbia) divided by the river Drina.

The bridge is a magnificent witness, which does not change anything deep in history. In addition, the bridge was built after the Ottoman conquest, by a resident of the village, who became a janissary and after that a Vizier. Bridge, more than a symbol of pain and suffering is "a symbol of the merger of two different worlds, that eastern and western ones, which followed and confronted each other in this land. Initially crushed by the Ottomans, who ruled for half a millennium by violating Bosnian freedom without considering the economic problems of this land; subject to the Austrians, bearer of a feeble, corrupted and corrupting moral, the inhabitants of Visegrad adapted to this instability of the time maintaining a personal ethos and, at the same time, welcoming the values and ways of life that one or the other invaders carried with them.

Namely this "adaptation", this assimilation is that dark omen that the narrator gets across while in "The Three-Arched Bridge", adaptation is seen as the beginning of a devastating havoc in the soul of "Arbëria", the essence of her

<sup>8</sup> Ivo Andric "The Bridge on the Drina"[Ura mbi Drin] , preface in the Albanian edition, (Dritan Publishing House: 2005) pp.11.

<sup>9</sup> Basri Çapriçi, "Kadarean paradigm"[Paradigma Kadareane] (Onufri Publishing House: 2006), pp. 61.

being. In Andric's novel the bridge is not the history, but a witness to it, and the main focus is not the bridge but the story of the people in the town where the bridge is being built. The population of the town is various, but in this case Andric chooses to emphasize the coherence of the whole to contrast with the insignificance of the individual human life within a broader perspective of life which itself is full of ups and downs. At this level, the bridge is a symbolic structural knot.

In Kadare's novel the bridge is constantly associated with the omen feeling of a threat. This threat is related to the 500 years conquer of Albania by Ottomans, a threat that risks the Albanian identity. Something that is reflected in the distributed narration of the monk Gjon. For Kadare the bridge is the history itself. It is a dramatic fact with strange protrusions, a real political and economic earthquake. Due to this perception, the novel is focused on its essential idea, an independent Albania, but fragile, divided and economically backward, which witnesses the approach Asian forces toward its borders.

## 5. Conclusions

In this brief study, we analyzed some of the converges between the two novels of two important Balkan and European authors, the novel "Three-Arched Bridge" of Ismail Kadare and "Bridge on the Drina" of Nobel laureate Ivo Andric. The myth of sacrifice existed as a literary motive since ancient Greek literature, sacrifice of Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon, before the start of the campaign of Troy and its modern interpretations thereof, inspired various Balkan writers among which the two great writers Kadare and Andric .

We referred to the origin of these novels of Kadare and Andric to highlight the opposite starting points at the genesis of their creation. Kadare starts his creative adventure from and creates "Three-Arched Bridge", a novel in which an essay argument turns into an aesthetic, literary one, in order to deduce that Kadare, aware of the existence of Andric's novel, has as an authorial aim to materialize a different literary work, a novel that is almost thoroughly based on a myth that radiates through the novel as a necklace of multiple interpretations and dual meanings. All converges between these two novels deal with only the way how these two writers use myth in service of the literary function.

Kadare uses myth as the main pillar of the novel edifice, folk tales of oral heritage serve as a way of interpreting history, while Andric, uses myth only as a starting point and connecting knot of facts, events and important phenomena that characterize the life of development of Bosnian people. Myth, being the main convergence point, announced the novels' titles, is the primary literary motif but the approach to myth is as well the aspect which makes the two novels simultaneously different.

This different approach in Andric's novel after the first three chapters, in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, a time with no major events affecting the life of the town of Visegrad, are included in a single chapter; the nineteenth century is given in ten chapters, and the years 1900-1914, the remainder of the novel, in nine further chapters. Such a scheme makes possible to describe the key events affecting the life of the town in details and also suggest awareness of the history being removed completely from myth and referring to only miracle of engineering and physical bridge, already stripped of the mythical significance which is replaced by the historical significance. Put in the words of one scholar of these two European literatures great writers "by approaching the same myth, quite differently, "Kadare and Andric share a sharp sense of imagination, in which the Balkan bridge connects the future and the present to the human sacrifices." <sup>10</sup>

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