

**REFLECTIONS OF ANTI-WAR PERSPECTIVES
IN ISMAIL KADARE'S
*THE GENERAL OF THE DEAD ARMY***

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According to the review of Petri Liukkonen entitled “Ismail Kadare”, many of his books have made their entry into the realm of cinema. Broken April has been filmed three times. *The General of the Dead Army*, entitled *Il generale dell'armata morte* (1983), was a highly acclaimed Italian film, starring Marcello Mastroianni as General Aristo. Shirin Neshath, who won the Silver Lion for Best Director at the Venice Film Festival in 2009. . . (Archived by Kuusankoski Public Library). Kadare bagged the first Man Booker International Prize in 2005, and established a confirmed status among the best authors of the world. Peter R. Prifti, a writer of Albanian scholarly journals, writes on Ismail Kadare:

Ismail Kadare, (born January 28, 1936, Gjirokastër, Albania), Albanian novelist and poet whose work explored his country's history and culture... Kadare, whose father was a post office employee, attended the University of Tirana. He later went to study at the Gorky Institute of World Literature. Upon returning to Albania in 1960, he worked as a journalist and then embarked on a literary career. The themes of Kadare's works, which often draw heavily on his own life, include Albanian history, politics, and folklore, blood-feud tradition, and ethnicity. (Britanica.com)

Ever since the origin of humanity, there existed a devastating enigma of war crimes. As a vicious phenomenon, this has perished innumerable lives, and imposed its ramifications on every aspect of life. Robert Greene in his work, *The 33 Strategies of War*, points out: “In the beginning, war was not at all strategic. Battles between tribes

were fought in a brutal manner But as tribes expanded and evolved into states That waging it blindly often led to exhaustion and self-destruction, even for the victor” (xvi). *The General of the Dead Army* is a renowned novel by the acclaimed writer Ismail Kadare of Albanian origin. The incidents which are described in the narrative took place in 1955, almost twenty years after the World War II. The narrative elucidates an ostentatious mission of Italian government to retrieve the remains of the dead soldiers, and the mission to Albania consist an army General, a Colonel-priest, a team of work men and other experts related. In addition to the irritant colonel-priest of his own army, the General had to face the pertinent menace of the antagonistic natives. Meanwhile, the General meets a German General who is on a similar mission in Albania. The mere presence of an Italian General in uniform invokes the uncut war memories of the past, and in response, they react with menacing interrogations and life-threatening warnings. Eventually, he has a mock-heroic an army of dead soldiers, and a disgracing memory of the Colonel Z, and an invariable repulsion towards the entire system of war. Despite the apparent denial of the priest, through gestures, the noble General had expressed his heart-felt apology for the Colonel Z's war crimes. As stated in the publication details of the Arcade Publishing; the novel was first published in 1963 as *Gjeneralii ushtërisë së vdekur*, and the first French publication in 1970 as *Le Général de l'armée morte*, and first English language translation in 1971. Kadare has written number of other works like, *Agamemnon's Daughter*, *Chronicle in Stone*, *The Concert*, *Elegy for Kosovo*, *The File on H.*, *The Palace of Dreams*, *The Pyramid*, *Spring Flowers*, *Spring Frost*, *The Successor*, and *The Three-Arched Bridge* (Kadare, *The General of the Dead Army*).

The narrative of Ismail Kadare's *The General of the Dead Army*, gives a crystal-clear view of a nation, which was brutally

defected by the World War II. The narrative-reality occurs twenty years after the war, yet the reminiscence of the terrible past has been rekindled by an Italian General in uniform. The socio-cultural spheres are crammed up with innumerable psychic traumas of yesterdays. The bilateral impacts of the war are equitable to both the Generals of Italy and Germany, who are on a mission in Albania to retrieve the remains of the dead soldiers intact. As for the Albanians, the very presence of the Italian army officers ignites the old recollections of despicable past; hence, both the General and his team had to meet totally hostile natives who were traumatized by the reminiscences dreadful war. Gradually, the war-past is brought into the present scenario in terms of people who are churned out by the wounded past.

With Chapter Two, the narrative stands for the “cause” of the mission ahead. The smooth flow of narrative is impeded by the actual incidents that occurred in the past, which links the present to the past in “broken narratives.” The diary entries of an Italian deserter has already foretold the hypocrisy behind the present mission ahead “O.K., so let's suppose they do search one day. Do you think I get any consolation out of that thought? There's nothing more hypocritical, if you ask me, than going around looking for bones when the war over” (16).

The extrapolation vividly depicts the very anti-thesis of war in situation; anyhow, the General burdened with many such stories ventures up his hopeless mission with a team of men consisting a colonel-priest, a group of gravediggers, and an Albanian expert. In the depth of his heart, the General disliked the search for a “dead-army” besides; this was a war against his own will, and also against the hostile Albanians. He has to examine and classify thousands of graves in Albania. Many such adversities have destabilized him to hate his

own odd fate: “What a damned business this is we've got on our hands!” the general said. “I can't even pass anyone in the street or see anyone in a café now without automatically checking to see what type his skull is” (23). The harrowing thoughts of the dead soldiers are also really bothering: “I feel like a foster father trying to make it up to children that others have abandoned... How can I avenge them?” (24). Whatever be the cause of war, more or less, the aftermath would be same to the both sides. It is axiomatic that the Italians bore a deep-cut wound of shame on account of Albanian set back in World War II; besides, for Italians, it was a matter of the national pride. As the narrative delves into the very heart of Albanian countryside, both the General and the priest face many harrowing and disheartening incidents. As typical of a General and the priest in the armed forces, they justify the Italian front, and illustrate the Albanian resistance in brutal manners. On the contrary, the Albanian country side still thrives on a deep sense of hatred and contempt towards Italian officers in uniform. Sigmund Freud in his decisive work, *Reflections on War and Death* disseminates a ground breaking notion on the concept of war, which is the most equitable quote on the subject of war so far:

War strips off the later deposits of civilization and allows the primitive man in us to reappear. It forces us again to be heroes who cannot believe in their own death, it stamps all strangers as enemies whose death we ought to cause or wish; it counsels us to rise above the death of those whom we love. But war cannot be abolished; as long as the conditions of existence among races are so varied and the repulsions between them are so vehement, there will have to be wars. The question then arises whether we shall be the ones to yield and adapt ourselves to it. Shall we not admit that in our civilized attitude towards death we have again lived psychologically beyond our means? Shall we not turn around and avow the truth? Were it not

better to give death the place to which it is entitled both in reality and in our thoughts and to reveal a little more of our unconscious attitude towards death which up to now we have so carefully suppressed? This may not appear a very high achievement and in some respects rather a step backwards, a kind of regression, but at least it has the advantage of taking the truth into account a little more and of making life more bearable again. To bear life remains, after all, the first duty of the living. The illusion becomes worthless if it disturbs us in this. (*Our Attitude towards Death II*)

The colonial pride of the General is defeated at the face of dead Italian soldiers' grave among the "martyrs' graveyard" (43). On a stone plaque nearby had the inscription: "These foreign soldiers died heroes' deaths, fighting beside Albanian partisans against the forces of the blue battalion, 17 March 1943" (43). The battalion was led by Colonel Z, evidently a notorious one. One day, during their return in the evening, the priest was startled by the scrawls in charcoal on the wall of cemetery saying, "such is the fate of our enemies" (48). The warning was unbearable and "contemptible insult" (48) to the Italian officers but for the natives, which was a token of protest against the colonial past. Even a common peasant is shown to be bold enough to interrogate the authenticity of the Italian team and their mission of grave-digging. The war has also disrupted and disoriented many well-kept traditions so far, especially with the arrival of brothel. This new anomaly gradually devours many of the male folk, which also hasten the downfall of Albanian culture and its coveted values. Despite the acrid treatment of Albanian women, especially with curse and insults, the first native visitor Lame Spiri visits the brothel. The natives were inept to curtail the further flow of the men folk. In the café owner's words:

It was war time for one thing, and we were hearing incredible,

fantastic stories every day. And we all thought there was nothing left in the world that could surprise us after that day when we saw the anti-tank guns and anti-aircraft guns with their long barrels rolling through our streets for the first time.... And yet, somehow the news that they were going to open a licensed brothel here shattered everyone no end. (64)

The conservative and traditional-minded Albanians detested the opening of brothel, and this causes troubles in the relationship with the army men. The affair of Ramiz Kurti's son with one of the prostitutes, rejecting his own engagement, paves way for its immediate closure. The noble father, who could not accept the affair, shoots down the prostitute. In return, the army men hang him and force the people to follow the coffin of the prostitute. A shop keeper says: "... She had been placed on the back of a small army lorry in a fine red coffin ... who could say what destiny had driven that poor women to follow so far in the wake of those helmeted soldiers"(74). As a matter of fact war, as system of destruction, always unleashes an unprecedented rise in the rate of rape and prostitution in toto. It is excruciating for the General to watch over the digging up and the exposure of dead soldiers' remains with their identifying medallion be confined in a blue bag bearing the trade mark name "Olympia" (76). The team is met with a war monument having some words carved: "There passed the infamous Blue Battalion that burned and massacred his village, killed our women and children, and hanged our men from these poles; To the memory of its dead the people have raised this movements" (78). In Chapter One of the *Reflections on War and Death*, Sigmund Freud formulates a pertinent perspective on war-trauma:

For psychic evolution shows a peculiarity which is not found in any other process of development. When a town becomes a city or a

child grows into a man, town and child disappear in the city and in the man. Only memory can sketch in the old features in the new picture; in reality the old materials and forms have been replaced by new ones. It is different in the case of psychic evolution. One can describe this unique state of affairs only by saying that every previous stage of development is preserved next to the following one from which it has evolved; the succession stipulates a co-existence although the material in which the whole series of changes has taken place remains the same. (*The Disappointment of War I*)

Chapters Ten and Eleven OF Kadare's novel gives a detailed account of the soldiers, and narrates how they remained in the servitude of Albanian peasants during the World War II. In the midst of their expedition, an old man, who was a miller, stops them, and gives a diary and the remains of a dead soldier. The soldier had deserted the army and took refuge in the mill, and served as his servant till the "Blue Battalion" murdered him. Everyday, the soldier wrote his experiences in Italian. Losing all his hope, he had given his medallion to the miller's daughter Christine. The entries in the diary give a moving as well as shocking account of war, and also about lives of deserted soldiers. The very first diary entry of the deserted-soldier interrogates the future vainglorious task ahead: "That was how I gave her the only thing I still possessed. And what good was it to me? Whatever happens I am lost. I am living, but lost, and what good of being found once you're dead" (116). The final entry dated on 5th September 1943 about the "hundreds of planes flew over" (117) is a strong indictment on the futility of war: "who knows what part of the world they've come from and what other part they're on their way to bomb?" (117).

The General is much offended by the strange turn of the events: "all those soldiers in uniform, with their weapons, their

badges of rank, their braid and medals, transformed into domestic servants, menials, farm labourers.... Do you remember how they even told us in one place about that colonel who did laundry and knitted socks for an Albanian family?" (122). More than anyone else, the General is much afflicted and disillusioned by the entire expedition itself. When intoxicated with liquor, he illustrates a "make-believe" world of heroic expeditions and elevates him as ever-winning General of all time. The narrative of his delusional mind is turned against his own ironic Generalship, "At first there had been just a few sections of coffins, the, gradually, companies and battalions were formed.... An entire army clothed in nylon" (128). Vatsal G. Thakkar sketches a pertinent view of depressive disposition of this sort in his book, *Depression and Bipolar Disorder*:

A major depressive episode (MDE) is at the core of major depressive disorder. This is an episode in which various neurological, psychological, and physical symptoms of depression are experienced for at least most of the day, every day, for a duration of *at least two weeks*. One of these symptoms must include either a depressed mood or seriously diminished interest, although both can occur at the same time. Other symptoms include a sharp change in appetite or sleep patterns, excessive fatigue, significant change in weight (usually a loss of weight), feelings of worthlessness or guilt, difficulty concentrating, and recurrent thoughts of death or suicide. (9)

It is too excruciating for the General to deal with real-life incidents of Albanian past in present. He is bewildered by the inhuman conduct and the indecent end of Colonel Z in the Albanian countryside. Colonel Z murdered a father only to rape his daughter. Later, traumatized by rape, the girl had committed suicide. Unaware of her death, the Colonel revisits her house and is killed by the dead girl's mother, Nice. Meanwhile, seeing a wedding party, they reach at

the same house where the colonel was murdered. The mother hands over the remains of the colonel in a sack. But the gentle General is gravely struck by the shameful deed of Colonel Z, and he even wants to apologize for the Colonel's misconduct. Defying the unwillingness of the priest, and also being ignorant of their language, he expresses his sense of humiliation through his gestures. On their return journey, the General throws sack which contained the remains of Colonel Z into a river.

J.E. Trenholm, has put forward a theory incorporating various views of Seifert, Synder, et. al., who state that in patriarchal society a woman's body is always viewed as the property of the nation. Thus, to seize her body in the war is almost similar to establish the ultimate victory over the enemy, and also serves as an “element of communication” to the patriarchy of that nation that they have failed to defend her. These are cultures which embrace the belief that the seat of male honour is mirrored in the sexual purity of their female relations. So, raping a woman could cause more lasting damage not just to her but also to her male relations (140). From very ancient period, there existed a heinous practice of raping the subjugated women to legitimize the victory in toto.

Eventually, disillusioned with the two-year long expedition in Albania, the General is seen to have uttered these words to his German counterpart on the same mission for Germany: “incompetent officers. I am here to sweep up the debris of your defeats! The General threw the crumpled telegram which was the list of 'unidentified soldiers' ” (262). The narrative is apt with the concluding stoic note: “The wind continued to blow, without respite” (264).

After witnessing the terrors and torments of the World War First, King George V of England stated in 1922: “I have many times asked myself whether there can be more potent advocates of peace

upon earth through the years to come than this massed multitude of silent witness to the desolation of war” (qtd. in Barwick, Editorial 249).

The narrative unravels the trauma of war in general, thus prompting the readers to rethink about the notion of fascism and its scathing ramifications in whole world. The novel also makes the readers rethink about the relevance of Second World War in the present scenario. Albania has witnessed a traumatic war, cultural rape, disintegration, loss, and a haunting memory. In a sense, Ismail Kadare's is an Albanian narrative of *past-in-present*.

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