



'Elegy' for the Victims of Misused Memory: Ismail Kadare's Three Elegies for Kosovo (1998)

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"Wherever collective memory based on the selective use of the past holds sway, everyone thinks alike. When everyone thinks alike, no one thinks at all."
(Debeljak 1994: 153)

I. Introduction

On 24 March 2019, the BBC broadcast a short documentary on the tensions between Serbia and Kosovar Albanians. Its title, *Kosovo war: The conflict that won't go away*, mirrors the tenacity of the conflict. This documentary questions the possibility of a reconciliation between the Serbian and Albanian ethnic groups in Kosovo. Journalist Jeremy Bowen points to the after-war 'legacy of bitterness' that makes such a reconciliation difficult and that continues to poison relationships between some individuals of Serbian and Kosovar Albanian backgrounds. This conflictual relationship is observable for instance in the occasional public manifestation of national symbols at crucial moments of encounter between both ethnic groups. During the 2018 Fifa football match between Serbia and Switzerland, two goals were scored by Swiss players of Kosovar Albanian origin (Das 2018). To celebrate their goals, the players, Granit Xhaka and Xherdan Shaqiri, mimicked the Albanian national symbol of the double-headed eagle. This led to fierce reactions from supporters on the Serbian side of the match. Fifa fined both players for this provocative display of ethnic identity. Even though armed conflicts belong to the past, nationalistic narratives, and the nationalistic actions they motivate, keep deteriorating relationships between Kosovar Albanians and Serbians.

Kosovo's symbolic value continues to affect the relationships between Albanians and Serbs in several contexts of encounter. Bowen traces the history of the ways in which this symbolic value has entered the collective memory of the Serbian nation across time (2014). Kosovo symbolism is at the centre of the Serbian nationalistic narrative, which recycles the 1389 defeat against the Ottoman Empire on 'Kosovo Polje' ("blackbird field") as its mythical cornerstone. Albanians claim Kosovo as part of their collective memory too. Well-known Albanian writer Ismail Kadare depicted this historical event in his novella titled *Trie këngë zie për Kosovën (Three Elegies for Kosovo)*¹, published in 1998. This literary work starts from the choice to recycle the 1389 episode to comment upon the conflicts that were escalating in the 1990s between Serbian nationalists and Kosovar Albanians around the Kosovo question.

The present contribution focuses on the manners in which the historical novella under scrutiny acts as a vector for resistance to nationalistic narratives through the construction of a fictional counter-narrative that deconstructs the main myth at the centre of the post-Titoist Serbian nationalistic narrative. As Levy argues, "[...] Kadare [remembers] in order to confront, then move beyond, their myths" (2001: 74). This study aims to unravel the ways in which the novella 'remembers' and 'moves' indeed beyond mystification. In doing so *Three Elegies* echoes Björninen et al.'s comprehension of narrative as *being* social action (2020). Prior to commencing the study, it is worth mentioning that Maria Tamboukou's Foucauldian approach to the study of narratives has offered insightful methodological strategies to the present investigation of the interrelationship between *Three Elegies* and the Kosovo myth (2013). Tamboukou's use of genealogical techniques seems particularly useful here. She interprets Foucauldian genealogy as the archival practice of working "meticulously with grey dusty documents" to look for "insignificant details" in order to uncover "unthought-of contours of various ways, discourses and practices that human beings have used to make sense of themselves and the world", not in order to reach a single, penultimate truth, but to open up "archaeological journeys with no final destinations" (op cit.: 1). Adopting Foucauldian genealogical tools to enrich this paper's methodology helps foster awareness about the constructed quality and the contextualisation of the emergence of the particular narratives studied here. Besides, moving from the research level to the narrative level as such, these tools facilitate a better comprehension of the manners in which Kadare's fictional narrative builds its own construction upon the unravelling and questioning of multiple aspects of the Kosovo myth. In other words, they show how "it [*Three Elegies*] keeps uncovering layers of distortions/constructions and is directed to the future rather than to the past" (ibid.).

Amongst the array of choices of objects of study that the "dispositif" (as interpreted by Tamboukou based on Foucauld's principles; op cit.: 8) of relations between Albanian narratives and Serbian narratives offers, I have opted for the examination of the connectedness between the following two narratives, using the first one as chief focal point: Kadare's *Three Elegies for Kosovo* and the Kosovo myth developed in Serbian nationalistic discourse. The first step is to map the cartography of the context of emergence of the Kosovo question, with particular emphasis on the founding myth at the heart of the Serbian nationalistic discourse. I subsequently explore the manner in which Kadare resorts to historical fiction as a means to build an alternative narrative to myth. While Serbian nationalistic discourse used this episode as a founding myth, Kadare's novella looks critically at the Serbian version of the Kosovo story (understood as *fabula*) by rewriting it (in a structured discourse or *sjuzhet*) as a narrative (a combination of *fabula* and *sjuzhet*) of sharing of the historical episode in the memory of different Balkan ethnic groups and by insisting on precisely this group contribution and cross-border cooperation to fight Ottoman imperialist expansion, embodying here the 'predatory identities' (Appadurai 2006). I further examine how the novella's focus on individual stories and the constructed aspect of narrative counters the mystification and subsequent instrumentalisation

of the Battle of Kosovo. Finally, the question arises how an exploration of European identity emerges from the text's treatment of exile, hospitality, and inclusion.

II. Historical Fiction as an Alternative to Nationalistic Narratives

In 1998 the war broke out in Kosovo, opposing the forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to the Kosovo Liberation Army. It started in February 1998 and ended in June 1999 under NATO pressure and bombings in Serbia (1999). The tensions at the heart of this armed conflict had deep roots in the history and collective memory of both ethnic groups. On the one side, the Serbian nation had claimed Kosovo as the cradle its identity for centuries. A particular event was subject to mystification and instrumentalisation in the discourse driving Serbian nationalists to keep control over Kosovo, that is, the Battle of Kosovo Polje (the blackbird field). As David Rieff argues, "exercises in collective historical remembrance far more closely resemble myth on one side and political propaganda on the other than they do history" (2016: 22). This narrative, which from now on I will be referring to as the 'Kosovo myth' or 'Kosovo narrative' interchangeably², relates the battle that took place on 28 June 1389 in Kosovo and that was triggered by the refusal of Lazar Hrebeljanović, mostly known as King Lazar of Serbia, to submit to the Ottoman invaders. The battle opposed a Christian coalition of Balkan ethnic groups to the Ottoman army and Serbian nationalism glorified prince Lazar as the main martyr of Serbian and Christian identity, downplaying the involvement of other ethnic groups. On the other side, Albanians, in turn, claimed Kosovo to be a part of 'Great Albania', an abstract – supposedly ancestral – region encompassing all places around Albania where Albanian ethnics live (Kola 2003)³. As Cohen argues:

Given the unrelenting tug-of-war in modern times between Serbian and Albanian nationalists over the question of who the rightful "owner" of Kosovo is, it is no surprise to find that each side has gone to great lengths (including in some cases flagrant manipulation of the evidence) to justify its position. (2014: 7)

These 'great lengths' materialise in the use of their respective myths on Kosovo to claim it as each party's own rightful territory.

² Baker: "Narratives, in the sense used here, are the everyday stories we live by, and indeed I will be using 'narrative' and 'story' interchangeably throughout the book. [...] The notion of narrative used in this book overlaps to some extent with Foucault's 'discourse' and Barthes' 'myths', especially in its emphasis on the normalizing effect of publicly disseminated representations [...] But the concept of narrative is much more concrete and accessible, compared with the abstract notion of discourse as a vehicle for social and political processes and myth as an element in a second-order semiological system. Also, unlike myth, and much more so than discourse, the notion of narrative is not restricted to public representations but applies equally to individual stories [...]" (2006: 3).

³ "In a stupor, Gjorg heard snippets of conversation. 'I think we've left Albania, we've been walking so many days now' – 'I think so too' – 'This isn't Serbian land' – 'What do you think?' – 'I'd say this isn't Serbia' – 'What? Not Serbia, not Albania?' – 'Let me put it to you this way, my friend: some say this is Serbia, some say Albania. The Lord only knows which of the two it really is. So who owns this accursed plain where we spilled our blood, the Blackbird Plain, as they call it? It was there, my brother, that the fighting started – a hundred, maybe even two hundred years ago'" (Kadare 2011: 43-44).

In the Serbian collective memory, the 'Kosovo myth' "[matured] and [crystallized] [...] in the nineteenth century, both in response to and as a shaper of modern Serbian nationalism" (Cohen 2014: 6). Vuk Karadžić (1787-1864) and Petar Petrović Njegoš (1813-1851) are now considered as the main literary carriers of the myth. Their texts have enabled its canonisation into a cornerstone of the Serbian national ideology (Cohen 2014: 11-12). Karadžić provided a coherent narrative around the story of Lazar and the Battle of Kosovo, and Njegoš's *The Mountain Wreath*, which fictionalises the fight against Islam converts, was also saturated with references to the Kosovo myth (originally published in 1847; English edition 1930). One wonders how the Kosovo narrative has come to endorse such a central significance within the Serbian nationalistic narrative. Cohen answers this question by arguing that it becomes particularly meaningful in moments of crisis for the Serbian nation (2014). He cites Radmila Gorup, a Serbian scholar, who claims that "whenever the nation is threatened, Kosovo matters again" (1991: 118, cited in Cohen 2014: 10). The Yugoslav situation of the 1990s is undeniably such a case (Cohen 2014: 20). After the death of Socialist Yugoslavia's founder, Josip Broz Tito, in 1980, Yugoslavia started to lose the unity and relative stability that were characteristic of communist times (22). As ethnic Albanians in Kosovo increasingly intensified their demands for autonomy, Serbian nationalism grew in turn more affirmed, being "[injected with] myths and legends [...] and fresh potential for violence" (ibid.). As Cohen remarks, "an especially toxic form of demagoguery, centering [sic] on the figure of Slobodan Milošević, burst onto the Serbian political scene" (ibid.). Shapira, arguing along the same lines, observes that "a whole line of 'memory agents' [...] shape the picture of the past according to the needs and agonies of the present" (Shapira 1994: 9, cited in Gedi and Elam 1996: 42). Therefore, the Kosovo narrative became 'important again' as a way to make sense of the present and its turn of events, when Serbian nationalists felt threatened by the demands of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. It became subsequently utilised as a springboard for violence in 1998, with the outbreak of the Kosovo war.

Ismail Kadare did not wait for the 1998 belligerent culmination of Serbian nationalism to react to the tensions that were palpable in Kosovo throughout the second half of the 20th century⁴. He had fictionalised the conflict a few years earlier, in the novella *Krushqit janë të ngrirë* (*The Wedding Procession Turned to Ice*). This work, in which he clearly takes sides for the ethnic Albanians and which was published in 1985, was written between 1981 and 1983 in response to the crimes committed by Serbs against Kosovar Albanians in Pristina in 1981. Eight years after this publication, Kadare commented:

J'y [The Wedding Procession Turned to Ice] lançais un appel aux Serbes pour que la haine cesse dans les Balkans. Dans ce roman, il y a vraiment un message d'amitié. Mais évidemment, c'était plutôt une illusion. Pas seulement de ma part mais aussi de celle de beaucoup d'autres intellectuels des deux côtés. Le mal l'a emporté. (1993: 82)

⁴ Kadare also expressed his views on the Kosovo question in a collection of interviews by Denis Fernandez Recatala. The interviews were published under the title *Temps Barbares* and published by L'Archipel in 1999.

However, his initial hopes of reconciliation – ‘the cessation of hatred’, which in his eyes came from Serbs – between both ethnic groups were gradually disappointed.

In 1998, Kadare decided to tackle the same issue again. The novella under scrutiny here is altogether different in tone. In this piece of fiction, he confronts the constructed character and the mystification of the Kosovo narrative. About the mystification of the Battle of Kosovo Polje, he says:

L'Occident fonde son attitude sur un mythe hollywoodien, naïf, vulgaire et mensonger, patiemment bâti depuis cinquante ans, selon lequel le Kosovo serait le berceau de la nation serbe. C'est une imposture, une légende primitive. (Cited in Hugué 1996)⁶

In this extract, Kadare denounces head-on what he considers as the mythical aspect of Serbian nationalistic discourse and its inherent ‘imposture’, which he openly disagrees with.⁵ In *Three Elegies*, the same denunciation occurs.

Kadare’s aim in this novella and in the public debate is to restore some truth around the Kosovo myth and thereby ‘desacralise’ and ‘demystify’ it. As the writer puts it in an interview given a few years prior to the novella’s publication, lies must be opposed:

Moi j'accepte qu'il y ait des solutions pacifiques, diplomatiques, parce que je suis écrivain, et je ne peux penser à autre chose. Mais quand même, il ne faut pas dire des mensonges. (1993: 85)

When asked what he would do if war were to break out, he claims:

J'essaierais d'aider mon peuple. Avec tous les moyens – tous mes moyens d'écrivain ; en essayant de dire, de rétablir la vérité, contre les mensonges dont je vous parlais. Mais vous savez... le Kosovo est un crime annoncé. (91)⁷

In order to ‘re-establish the truth’ and ‘help his people’, Kadare opts for a fictional exploration of the 1389 Kosovo Battle in the novella. He insists on the need for the writer to dig in the historical past to affirm truths in order to counter tyranny:

C'est très triste et primitif d'avoir à ouvrir des archives historiques pour résoudre les problèmes d'aujourd'hui. Mais si l'autre commet un grand mensonge, on doit quand même le corriger. (86)

In *Three Elegies*, the author endeavours to use history as a vector for correction, rehabilitation of ‘truth’ and challenge of the dominant mythical Kosovo narrative in the late 1990s.

III. Demystification

How does Kadare’s novella tackle what the author referred to as historical ‘problems’ in the above-mentioned interview? The classical historical novel, since Sir Walter Scott’s novels delimited the contours of the genre, tends to explore “dark areas”

⁵ Kadare’s arguments on the conflict engendered some reactions. In his strongly critical article, Yves Tomić asks the question whether Ismail Kadare is neutral in his observations of the Kosovo war (2000). To this type of questions, Kadare answers that it is not the writer’s role to bear a political message on a political scene.

⁶ Emphasis by the autor.

⁷ Emphasis by the autor.

in the official records in order to enjoy some literary freedom (McHale 1994: 87). To stay truthful to the official lines of history, historical fiction habitually avoids anachronisms and contradictions (ibid.). Postmodern historical fiction, on the contrary, goes beyond seeking literary freedom as such and aims at emphasising and subsequently questioning the "dark areas": it "[...] seeks to foreground ["the dark areas"] [...] by visibly contradicting the public record of 'official' history; by flaunting anachronism; and by integrating history and the fantastic" (90). In *Three Elegies*, the whole story unfolds around the Kosovo Battle, but exceeds the officially accepted version. On the discourse level, contradictions, anachronisms and the fantastic penetrate the storytelling. The use of historical material features key aspects of postmodern historical novels, since

it revises the content of the historical record, reinterpreting the historical record, often demystifying or debunking the orthodox version of the past [and] it revises, indeed transforms, the conventions and norms of historical fiction itself. (ibid.)

Here, it is the nationalistic narrative – considered as historical 'truth' in Serbian nationalism – and "dark areas" in the official historical record of the 1389 Battle that undergo revision and reinterpretation.

The main aim of a recourse to history for Kadare is to remedy the mystification and instrumentalisation of the Kosovo narrative, its inherent "lies" and "manipulation" of the Serbs:⁸

Quand nous parlons du drame des Balkans, c'est aussi celui de la nation serbe manipulée, de manière désespérante. Car dans les Balkans, la chose la plus facile est d'inciter à la haine, au nationalisme, de fabriquer des mensonges historiques, des mythes... Les Serbes croient, en toute sincérité, qu'ils sont les habitants autochtones des Balkans, qu'ils ont des droits sur tout le monde, qu'ils sont persécutés, attaqués par tout le monde. C'est le contraire qui est vrai. (Kadare 1993: 83)

Cohen foregrounds this instrumentalisation too:

The main focus of the Serbian nationalism of the 1980s was the alleged victimization of the Serbs of Kosovo, which Milosevic and other Serb leaders played for all it was worth, injecting myths and legends that had surrounded the subject of Kosovo since the fourteenth century with new emotional power and fresh potential for violence. (Cohen 2014: 22).

As explained here, 1980s Serbian nationalism played on the "victimization of the Serbs of Kosovo". It used the Kosovo myth as a vector of legitimation of violence against the alleged persecutors, namely the Albanians 'stealing', as it were, Kosovo.

This form of instrumentalisation permeates the novella studied here. *Three Elegies* is divided into three parts ("elegies", 2011)⁹. The first part of the book depicts the shared character of the 1389 Battle and deconstructs the Serbian-centric nature of the

⁸ Ani Kokobobo develops this argument in her article "The 'Curse' of Eastern Blood in Ismail Kadare's Elegy for Kosovo" (2010). She argues that Kadare substantially rewrites the founding myth of Serbian nationalism.

⁹ The novel presents three elegies, probably addressed to the lost peace in Kosovo and to the actual victims of the conflict on all sides. The first part tells the story of the battle from an omniscient and an Ottoman perspective. The second part adopts the perspective of Balkan minstrels. The last part gives the word to the ghost of Sultan Murad.

Kosovo myth. In the novella, Serbs fight alongside Bosnians, Wallachians, Croatians and Albanians. All these ethnic groups have their own founding myths and their own national collective memory, which co-exist in relative internal peace. None of them seems to jeopardise the legitimacy of any other and they all form an alliance against their common Ottoman enemy. When the loss of the battle becomes an unavoidable outcome, their use of national symbols seems without avail. Resorting to national myths does not resolve their present struggles:

Finally, when they saw that all this was of no avail, they began to cheer on holy Serbia, glorious Walachia, Bosnia the immortal, Albania begot by an eagle, and so on, but it was too late for all of this, too. (25)

Besides, none of the 'nations'¹⁰ evoked are favoured in their heroic deeds. All were united in the battle and all were defeated together. *Three Elegies* thereby suggests a new legitimacy of various Balkan ethnic groups to claim the battle as part of their own collective memory as well. The first part, so doing, deconstructs one of the central pillars of the Kosovo narrative.

In the Kosovo narrative, Prince Lazar is hailed as a martyr who lost his life for the Serbian nation and Christendom against Islamic influence. The first part of *Three Elegies* pays tribute to the suffering and bravery of Prince Lazar. However, it does not glorify him as a hero, but characterises him as "one ruler among many". As Ani Kokobobo claims:

This transformation of Lazar from self-martyring prince to battlefield strategist strips him of his heroic status in the original poems. Indeed, he is now merely one ruler among many, and with his demotion, the story of the battle loses its Serbian-centric nature. (2010: 83)

Moreover, the text undermines further instances of represented Serbian self-importance. The narrator mocks the egotism of Vladan, the Serbian minstrel, and his feeling of superiority in a sharp ironic tone:

Vladan's eyes filled with tears. It came as no surprise that people should be left behind in this confusion, he thought, but surely not a Serb of his distinction (Kadare 2011: 38).

The novella's depiction of Serbian characters strips them of the centeredness they occupy in the Kosovo myth. In this novella, they become the equals of other Balkan characters.

The first part of *Three Elegies* draws further attention to the constructed character of narratives and the "dark areas" of historical record, which contrasts with the inflexibility of the Serbian narrative of the 1980s, via the disruption of the discourse's style and the subsequent exploration of these historical "dark areas" in the story. This part ends with a war report, in which the narrator comments on the battle. The narrative style of the novella is abruptly disrupted, the report occupying a non-negligible amount of space in the first part (corresponding to five of the twenty-nine pages). Such a stylistic shift

¹⁰ The use of the word 'nation' reminds us of the modern political sense of the term, that of equivalent to the state and the demands of Kosovar Albanians.

instigates a question: how does this break in the discourse relate to the rest of the narrative? According to historical record, the Ottoman sultan at the head of the army that fought against the Balkan coalition, Sultan Murad, was supposedly murdered on the battlefield, just like Prince Lazar. The narrator questions this assassination via the inserted war report, where he casts doubts on the identity of the perpetrators of the crime. In some historical records, Miloš Obilić, a Serbian warrior, supposedly killed Sultan Murad during the battle (Bataković 2005: 64; for further information see Dutceac 2011: 208). However, little information exists concerning the murderer and the circumstances of the assassination. The fictional narrative precisely expands on this "dark area" to suggest other possible tracks. In the war report and its supplement, the narrator explains in a quasi-investigative manner how the killer could not have been a member of the Balkan coalition since the Sultan is reachable only by his own people in general. Even on his horse, the probability of someone jumping and reaching the sultan's chest would have been close to zero. The reporter therefore argues that the Sultan's son, Bayezid, was most likely the perpetrator of the crime. By questioning historical records through stylistic fragmentation, the novella attracts the attention doubly: on the one side, on the constructed character of discourse, and, on the other side, on the constructed character of, and the 'ontological doubt' (Wesseling 1991: 5) which postmodern historical novels consider inherent to, historical records and stories.

Moreover, the novella raises awareness about the constructed aspect of narratives on a thematic level as well. Linda Hutcheon in her discussion of postmodern fiction states that the major form of postmodern historical novels is "historiographic metafiction" since it shows awareness of the recent historiographic developments and questions the borders between history and fiction, showing "intense self-consciousness about the way in which all this is done" (1989: 113). Labelling *Three Elegies* as postmodern historical fiction would possibly be too generalising and beside the point of the present paper. Still, the fictional narrative systematically borrows postmodern literary strategies in the form of self-reference to its own literariness and constructed character, and of reference to the constructed character of history shaping. This is exemplified in the emphasis at several occasions on the impossibility of the completeness of information gathering. In the novella's story, the task of rendering 'historical facts' lies in the hands of a few minstrels, whose initial and principal task is to 'sing the glory' of the nation:

Those minstrels have always been the darlings of fate!' one of the men said with a faint smile and a twinkle of envy in his eyes, but the Prince was quick to point out: 'If we lose them, who will sing our glory?' (36)

They are in charge of reporting and narrating the battle, obviously without the modern apparatus for the collection of information and with the task of glorifying the side to which they belong. They thereby inevitably add a mythical layer to their storytelling¹¹. The minstrels' very human condition – their physical and mental characteristics

¹¹ The parallel with the situation of the late 1990s in Kosovo is perceptible. Cohen refers to the transmission of the Kosovo myth and the glorification of Prince Lazar, via songs and stories often sung while playing the *gusla*. In *Three Elegies*, the minstrels transmit their glorified stories via storytelling and singing, while playing either the *lahuta* (for Albanians) or the *gusla* (for Serbians).

– inhibits the objectivity of the information collected. The second part of the book focuses on the reaction of Gjorg Shkreli, an Albanian minstrel, and his fellow minstrels to the loss of the battle, and their travel from the battlefield towards Western Europe. They are depicted as anxious individuals, seeking to meticulously observe the fight but blinded by the sun (36) and affected by emotions (36, 38). Superstition interferes with their comprehension of the events as well, as they begin to discern signs of loss in the sky (37). Besides being inhibited by bright light and superstition, the minstrels' perspective shows limits. Their attention cannot be equally distributed everywhere during the battle. They must choose a focus:

[W]ith his attention focused on the battlefield Gjorg did not manage to turn around in time. It was only when he heard someone shout – 'The commander-in-chief is moving out!' – that he realized what had happened. (37)

This extract suggests that Gjorg does not simply collect information he sees, but also information he guesses following what he hears. Sometimes, human senses can be deceitful due to fatigue:

With eyes grown weary from the light, they struggled to follow the movement of the banners bearing crosses that were being slashed to pieces by the Turkish crescent. The harsh light spread a great dread. Just as the intoxicating wine had the night before. (36)

Part of the information on the events that manages to reach the minstrels comes to their ears via rumours and snippets of information, which the listeners weave into a coherent story themselves (40). However, the pieces of information sometimes come from too far to be truthful:

Now they were so far that hardly any news reached them any more. Even when news did come, it was so altered by the distance that they were not sure what to make of it. It was as if one were to believe a courier who had grown old, even died, travelling down an endless road, and yet had still managed to somehow get through and deliver his message. (57)

When the battle is over, the bards join a flow of migrants who are travelling to the north of Europe. At one given moment (that is, the gathering of Catholic princes in a tent during the battle), they are asked to relate what happened. However, "[i]t is [their] trade, both to curse and to exalt" (47) and solely testifying lessens their role. This makes them feel uncomfortable, "especially now after the calamity on the Plains of Kosovo" (49), when they have to transmit their traumatic story. Reducing the minstrels' role to simply retelling reality 'objectively' equals asking them to complete a task for which they do not possess the qualifications:

It was not surprising that they [Vladan, Manolo and the Croat] wavered – the one could only tell folktales, the other only mimic the calls of birds and wolves. To ask these minstrels to talk of their lands was like asking a cavalryman to take a broom and sweep the road. (70)

The trauma of the battle renders the message ineffable if not uttered in the form of a song. Glorification and cursing enable historical trauma to be expressed. History and

poetry are interwoven and this emphasises the subjective character of storytelling, which is sublimated and poeticised.

Through these different strategies, the novella foregrounds the subjective, potentially deformed and partly imaginary character of stories. It becomes clear that what is drawn from historical reality becomes a story mediated through the senses and sensibilities of the mediators, time and distance. Tim Wilson, when addressing the depiction of characters in the novella, argues that "[e]ach perspective is imbued with candour and humanity, thereby undermining the perspective which propagates violence through mythical justifications mixed with fanatical nationalism" (2016). This appears to be accurate, since the emphasised uncertainty and humanity contrast with the fixedness of the Kosovo myth to which the novella responds.

Three Elegies depicts the misuse of subjective stories when they become instrumentalised. The Ottoman soldiers fight to impose Islam on those who have not adopted it yet, that is to say, the Balkan peoples:

The Turks facing them, who had never seen anything like this before, charged shouting only the name of Allah, in the simple conviction that they had come here to take this evil region, which was a blot, a scandal on the face of the earth, and bring it back to the right path, in other words, to make it an "Islamic region." (Kadare 2011: 25-26)

The aim of this form of imperialism is to conquer the Balkans and destroy "[a]ll those banners and icons and crosses and multicoloured emblems, and the trumpets, and the long and resonant names and titles of their dukes and counts" (22) to turn the region into a unified whole without internal individualities, governed by a single Islamic 'truth'. Diversity, which is inherent to the Balkans, is destroyed and the Ottoman army's aim is to homogenise the culturally multifaceted Balkans:

It is these shadows [the imperial army], as they might appear to be to an onlooker, who will face those strutting Balkans and slash their names, their long peacock-tail titles, and ultimately slash their lives. (23)

As the following extract shows, the Balkan people feel that they have become ghosts after the Ottoman invasion and their defeat. They feel stripped of their substance: "'We are dead, brother!' he heard Vladan's voice say. 'Do you believe me now, that we are nothing but spirits?'" (42). Countries are not countries anymore, but a unified area peopled by slaves to the Empire:

What's there now is slavery! Do you understand what I am saying? S-l-a-v-e-r-y! I am telling you, there is no more Bosnia, nor Greece, nor Serbia, not Albania, nor Walachia – only a 'region'. (54)

The novella's depiction of the acculturation process set in 1389, with the Ottoman army as perpetrator, echoes in the novella's present of publication. As mentioned above, the Kosovo myth had been used by Milošević's proponents with the purpose of stripping Kosovo of its 'Albanianness'. Milošević, for instance, implemented various restrictions on the cultural rights of the Albanian community in Yugoslavia (Tollefson 2002: 186). Therefore, the ways in which the story is put into discourse activates social

significance (Björninen et al. op cit.: 439) in that it acts as resistance against such instrumentalisation of narratives.

Nonetheless, the Ottoman Empire, which, at first sight, seems so uniform and grey (deprived of any 'colour', any inner difference and hence any 'life') and that wishes to homogenise the Balkans, shows internal conflict and paradoxical heterogeneity. In the war report appended to the first part of the novella, inner political discordances between Sultan Murad and his son Bayezid concerning the politics of the Empire become concrete. The former wishes the rooting of the Empire in Asia; the latter aims at expanding it across Europe. Nevertheless, this plural political reality is annihilated by an insistent and destructive fight for dictatorial, although artificial, homogeneity. Bayezid supposedly assassinates his discordant father for political reasons, with the purpose of continuing his imperial politics in Europe.

IV. Questioning European Identity: Predatory Identities and Forgetting

The second part of *Three Elegies* addresses issues related to the identity of Europe, which also displays symptoms of a predatory identity (as defined by Appadurai 2006: 51). Imposing one narrative through the medium of violence is not restricted to the Ottoman army; Europe undergoes a similar depiction, and hence criticism, too. Three aspects are particularly pointed out: the rejection of the cultural otherness from the Balkans, the killing of the hybrid character of the novella, and the reduction of the other to one's own epistemological codes.

When the Balkan migrants reach Northern Europe¹², they face inhospitality, distrust and suspicion on the part of the Europeans: "There were more and more searches. The fugitives were searched for hidden icons, for symptoms of the plague, for counterfeit currency" (63). This is partly due to the lack of information about the former: "Most of the people had never heard of the Battle of Kosovo, so when the fugitives spoke of it, they aroused suspicion instead of compassion" (ibid.). However, the Balkan migrants are not what Europeans fear the most. When migrants arrive from the Balkans, they import novelties such as the yogurt recipe and some cultural objects like their musical instruments. After being first admired, those cultural transfers fail. Westerners start fearing the pyre for having tasted the "diseased milk" (65). This is the result of the climate of sweeping fear that the authorities instigate. Therefore, Vladan advises Gjorg to abandon his instrument to save his own life: "You must throw that *lahuta* away, or you might well end up burnt at the stake" (64). Balkan migrants gradually adopt strategies of identity adaptation and abandon elements of their own cultural identity in order to survive. Europe is thus generalised and depicted as persecuting authority that rejects signs of cultural difference and imposes integration.

Europe further proceeds to strategies of acculturation, the main tenet of which is the barbarisation of the cultural other. When they arrive in an unidentified and

¹² As they move forward to the north, landscapes look increasingly like Northern European cities: "The further North they went, the higher the cathedrals and the towers of the castles became. Black iron crosses dominated the skies" (58).

apparently hospitable country, the Balkan minstrels are invited to sing their old epic songs at a party in a castle. They choose their best-known songs through which they recount the story of the Albanian and Serbian mutual enmity. Europeans instantaneously judge them:

'What songs do you expect from them?' one of the guests at the end of the table asked. 'Hate is all they know!' 'They corrupt everything, the way they corrupt the milk,' a guest shouted through the mocking laughter. (69)¹³

They seem to have built a particular representation of the Balkans: the guest essentialises the region to violence and sourness¹⁴. Desperation ensues on the part of the minstrels:

They stood with bowed heads as the guests denounced them. They would have tried to explain [...], but they realized that their words would fall on deaf ears. 'It would have been better for us to have died on the battlefield than end up at this cursed banquet,' Gjorg thought. (68)

At a particular culminant point, the rejection of otherness surpasses mere stereotyping and discrimination. Some types of 'otherness' are altogether annihilated¹⁵. In the flow of migrants, a character stands out amongst the different cultural groups. The Turk Ibrahim appears to be in-between cultures and religions¹⁶: a Muslim Turk who finds reassurance in Christianity and wants to convert, but is not ready yet. He has built an identity that embraces Christianity and Islam at the same time. Eventually, his religious and cultural hybridity costs him his life. He is condemned to the pyre by Europeans who follow the "immutable principles of the Church" (61). Only a Bosnian refugee and the Ahasuerus figure of the novella, a wandering Jew who joined the flow of refugees and whom no one seems to know, feel sympathy for the victim. The last word that Ibrahim cries before dying is 'NO!' in Latin: he adopts the language

¹³ Here, Kadare arguably inserted a commentary on the situation in 1998.

¹⁴ Kadare shows consciousness of the generalised representations of the Balkans. Maria Todorova coined the term "balkanism" to refer to the essentialised stereotypes of Balkan peoples (1994).

¹⁵ This argument has been discussed by Aleš Debeljak as well, in relationship to the way Kosovar Albanians were treated by the Serbian authorities: "The Serbian inability to accept differences showed its Medusa head in Kosovo, before the outbreak of war. The apartheid that the Serbian regime has been using for more than a decade to break the spirit of Albanians who have lived there for centuries has its roots in the conviction that Serbian culture alone is possessed of great qualities. While bullets ricochet over their rooftops and the Serbian minority drives them out of their walled compounds with fire and sword, Belgrade's propaganda machine belches forth an endless string of insults that denies the Albanian Kosovars their very humanity, reducing them to the status of animals fit to be shot. The Kosovars have thus become an instrument of evil: 'Islamic fundamentalists,' a 'demographic time-bomb,' 'uncivilized scum.' Only with the elimination of the evil foreign element from the nation's body will the Serbian people at last be free, croak the little Serbian Goebbels" (1994: 156-157).

¹⁶ This character, Ibrahim, reminds us of the key political figure in Kosovo politics of that time: the Albanian pacifist Ibrahim Rugova. Whether the author meant this parallel or not remains uncertain (perhaps unlikely). However, just like the novella's Ibrahim, Rugova chose pacifism and compromise. His aim was to negotiate peace and independence of Albanians in Kosovo. Kadare reacted to his pacific politics by saying that he feared that they might not last long since the battle between Serbs and Albanians turned into a battle between national identities, that would most likely end in violence: "Je comprends très bien la politique de Rugova. Je comprends très bien cette résistance. Mais je doute que cela dure encore longtemps, car il y a des limites à tout" (Kadare 1993: 83).

of the persecutors' religion to reject the Europeans' barbarity. In this scene, Europe's authorities are depicted as keen on rejecting non-homogenous identities. This scene shows that, contrary to what Ani Kokobobo argues, violence is not the exclusive characteristic of the 'Eastern Other' (2010). It is the inevitable outcome when predatory identities implement the "immutable principles" of their ideology.

Although not all instances of difference are annihilated, even when the migrants are accepted, they are reduced to the Europeans' own epistemological codes. In the European castle, the minstrels are asked to testify instead of singing. Their hosts request them to tell about their homeland and culture. They experience this request as torture, as if they were reduced from their identity as *homo poeticus* to *homo politicus*:

It was the first time that he [Vladan] did not sing before listeners, but *speak*. It seemed ridiculous, and shameful, and sinful, all together. [...] [H]e signaled to them [the other minstrels] that he was at the end of his tether. (Kadare 2011: 70)

Despite their initial restraint, the minstrels comply with the Europeans' wishes. However, this is not enough. A 'great lady' among the castle's guests insists that they do more. She is not satisfied with their testimonies and wants to hear their songs, which, she says, follow the line of Greek tragedy (70). She decides to leave room for the Balkan minstrels' ways of expressing themselves. However, they refuse with a direct "no!" (73), which echoes the 'no!' of the persecuted Ibrahim, since they are minstrels of war, not entertainment:

The Balkan minstrels' faces grew dark. They broke out in a cold sweat, as if they were being tortured. Even the words they uttered were uttered as if in a nightmare. They were martial minstrels. They were filled with fervor and hatred, but there was something vital missing. They could not break out of the mould. Besides which, they would first have to consult their elders. Consult the dead. They would have to wait for them to appear in their dreams so that they could consult them. No, they could not, under any circumstances. *Non*. (73)

The novella thereby draws a parallel between Ibrahim's execution and the minstrels' suffering. Their voices become imprisoned in European frames and they experience this restriction as violence.

It is worth mentioning that describing these various processes of persecution against difference does not do justice to the story as a whole. The novella foregrounds a particular speculation of what European identity could become: an entity that does not forget its "outer court", the Balkans (78). The 'great lady', in the second part, reflects on the racism and rejection that the "eleven peoples of the peninsula" underwent. It becomes Europe's mission to take care of this region, since its survival depends on the survival of the Balkans:

The eleven peoples of the peninsula had to stumble along within a communal shell named "Balkan", and it seemed that nobody gave them a second thought, unless to anathematize them: "You cursed wretches!" [...] In their black sockets she saw a Europe that had died, transformed into a doleful memory. [...] "We must not abandon our outer court!" she almost said aloud. "If it falls, we shall all fall!" (78)

This extract resonates with Kadare's discourses and posture, as Jérôme Meizoz defines it, in the international literary and cultural landscapes (2009). In *Temps barbares*, in

which the writer expresses his views on the Kosovo question, he argues that Europe had totally abandoned Albania towards the end of the Albanian communist regime (1999). In the novella, voices coming from inside Europe claim a reconsideration of European identity by avoiding abandoning a part of its identity, that is, the Balkans.

The third, and last, part of the book presents a possible solution to 'predatory identities'. Arjun Appadurai coined and defined 'predatory identities' as

those identities whose social construction and mobilization require the extinction of other, proximate social categories, defined as threats to the very existence of some group, defined as a we. (2006: 51)

The novella's elegiac tone prompts us to pay tribute to those who underwent the consequences of these forms of identity. The story also prefigures a potential answer to overcome the instrumentalisation of myths. In this part, a parallel is drawn between various turns in Western history in which 'predatory identities' managed to apply a political programme of persecution of another ethnic group. The ghost of Sultan Murad, whose remains rest buried in Kosovo, takes the floor and lists various historical elements that echo crimes that he witnessed throughout the 20th century: "NATO. R. Cook. Madeleine Albright. The slaughter of children in Drenicë. Milošević. *Mein Kampf*" (Kadare 2011: 87)¹⁷. The first part of this passage notes the main external protagonists in the political negotiations in Yugoslavia: the NATO forces, the British Foreign Minister Robin Cook, and the American Secretary of State Madeleine Albright¹⁸. In the second part of the passage, what the Drenicë slaughter, Milošević and *Mein Kampf* have in common is the war criminality that they evoke and that was installed based on instrumentalised narratives by 'predatory identities'. Mentioning Nazism just after Milošević enhances the criminal characterisation of the latter. Yet, the third part closes the novella on a positive note. It presents a potential solution to morbid myths in collective memory: forgetting. Müller-Funk's argument that states that "[h]appiness is based on forgetting" seems to be of particular relevance in this novella:

We may insist on the necessity of remembering, but on the other hand, the young people [...] have the right to start their life free of an overshadowing past [...]. (2003: 214)

In *In Praise of Forgetting*, Rieff insists on the dangers of wrongly remembering and the ensuing hindrance of the possible reach of a *modus vivendi* between communities (2016). The ghost of Sultan Murad believes that his presence in the field of Kosovo has propagated continued violence for centuries (Kadare 2011: 87). To a certain extent, this resonates in the context of the late 1990s in Kosovo. The 1389 battle metamorphosed into a persistent instrumentalised "Kosovo mystique" across centuries (Mihailovich

¹⁷ In the French translation of the book, the city mentioned is Srebrenica, not Drenicë. Drenicë is a province in Kosovo; Srebrenica is a province in Bosnia. Both cities were the stage of crime perpetrated by Serbian soldiers, but at different times.

¹⁸ In 1998 foreign powers were talking about the possibility of bombing Serbia, but had not reached a tangible solution after months of talks, the actual bombings starting only in 1999. Would the suggestion in 1998 have been that these were hawkish powers threatening to use force in the Balkans? Or that they were allowing crimes to continue by not pushing hard enough earlier in 1998? In other words, are they being blamed for getting involved, or for not having got involved enough? ("NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo" 1999).

1991, cited in Cohen 2014: 10)¹⁹. This persistence is depicted in the novella:

And the Balkans, instead of trying to build something together, attacked each other again like beasts freed from their iron chains. Their songs were as wild as their weapons. And the prophecies and proclamations were terrible. "For seven hundred years I shall burn your towers! You dogs²⁰! For seven hundred years I shall cut you down!" the minstrels sang. And what they declared in their songs was inevitably done, and what was done was then added to their songs, as poison is added to poison. (Kadare 2011: 86)

Sultan Murad, after having drawn the picture of the tenacious Balkan conflicts, begs God to "grant him oblivion".

Finally grant me oblivion, My Lord! Make them remove my blood from these cold plains. And not just the leaden vessel, but make them dig up the earth around where my tent stood, where drops of my blood spattered the ground. O Lord, hear my prayer! Take away all the mud around here, *for even a few drops of blood are enough to hold all the memory of the world.* (87)²¹

The literary work's very last line, italicised in this passage, points to the potential for memorialisation of historical events in which loss is central. Erasing violence from collective memory might thus be the possible solution for peace. The novella ends with these words, thereby foregrounding the importance of forgetting enmities in collective memories.

V. Conclusion

In the above-mentioned BBC documentary, journalist Albana Kasapi argues that "unless Serbia recognises Kosovo, Albanians and Serbs are not going to reconcile" (2019). Issues of reconciliation and peace have permeated the interrelationships between Kosovar Albanians and Serbs for ages. Ismail Kadare's *Three Elegies for Kosovo* discusses the persistence of the conflict directly. Serbian nationalism based its narrative on the mystification of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo Polje to justify its political programme towards Albanians in Kosovo. Kadare responded to the Serbian nationalistic narrative by retelling key aspects of its founding myth and demystifying them. In using historical fiction, the author arguably succeeds in showing how historical reality can be constructed, mystified and subsequently instrumentalised in collective memorial discourse. The Serbian-centric nature of the myth undergoes deconstruction in the novella. The battle is depicted as a shared episode of Balkan peoples' history and Prince Lazar, the key historical figure of the Kosovo narrative, is demystified and rendered as an individual, even though of rather significant importance, amongst others who

¹⁹ Past enmities persist through time in collective memory, despite the present and past alliances. When the 'great lady' dies, the minstrels are asked to sing on her grave. They compose a song that copies an old song of enmity between Serbs and Albanians and add some lyrics: "A black fog has descended, the great lady has died. Rise, O Serbs, the Albanians are seizing Kosovo!" (79).

²⁰ The French version has 'I shall burn your dogs' instead of 'you dogs', which changes the meaning of this chunk altogether and renders it more violent.

²¹ Emphasis by the autor.

perished in the battle. Moreover, the novella draws the attention of the readership to the constructed character of narratives and storytelling around the Kosovo battle on stylistic and thematic levels via fragmentation and subjectivity. *Three Elegies* also shows what the misuse of narratives leads to when instrumentalised: homogenisation and violence. Nevertheless, it embraces a certain degree of optimism in its proposed solution to the misuse of nationalistic narratives, that is, forgetting.

The novella also problematises an aspect of European identity. At first, Medieval Europe is depicted in a negative light, as an inhospitable region prone to predatory identities, just like the Ottoman enemy in the story. European authorities persecute the cultural 'others' and tend to assimilate the Balkan minstrels to their own codes. However, Europe's identity is not restricted to inhospitality and violence. It also suggests the potential for unity and inclusion, on the condition of not forgetting and abandoning some of its geographical and cultural constituents. The respective fates of the Balkans and of Europe are thus depicted as strongly interwoven.

Kadare thereby reflects on an inclusive Europe as conflicts were escalating in Kosovo and as the war was about to break out. In 1998, literature did not solve the Kosovo question: the predicted war materialised and nowadays the conflict still persists in the Albanian and Serbian collective memories. The novella has nonetheless managed to foresee Kosovo's political future and has fulfilled, to some extent, the social potential of narratives that Björninen et al. theorised (op cit.), since the process of forgetting that it foregrounds as a potential solution to the instrumentalisation of myth in collective memories echoes in the present political discourse in Kosovo. Albin Kurti, one of Kosovo's key political figures belonging to the *Vetëvendosje* party ("self-choice"), recently expressed himself in *Le Courrier des Balkans* as regards the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia:

La Constitution serbe est très datée et elle devrait être modifiée. Je pense que le peuple serbe est prêt pour ce changement car la priorité des Serbes de Serbie n'est pas le statut du Kosovo, son indépendance ou nos problèmes bilatéraux, mais plutôt l'intégration européenne, l'emploi, la lutte contre la corruption, la justice, l'éducation. Il en va de même pour les Albanais et les autres communautés vivant au Kosovo. (2020)

In this interview, Kurti points to the need for both sides to overcome their mutual problems, their priority nowadays being European integration.

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