

## ISMAIL KADARE'S THE PYRAMID AS A MULTI-LAYERED ALLEGORY OF TOTALITARIANISM

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### Abstract

Kadare's novel, *The Pyramid*, presents the reader with a many-faceted literary account of the phenomenon of totalitarianism. The Albanian writer's favourite theme of totalitarianism, which has made his name world-famous to readers of political fiction, attains its fullest exposition in this novel, as it is approached from different standpoints and explored through a variety of artistic means that bring to light not only the outer trappings, but, first and foremost, the essential structure and inner workings of totalitarianism as a system. Kadare puts to the service of this ambitious task an impressive array of modern literary techniques such as, among others, the deliberate use of an anachronistic diction, the employment of archetypal characters, a symbolical time-frame, the symbolical reification of ideas, doctrines and practices, etc. The result is a complex allegory which yields layer upon layer of signification, depending on the expectations of the reader, which in their turn are conditioned to a large extent by the reader's background. Thus, as we will show in detail during the course of our analysis, besides its universal dimension that attracts readers that might have never heard of Albania, let alone its obscure totalitarian history, *The Pyramid*, underneath the exotic facade of its ancient setting, contains a faithful allegorical picture of communist Albania, which, understandably, is what constitutes the principal object of attention for the average Albanian reader. It is this multi-layered semantic structure that gives to Kadare's antitotalitarian allegory of the Pyramid an inexhaustible capacity to communicate with a heterogenous readership that is not bound by a common framework of references and expectations.

**Keywords:** totalitarianism, allegory, symbol, reader, universal, diction, archetype, character, level, time-frame.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is the main object of this study to show that Kadare's novel *The Pyramid* is a major anti-totalitarian allegory that contains layer upon layer of signification. In reading *The Pyramid* the reader discovers a striking allegorical representation of the internal anatomy of the ideal totalitarian state, as well as a more concrete picture of the Albanian communist state and society in the latter half of the twentieth century. The way Kadare achieves such a broad representation of totalitarianism, including the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the universal, in a relatively short novel, is sophisticated and complex. Besides making use of

a number of traditional allegorical techniques, the author employs some modern literary devices in order to attain the full artistic representation of his anti-totalitarian vision. Without claiming to offer a fully exhaustive analysis of the anti-totalitarian significance of Kadare's novel and of the way it is artistically expressed by the writer, in this study we have focused on what we deem as the basic levels into which Kadare's allegorical semantic structure can be broken down, and on the artistic means and techniques which have gone into their making. To attain this purpose, besides carefully analyzing the actual text of the novel, we have made liberal use of historical facts and information that help in interpreting the Pyramid's significance, especially in the context of its close relationship to the Albanian communist dictatorship during most of the latter half of the twentieth century. We deem the employment of this methodological eclecticism as particularly appropriate for the proper interpretation of a novel that, first and foremost, seeks to reveal to its readers the true nature of a reality that lies beyond the text itself, and thus, in order to be fully understood, requires a broad range of information from extra-literary sources that help to throw light on the what it actually represents.

## 2. THE HISTORICAL, THE CONTEMPORARY AND THE UNIVERSAL READING OF THE PYRAMID

The nucleus of Kadare's novel was written during the mid 80's, but was first published only in 1991, when the communist system in Albania was giving out its last breath. This was precisely the time when the great majority of Albanians, who, till then, had been intellectually abused by the relentless machinery of totalitarian propaganda, were being confronted by the great revelation that socialist Albania, far from being a utopian land of freedom, prosperity and justice, had been a nightmarish dystopia designed to enslave the many for the interests of the few. This bitter truth could now be read between the lines of a story that ostensibly takes one back to the early history of pharaonic Egypt. *The Pyramid* is, thus, remarkable for the great spatial and temporal distance that separates its superficial setting – ancient Egypt – from its allegorical framework of representation – twentieth-century communist Albania. That the gap between these two seemingly disparate layers of signification is almost coterminous with the whole history of civilization, is, as we hope to show in the course of this study, entirely in keeping with the overall universalizing tendency of the novel, that, beneath all references to particular times and places, seeks, at its deepest, to allegorically represent the essential features of totalitarianism as such.

Among the many and diverse artistic means and techniques that Kadare uses to build up his multi-layered allegorical structure, the anachronistic interpolation of words and phrases that typically belong to the contemporary discursive apparatus of Communism, into a context that refers to ancient Egypt, is particularly striking. The blatant stylistic discrepancy between *The White House*, *The Political Police*, *the decoration ceremony*, *the declassification of files* or other such-like lexical abnormalities, and the surrounding text that recounts the story of the building of the Great Pyramid, is such that cannot be overlooked by any well-informed reader. By following the passageway that such stylistic cracks open into the inner structure of the text, the reader is led into a deeper level of signification, whereby the surface plot of the novel is read as an allegory of contemporary communist Albania.

The linguistic juxtaposition of pharaonic Egypt and communist Albania leads the reader into finding further and deeper analogies between these two frameworks of signification. In fact, though the outer historical and cultural trappings of the ancient Egyptian state are necessarily different from those of the modern Albanian dictatorship, such social and political phenomena as the recurrent exposure of alleged conspiracies against the Pharaoh followed by periodic purges of the ruling elite, the enslavement and oppression of the bulk of the population by a self-serving caste of demagogues and bureaucrats, or even the general climate of fear that weighs down on the collective psyche of Egyptian society, require no great feat of the imagination to be coherently transposed into the Albanian frame of reference, where, indeed, their real-life prototypes can be situated. Likewise, many of the political structures and even some of the principal actors that run the Egyptian government can be allegorically identified with their Albanian counterparts. The chief priest and the chief architect, the ministers, the courtiers, the provincial authorities, or even the masons who build the Pyramid's secret passages and are then killed so that their secrets may never be revealed, are only some of the human and institutional building blocks of the pyramidal structure of Egyptian despotism that in their broad outlines represent the Albanian communist hierarchy (some of the names of the Egyptian hierarchs can be read as anagrams of the names of the members of the Albanian Politbureau in the 1980's; Cheops, himself, as will be shown below, bears a close resemblance to the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha).

More specifically, the downfall and ultimate execution of the chief priest Hemiunu, who is second only to the Pharaoh in the pyramidal structure of the totalitarian state, is clearly reminiscent of the political elimination of the Albanian Prime Minister, Mehmet Shehu, by his boss, the dictator Enver Hoxha. Particularly suggestive of the Albanian scene during the 1970's and 1980's, when, according to a perverse logic, all the different sections of the totalitarian state were radically purged, is the episode that recounts how

the different sections of the Pyramid are purged, one after the other, of alleged saboteurs and conspirators. Even the grotesque nature of the Albanian charges (ministers that plot to poison the dictator, etc) bears a close resemblance to the Egyptian archetype of treacherous magicians, poison vials and subversively ambiguous poems.

The most important dimension of Kadare's novel, however, cannot be confined within a framework of representation limited by historical and geographical boundaries. The deep-seated analogy between the ancient past and the present, which in historical terms are separated by more than four millennia, gives rise to the metaphorical representation of an abstract universalized time-frame that contains within itself the whole history of human civilization. In other words, the two historical poles – pharaonic Egypt and communist Albania – between which the concretistic reading of the novel shuttles, symbolically hold in between themselves all the other manifestations of despotism throughout recorded history, albeit they may not be specifically represented or alluded to in the text.

Furthermore, the events and situations which make up the storyline of the novel, have a marked tendency to recur in a cyclical pattern. The alleged conspiracies, the investigations, the purges, the spiritual ups and downs of the downtrodden masses, all follow a predictable cyclical course which creates the impression that time and motion are fundamentally an illusion. The Pyramid itself, the central symbol of the novel, is cyclically reborn in different epochs, throwing, thus, its dark shadow over the whole course of human history. This indirect literary construction of the well-known concept of cyclical time, which, in its literal cosmological form originates in the myths of antiquity, is used by Kadare as a means of adding a universal symbolical dimension to the particular characters, actions and events of the story.

Such elements, then, can alternatively be read through the simplistic Egyptian lens of interpretation, in a deeper allegorical fashion as concrete representations of their Albanian counterparts, or, from the universal perspective offered by the generalized nonlinear time-frame, as symbols and archetypes unbound by particular historical and geographical limitations, which speak to all readers alike despite their diverse biographical and cultural backgrounds. In other words, Kadare's text is structured like a palimpsest. The uncovering of its different layers of signification depends on the reader's ability to probe into the hidden depths of the text. In its turn, the reader's ability to identify the author's coded meanings depends largely on his background – the concrete layer of allegorical representation which behind the Egyptian elements identifies their Albanian counterparts is necessarily more accessible to Albanian readers, while the more generalized layer is equally accessible to all readers, provided they possess the necessary critical acumen and sufficient encyclopaedic knowledge.

### **3. THE BUILDING OF THE PYRAMID AND THE TOTALITARIAN MECHANISM OF OPPRESSION**

Kadare's story progresses simultaneously on several levels. On the surface the plot proceeds in a straightforward linear direction to recount the building of the Great Pyramid, from its initial conception in the mind of the Pharaoh down to the placement of the last stone that caps the megastructure. Underneath the surface plot, however, the attentive reader discovers a more fundamental symbolical level, which is not organized chronologically or sequentially, but is structured around the central symbol of the Pyramid.

As a matter of fact, everything that is related to the Pyramid, from its physical characteristics to the many episodes that make up the story of its construction or the many characters who, in one way or another, are part of the building process, can be read symbolically. It is, in fact, precisely the relationship which they bear towards the Pyramid that infuses all the aforementioned elements with a symbolical meaning which frees them from the limitations of the Egyptian or Albanian frame of reference. Instead, seen from this symbolical perspective everything that is related to the Pyramid gains a universal significance in that it speaks of the essential structural and functional features of totalitarianism as such, rather than of its concrete manifestations in the course of history. Typically symbolical is the episode of the two stone carvers whose bones are crushed in-between the stones of the Pyramid. There can be little doubt that the manner of their deaths (even after the bodies are removed their feet remain stuck within the mighty structure) symbolises the unbearable weight of physical and spiritual oppression which constitutes the lot of man in totalitarian societies. Likewise, the myriad slaves who are worked to death so that the Pyramid might rise, represent the anonymous human masses in totalitarian societies. Like the Egyptian slaves who literally have no proper names, individuals living in a totalitarian society are deprived of any sense of personal identity, as they are valued not because of their essential dignity as human beings, but only for the instrumental function they perform as servants of the state.

The building of the Great Pyramid is punctuated by the recurrent exposition and smashing down of numerous imaginary conspiracies intended to sabotage its successful completion. The climate of fear and uncertainty generated by the periodic campaigns to wipe out anyone thought to be complicit in such

subversive work are, in a way, part of the Pyramid itself, integral features of its hidden spiritual essence. As a matter of fact, the fabrication of such imaginary plots and the liquidation on trumped-up charges of anyone whom the pharaoh almost arbitrarily chooses to play the role of scapegoat for the failures and disasters that accompany the building the Pyramid, is an essential constituent element in the great totalitarian design of securing and maintaining absolute power over the whole of society. The collective sense of fear produced by this diabolical technology of power reaches its climax during the so-called “Winter of Universal Suspicion”. While the long season of investigations, trials and executions runs its seemingly never-ending course, almost everybody becomes paranoid, as anyone is encouraged to spy on and denounce anyone else. Furthermore, in this perverse system of universal spying all social ties are loosened or even completely broken, making it, thus, easier for the state to command sole control over everyone.

Finally, the completion of the Pyramid gives rise to a general apathy among the people who seem physically and emotionally run down by the heavy toll it has taken in human lives. The political and social climate that the building of the Pyramid leaves as a legacy in the Egyptian capital is clearly representative of the spiritual poverty and listlessness of totalitarian societies, especially after they have passed beyond their early “heroic” phase. Like the Egyptian capital after the building of the Pyramid, stagnant totalitarian societies are characterized by the smothering of all creative impulses, which can find no outlet as the only socially accepted discourse is ridden by clichés and thus unable to express anything but the fictitious platitudes that serve to maintain the *status quo* of oppression. In such circumstance human existence itself loses its inner dynamic and falls prey to inertia.

Besides the many events and situations that are related during the course of the narration, *The Pyramid* contains descriptive scenes that also symbolically speak of the ultimate nature of totalitarian rule. A striking example of the latter is the enormous crowd of slaves working to build the Pyramid, who always appear to be moving under a thick cloud of dust. The dust, the sweat, the sandstorms and the scorching heat can be symbolically interpreted as objective correlatives of the unseen inner world of the slaves. In the same way that the excruciating exertion of their muscles is made physically sensible through the detailed description of the hauling of the huge stones, the above mentioned elements give symbolical materiality to the collective inner feelings of the slaves, which alternate between the two opposites poles of dull passivity and an almost hysterical enthusiasm. In the midst of the dust, the enormous crowd of slaves looks and functions like one single amorphous entity wherein individuals are melted into a homogenous mass. This is a particularly striking symbolical image of the mass psychology of totalitarianism, which, as is well known, assimilates the human individual into larger collective wholes that leave him with no sense of autonomous selfhood.

#### 4. THE PYRAMID AS A MULTI-FACETED SYMBOL OF TOTALITARIANISM

Beyond its obvious relationship to the Pharaoh, the Pyramid is symbolically related to the whole structure of the totalitarian state. Everyone in Egypt, from the Pharaoh down to the lowest slaves, is, in one way or another, functionally and emotionally involved in the building of the Pyramid. The function which different people perform in the building of the Pyramid is necessarily different, while even the emotional reactions that the Pyramid causes in the various strata of society are by no means the same – the provincial officials when hearing of the Pharaoh’s decision to build a pyramid are overcome by an intense feeling of enthusiasm; on the other hand, the Pharaoh’s courtiers are filled with an unbearable feeling of apprehension for what might befall them. Yet, for everyone alike the Pyramid serves as a fundamental frame of reference which determines their ultimate significance. What is important in the totalitarian society depicted by Kadare is precisely the relative position which people hold vis-à-vis the Pyramid, rather than their intrinsic values or capacities. The Pyramid can, thus, be symbolically likened to the totalitarian state which, in the well-known theory and practice of totalitarianism, not only comes prior to the individual in order of importance, but provides the only terms in which the latter can be understood. Like the stones of the Pyramid that have no value whatsoever apart from the great structure in which they are embedded, individuals in a totalitarian society are considered as having no identity beyond and above the all-encompassing state.

The architectural configuration of the Pyramid is symbolically significant as it projects in visual and material terms the unseen structure of the totalitarian state. First of all, the structure of the Pyramid, with the pyramidion at the top and the countless nameless stones at the base, very obviously represents the hierarchical principle of power according to which all the different organs of the totalitarian state are organised. Like the constituent parts of the Pyramid – the individual building blocks – the constituent organs of the totalitarian state are all made to serve one ultimate aim. In other words, like the perfectly harmonious shape of the Pyramid, which its original designer Imhotep has cryptically described by the gnomic saying “The Pyramid is one”, the totalitarian state is essentially monolithic. Even the symmetrical perfection and formal harmony of the Pyramid, can be construed symbolically as representative of the Procrustean totalitarian urge to reduce everything to simplistic schemes that leave no place for the in-built irregularities of

life. As Kadare himself in his non-fictional *Barbarian Times* suggests: "Totalitarianism is a negative harmony... Democratic countries are not harmonious in this way, they are not homogenous. The only form of government that is unitary and harmonic is communism, totalitarianism." (Kadare, 2000, pp. 60-61).

The geometrical perfection of the Pyramid, the fact that it is designed in accordance with the patterns of the stars, the detailed planning that precedes the actual work of its construction, all suggest the essentially utopian nature of totalitarianism both in theory and in practice. This aspect of the symbolical significance of the Pyramid is brought to more conspicuous relief by its striking contrast to the river Nile, which is described as a permanent obstacle standing in the way of all human efforts to follow the strict guidelines of the planners. Whereas the Pyramid is symmetrical and formally harmonious, the river follows an irregular course, while its waters often turn in on themselves in strange whirlpools that pose a real threat to the rafts which carry the Pyramid's stones to its building site in the desert. It seems reasonable, then, to symbolically interpret the Nile as an image of the natural spontaneity of life, its inherent unpredictability that cannot be contained inside the artificial straitjacket of totalitarianism. Unlike the Pyramid, which long before it is actually built in the desert exists first as a mental construct and then as a design on papyrus, the Nile antedates humanity by aeons of time. It can thus be seen as a symbol of the fundamental order of nature that thwarts all human attempts to build on it a radically different order of society which takes no cognizance of its existence.

The same representation of the Pyramid as a force that stands in stark opposition to the spontaneity of life and nature is suggested by the fact that the later stages of its construction witness the opening of numerous drinking establishments in the Egyptian capital. The spirit of licentiousness that reigns within the newly opened taverns serves people as an antidote to the long nightmarish years when the building of Pyramid took precedence over all the natural expressions of life, however basic they might be. The levity of drinking, which stands for the unruliness of life, makes the heaviness of the stony pyramidal structure all the more suggestive of the idea that totalitarianism is the epitome of the repression and denial of all the natural urges of human beings.

Symbolically the Pyramid is also related to what is irrational, obscure and unintelligible. Its *raison d'être*, "the secret reason" for its existence, remains hidden from the people, and only hinted at or rumoured about by the upper classes of society. The obscurity which surrounds the principle behind the building of the Pyramid represents the essentially esoteric nature of the totalitarian agenda, which lies at the core of all hypocritical efforts to propagandize a falsified version of reality to the people. Only the leader himself and the close circle of potentates around him know what is going on and for what purpose. Even they, as a matter of fact, at times prefer to keep this dangerous knowledge below the threshold of consciousness. The idea suggested is clearly that of the essentially conspiratorial nature of totalitarian regimes, which built their power on the systematic manipulation of the people who are kept in deliberate darkness as to the true nature of the regime.

## 5. CHEOPS, OR THE ARCHETYPE OF THE UNIVERSAL DESPOT

Conventionally, the Pharaoh Cheops as presented in *The Pyramid* is modelled on the well-known historical personage of Egyptian antiquity, who, according to Herodotus, was a cruel tyrant. Kadare, however, is far from attempting to produce a historically accurate portrait of the Egyptian ruler in the manner of the traditional historical novel. More than history what interests him is the psychology of the tyrant as such, whether ancient or modern. A number of details about Cheops are specifically suggestive of the Albanian communist dictator Enver Hoxha (his mental instability in the late stages of life, or the rumours about his daughter). Yet, the Cheops we read about in *The Pyramid* is essentially an archetype rather a representation of a particular person. As we intend to show in the last section of this study Kadare's Cheops is ultimately the archetypal dictator whose every action is guided by the unprincipled pursuit of power as an end in itself.

The archetypal character of the Pharaoh is entirely in keeping with his physical portrait as a mainly silent, almost two-dimensional iconic figure that seems more like a sphinx than like a living human being. Kadare's Cheops is, in fact, depicted not in the usual mimetic fashion of historical novels, but rather in the iconic manner of allegory which under the guise of the concrete and the particular seeks to express an unchanging universal essence.

The story of Cheops's development from an inexperienced young ruler to a hardened tyrant bears all the distinctive characteristics of a parable filled with universal significance. When he ascends the throne, Cheops, to everyone's surprise, declares that he will dispense with the old pharaonic tradition of having a pyramid built as a tomb for himself. What looks like a well-intentioned modernizing and reforming zeal, however, turns out to be no more than a youthful fantasy on the part of the young ruler, who, as he becomes more accustomed to the ways of power, changes his mind and decides to build the biggest pyramid in Egypt. Cheops's betrayal of his seemingly idealistic impulse, is yet another example of the archetypal story of the

young idealist who is corrupted by power to such an extent that he ends out by becoming the exact opposite of what he thought he was in the beginning.

As the years go by, the Pharaoh develops a complex symbiotic relationship to the Pyramid. At times the Pyramid seems to isolate him from the world, or even to oppress him with the enormous weight of its heavy stones. One might say that the pharaoh himself, like the countless tyrants that fill the pages of world history, becomes himself one of the victims of his murderous megalomania. On the other hand, the Pharaoh, or the archetypal tyrant, is very intimately identified with the Pyramid, or the whole oppressive structure of the totalitarian state. He channels and releases the deeply felt sense of isolation, which is an inevitable side effect of his solitary position at the summit of power (the pyramid's location in the midst of the desert is very suggestive of the Pharaoh's own spiritual aridness), into a sadistic hatred for the people who speak ill of the Pyramid (therefore of him, too), and who, unlike him, still retain the human capacity to love, make friends and live the lives of ordinary mortals. As in a psychological vicious circle, the Pharaoh's active enmity towards the people causes him to further lose his grip on reality by becoming ever more isolated and paranoid. Kadare's portrait of Cheops as the archetypal paranoid tyrant could, in fact, stand for the whole catalogue of despots, tyrants and dictators that have lived during the whole course of history from the earliest human civilisations (the actual setting of the novel) to the actual present (the novel's allegorical frame of reference).

## 6. CONCLUSION

In this study we aimed to show that Ismail Kadare's *The Pyramid* is a complex multi-layered allegory of totalitarianism. The novel can be read in three basic levels: the superficial one which refers to ancient Egypt and such well-known historical personages as the Pharaoh Cheops; the deeper allegorical but still concrete level in which ancient Egypt is identified with contemporary communist Albania; the most fundamental level which reduces all concrete representations of events and characters to their archetypes, and, thus, refers to despotism and totalitarianism as such, beyond their particular historical manifestations. The complex semantic structure of the novel's text is built up by the employment of a number of artistic means and techniques. In the course of our analysis we focused especially on Kadare's deliberate use of lexical anachronisms that superimpose the typical discourse of twentieth-century Communism on the ancient historical setting, the polarization and the cyclical rendition of time through which the particulars that make up the surface plot of the novel are universalized, the deeply symbolical significance of the Pyramid and everything that is related to it, and the archetypal nature of Cheops as the chief character, who, beyond his Egyptian historical prototype and his obvious modern allegorical analogue, the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha, stand for all the tyrants of history. Through such artistic proceedings like the above, Kadare manages to fuse into a single short novel a multi-dimensional depiction of totalitarianism that attracts a broad range of readers, from those whose particular interest lies in the novel's Albanian frame of reference to those who might never have heard of Albanian politics, but are kept in thrall by the writer's deeply revealing artistic representation of totalitarianism.

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