



Agamemnon's Daughter: A Novella and Stories

Ismail Kadare , David Bellos (Translator) , Tedi Papavrami (Translator)

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In this spellbinding novel, written in Albania and smuggled into France a few pages at a time in the 1980s, Ismail Kadare denounces with rare force the machinery of a dictatorial regime, drawing us back to the ancient roots of tyranny in Western Civilization. During the waning years of Communism, a young worker for the Albanian state-controlled media agency narrates the story of his ill-fated love for the daughter of a high-ranking official. When he witness the ghostly image of Agamemnon-the Ancient Greek king who sacrificed his own daughter for reasons of State-on the reviewing stand during a May Day celebration, he begins to suspect the full catastrophe of his devotion. Also included are "The Blinding Order," a parable of the Ottoman Empire about the uses of terror in authoritarian regimes, and "The Great Wall," a chilling duet between a Chinese official and a soldier in the invading army of the Tamerlane.

Agamemnon's Daughter: A Novella and Stories Details

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D says

3.5 / 5

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Alta says

Agamemnon's Daughter is a novella that, together with "The Blinding Order" and "The Great Wall" constitutes the most recent translation into English of Kadare's books. Agamemnon's daughter, Suzana, also a protagonist in *The Successor*, is here the narrator's lover, though she only appears indirectly through the latter's reminiscing. The novel's title is not gratuitous, however: "Agamemnon's Daughter" is a metonymy for the idea of sacrifice, viewed as a pact of blood that lays the foundation of all dictatorships. The "campaigns of purification" or "great purges," as they were called during Communism—names that call to mind religious rituals accomplished periodically in order to appease the angry gods—were campaigns of terror in which anyone (or rather, anyone except the Leader of the Communist Party, significantly called "Himself" in *The Successor*) could be accused of being an enemy of the State or of the people, forced to do his self-criticism, then punished. The punishment ranged from having one's membership in the Party revoked, to a downgrading of one's career, to being moved to the countryside and constrained to embrace the joys of farming, to being sent to the chrome ore mines and shoved into a deep, nameless pit by some unknown hand in the dark. Often, the punishment began with its lightest form, the revocation of the card, and ended in the mine pit.

As a reflection on sacrifice, Agamemnon's Daughter links stories of sacrifice from different times and places—the ancient Greeks, the Russians under Stalin, the Albanians under Hoxha—and ties them into an eternal, universal story. It wasn't for a noble cause that Iphigenia was sacrificed, in the same way it wasn't for a noble reason that Stalin's son, Yakov, was sacrificed. The latter had been, apparently, sent to war by Stalin in a gesture implying that all Russians were equal; in fact, says Kadare, Stalin's gesture had a much more sinister and cynical motivation: the sacrifice of his own son gave him free hand in demanding anyone's life from then on. The Successor's daughter, Suzana, is sacrificed by being forbidden to see her lover because their relationship could compromise her father's political career. Reflecting on all this as a spectator at the May 1st Parade—one of the biggest Communist holidays—the narrator compares the father to a successor of that grand master of all sacrificers, "Comrade Agamemnon MacAtreus," member of the Politburo.

Even more than *The Successor*, Agamemnon's Daughter describes with clinical lucidity the mechanism of

power in a society resembling a concentration camp. The Communist concept of “self-criticism” was, in Kadare’s words, a truly “diabolical mechanism,” because once you’ve debased yourself, it was easy to sully everything around you. The complete lack of logic or coherence of the system, its schizophrenia, are exemplified by several accounts, including the narrator’s own experience, which, fortunately, has a happy ending. In all these accounts the precise accusation against the accused is never mentioned out loud by the officials, as if pronouncing the words themselves carried some great danger.

As in all of Kadare’s stories, here too there is a folktale whose meaning functions as an allegory for the contemporary story. It is the ancient tale of Bald Man, who one night fell into a hole, and kept falling until he reached the netherworld. After his fall, Bald Man strove to find the way and the means to clamber back to the upper world, and found an eagle that took him back on one condition: if Bald Man would feed him raw meat all the way up (Incidentally, Albania is called “the land of the eagles.”). When Bald Man finished off the piece of meat he had brought, he cut into his own flesh and fed the eagle with it, and by the time the eagle came out into the upper world, Bald Man was a mere human skeleton carried on the bird’s back. This tale is told in fragments interspersed in-between the story of a man who, in order to stop his fall from grace with the Communist regime, feeds the latter not only his own flesh but also that of others, people he denounces and tramples on as he finds his way back up.

Written in 1984, “The Blinding Order” is an allegory set, like *The Palace of Dreams*, in the Ottoman Empire, but its political allusions to Communist Albania are transparent even for the uninformed reader. In their desire to preserve society from the evil eye, nineteenth-century Turkish authorities pass an edict enforcing the blinding of those suspected of exercising the eye’s maleficent power. But how are the carriers of misophthalmia (or “eye trouble”) going to be identified? Although many of them are said to have blue eyes, eye color alone is not enough for their proper identification, and the lack of any specific characteristics of these potential enemies, the fact that anyone could be one of them, contribute to the sense of terror among the population. In its magnanimity, the State doesn’t sentence to death the carriers of the evil eye, but prevents them from perpetrating their deeds by depriving them of their eyes. In addition, those who turn themselves in before being identified by others as carriers of the evil eye receive a monetary compensation from the State after their disoculation. Everyone is encouraged to practice denunciation, and any resistance is punished. After a campaign of terror in which we can easily recognize the Communist purges or “campaigns of purification,” the authorities decide to hold a Banquet of Forgiveness or of Reconciliation, where all the blind people are invited. There, as the blind are playing the Balkan lyres and lahutas, and a huge cacophony is rising to the skies, the authorities bestow forgiveness upon their victims, and the terror of the past is conveniently forgotten for the greater good of the State.

Beth says

This book was actually smuggled out of Communist Albania by the author and a French friend. The preface tells this story of literary intrigue, and makes the reading of the novella that starts this collection feel more real. I’m now eager to read *The Successor* which forms the second part of the same story. The other stories in this collection are about autocratic rule in the Ottoman Empire (of which Albania was historically a part) and about the territorial battles between those within and without the Great Wall of China.

Jose Carlos says

Ifigenia, la hija de Agamenón, rey de Grecia, según cuenta la tradición debía ser sacrificada por su padre en Aúlide para así calmar a la furiosa diosa Artemis que había parado el viento con una gran encalmada que impedía a las naves de los aqueos zarpar en dirección hacia la campaña de Troya. Agamenón, implacable, encuentra razonable el sacrificio de la hija en pos de sus beneficios políticos y militares. Al final, sin embargo, Ifigenia es sustituida, en el último instante, por una cervatilla en su lugar.

Suzana es la hija del miembro principal del buró, del hombre señalado a suceder al Gran Líder cuando cese en su mando. Y ese futuro de gloria y poder podría verse empañado por el comportamiento de la mujer, que mantiene una relación amorosa inconveniente que podría manchar la reputación del padre en una Albania repleta de odios, intrigas, dobleces, traiciones por el poder, y en donde todo vale para ocupar un puesto tanpreciado como el de sucesor. Suzana debe sacrificarse, como Ifigenia, por el bien político del padre, y abandonar la relación poco recomendable.

Kadaré establece un paralelismo entre las intrigas y el juego sucio del Partido con el mito de Ifigenia, iguala los intereses y ambiciones de Agamenón y del sucesor, reflexiona acerca de las cuestiones morales del poder “a cualquier precio”, sobre la inhumanidad de los dirigentes y de los totalitarismos e, incluso, introduce una reflexión sobre el propio mito relacionada con su máxima de “la gran estratagema” (en función de si todo el sacrificio de Ifigenia y la posterior sustitución por el cervatillo no obedecen a las farsas políticas, si sólo son maniobras de distracción del poder para aterrorizar a los súbditos).

En efecto, si un Líder envía al sacrificio a su propia hija, ¿qué penalidades y entregas no exigirá de su pueblo? Con ese momento, ejemplar, el pánico se apodera de todo el sistema, desde los hombres situados más abajo hasta los altos miembros pertenecientes al gobierno. De ese modo, el sucesor envía un mensaje de lo que está dispuesto a empeñar por su ambición de alcanzar el poder, un mensaje dirigido en dos planos (aterroriza al pueblo, y porque sirve para amedrentar, además, a sus futuros camaradas y rivales políticos y le demuestra al Líder su entrega incondicional a la idea y al sistema).

Troya, lo relacionado con la ciudad épica, su asedio y caída, siempre ha sido un tema referencial en la narrativa del escritor albanés, así como sus constantes referencias a la cultura y a los mitos clásicos. En Ifigenia, encuentra, además, muchos de los elementos de las tragedias de su admirado Esquilo, con un drama que se puede superponer a la dictadura de Hoxha.

La perspectiva elegida para narrar los acontecimientos se inserta en un determinado y significativo momento temporal: el amante de Suzana se dirige a las celebraciones del Primero de Mayo, tan cargadas de significado e importancia en los países comunistas, y que en Albania son una gran fiesta política y nacional. Mientras camina en pos de ubicarse en una tribuna de preferencia, desgrana sus pensamientos y reflexiones en primera persona acerca de la pérdida de la mujer, del sacrificio, de la hipocresía de la clase dirigente, de la pavorosa vida cotidiana bajo el comunismo... Todo ello salpicado con su percepción personal del momento, del gentío que, como autómatas, se dirigen a presenciar el desfile y vitorear a sus líderes.

Todos ellos son producto del pánico, de las escuchas, de los chivatazos, de las delaciones, del estado de angustia y depravación moral que rige en Albania. Ante la visión de una familia que acude al acto, el protagonista argumenta un “padre ideal con hijas de la mano bajo el cielo socialista de mayo”, una estampa perfecta que ha costado el sufrimiento de muchos, porque “¿a qué precio te has ganado esa estampa? ¿A quién has enviado al destierro?”, le gustaría preguntarle al padre alegre y orgulloso. Es el sustrato más bajo del sistema amoral, donde rige el monopolio de la sospecha y la degradación humana.

El engranaje de perfidia y cruelezas hace que todos crean que poseen un pasado deshonroso, plagado de actos contra el Estado, un pasado que ocultar bajo el temor, y se conducen como cáscaras vacías, alienados, movidos por vacías consignas de aterradores promesas: “Defenderemos los principios del marxismo-leninismo, incluso si nos vemos obligados a comer hierba”. Cualquier sacrificio será escaso; Ifigenia encaja a la perfección en todo ello.

Aprovechando las reflexiones del protagonista, Kadaré va repasando uno a uno los crímenes del régimen y los diferentes resortes que ha utilizado para reprimir las conciencias, desde la autocrítica, las asambleas, las purgas, los procesos, las depuraciones, la censura a los escritores... la historia política de Albania, las decisiones de su Gran Líder Hoxha con todas sus iniquidades.

Kadaré, mediante trucos y engaños, consiguió sacar del país, junto a otras obras, *La hija de Agamenón*, primer escrito en el que se narra de forma directa y explícita su postura ante el régimen criminal de Hoxha. Antes, había utilizado subterfugios (la llamada noche otomana para ubicar sucesos políticos muy similares a los de la Albania actual, las alusiones más o menos veladas al control de las conciencias en *El Palacio de los sueños*, al terror político en *El firmán de la ceguera...*), pero *La hija de Agamenón*, acabada en 1986, era una narración impensable e imposible para aquellos momentos: y tremadamente comprometedora y peligrosa. Tras ciertas peripecias, fue puesta a salvo en París, en el interior de una caja fuerte, gracias al editor Claude Durand. Después, a la caída del comunismo, aquellos textos vieron la luz, muchos de ellos retocados, pero no así *La hija de Agamenón*, que apareció editada exactamente igual que fue redactada entre los años 84 y 86.

El empeño de Kadaré en la obra es el de reflejar la caída moral, de los políticos, de las ideas, de los ideales, del Gran Dirigente, pero, además, el vaciamiento y agostamiento de la vida bajo el comunismo: “¿Cuántos años de semejante aridez serían precisos para convertir la vida en un erial?”, se pregunta el protagonista. Y añade: “Y todo eso por la sola razón de que así, marchita, reseca, la vida era más fácilmente dominable”. Al final del texto, Kadaré establece un paralelismo de Troya, de la campaña y de los sucesos que conducen a su final, con la infamia. La historia de Troya, repleta de muertes y artimañas políticas, no es sino la historia de una infamia.

No en vano, ¿qué podía esperarse de un país cuyo modelo era Stalin? Porque Albania era estalinista, mucho más que soviética, y cuando consideró que la URSS de Jruschov traicionaba los ideales de Stalin se alejó de ella. De esa manera, si Stalin había entregado a su propio hijo Jarkov a la muerte, sacrificándolo a manos de los nazis, el ejemplo entre los políticos albaneses debía cundir: tenían que ser como Stalin, cualquier sacrificio era poco, y el pueblo pensaría como en tiempos del sacrificio llevado a cabo en Aúlide: “Si el jefe supremo, Agamenón, había sacrificado a su propia hija, ni la más leve muestra de piedad podía esperarse para nadie”.

Y sí con el sacrificio de Ifigenia arrancaba la campaña de Troya, es decir, la campaña de la infamia, el sacrificio de Suzana rehusando a su relación amorosa para no perjudicar al sucesor sólo podía desembocar en la demoledora conclusión: si nadie espera ya piedad, entonces, “nada se opone ya al agostamiento de la vida”.

Audrey says

The final story in this collection, "The Wall", is the story that I set out to find. It is very powerful and had me

thinking about truths, religion, viewpoints. I loved this story. It begins, "Barbarians always go back over in the end."

Benjamin says

Vivid and dystopian. Should have some better knowledge of Albanian history before I try to read any more.

Louise says

Interesting story/display of the mechanisms and absurdities of totalitarian powers.

Pierre Menard says

Lungo racconto dal sapore kafkiano (anche se ce ne corre, tra i due K.), è narrato in prima persona da un anonimo membro dell'*intelligencija* albanese che si sta recando alla festa del Primo Maggio, rituale di massa del regime comunista e complicato barometro degli equilibri di potere della dittatura. Dalla propria abitazione il narratore si sposta attraverso la folla, superando cancelli e posti di blocco fino all'agognata meta, una delle tribune principali, la stessa dove potrebbe trovarsi l'oggetto del suo amore, la bella e sensuale Suzana, figlia di un uomo vicinissimo alla Guida (l'uomo che detiene il massimo potere nel paese). Potrebbe, perché Suzana ha intenzione di interrompere la relazione che rischia di danneggiare il padre, e quindi il nostro protagonista teme a buon diritto di non rivederla mai più.

Suzana riveste il ruolo di Ifigenia, la figlia che Agamennone sacrifica ad Artemide per placarne l'ira e consentire ai Greci di riprendere il mare e raggiungere Troia: il mito viene evocato attraverso la lettura di Robert Graves, e la chiave interpretativa va cercata nella contorta mente dell'uomo di potere che è disposto a sacrificare anche gli affetti più cari al fine di conservare lo *status quo* e "inaridire" definitivamente un popolo e una nazione, così come si inaridisce il corpo di una donna privata della facoltà di amare.

Kadarè mescola nel racconto (terminato nel 1985) suggestioni che gli provengono dalla mitologia e dalla tragedia greca, dal folklore balcanico, dall'Alighieri (il cammino verso la tribuna è una sorta di discesa infernale nella *burocracij* comunista), da Kafka (le variegate storie di ascesa e caduta della nomenclatura di regime). Alcune di queste costituiranno materiale per opere successive: la trama di un altro racconto lungo, L'aquila (1995), si ritrova qui quasi per intero, e il personaggio di Suzana appartiene al romanzo Il successore, scritto tra il 2002 e il 2003.

Ho trovato più convincenti e meglio strutturate queste ultime opere: "La figlia di Agamennone" soffre di una certa incoerenza narrativa. I fili narrativi non sono ben intrecciati e, in particolare, la storia della relazione tra Suzana e il narratore ha una dimensione estemporanea che non si amalgama bene con il tema del totalitarismo, anche nelle ultime pagine quando si cerca il parallelo tra Suzana e Jakov Džugašvili, il figlio di Stalin morto in un lager nazista. I meccanismi della dittatura comunista sono illustrati in modo efficace, ma il messaggio finale del racconto è stato meglio declinato da Kadarè in altre opere.

Consigliato a chi ama le sfilate militari.

Sconsigliato a chi odia camminare.

Fahad Nasir says

There is much depth in the writing, much allusions and philosophical and political ponderings that fall heavy on my brain in the novella. It feels complex though just as imperative in the understanding of the governmental affairs. I sense it to be very intelligent, with mythical drawings upon it. It's just me who couldn't concentrate to the fullest on it. Perhaps because the narrative was not as ample as were the philosophical ramblings and expositions.

My favorite was the story, 'The Blinding Order', in which the small niche of 'bad eye' is taken as the central theme. A punishment of blindness for those possessing a bad eye is declared by the state. Its influence especially on a romantic couple is shown, and shown with a bohemian grip that I've found only Kadare's writing hold.

Željko Obrenović says

Osetno slabija od ostalih Kadareovih knjiga koje sam dosad pročitao.

Kes says

This is good, but it's really not my genre.

There are three stories: the first is Agamemnon's Daughter, a meditation on sacrifice and the ties that bind people together. Set in communist Albania, the protagonist is in love with the leader's daughter; he meditates on what Agamemnon has to sacrifice (a kind of pact) and likens it to his present situation. There's also the underlying dread of his life: anyone can be denounced as a state enemy; further, if your relative is denounced, you too, are affected.

I liked the story of the Bald Man, who sacrifices himself to the eagle just to get out. Basically, one night, the Bald Man falls to the netherworld. He tries to climb out, and finds out that there is an eagle who can bring him out if the eagle is amply supplied with raw meat. Bald Man obtains the raw meat and sets off. Intermittently, the eagle asks to be fed and the Bald Man does so until he runs out of raw meat. When the eagle next asks to be fed, Bald Man feeds the eagle his own flesh. Eventually, the eagle emerges from the netherworld - but all that is left of the Bald Man are bones. It's an allegory about sacrificing yourself to power - how much do you sacrifice?

It's a really rich, multilayered novella.

The second story is The Blinding Order. There is a recent spate of people being afflicted by the evil eye; the sultan therefore issues an order that people can be blinded - either voluntarily (at which a pension will be provided) or involuntarily. Again, people can be anonymously denounced at possessing the evil eye. I loved the description of the reaction:

An old feeling, which people had perhaps forgotten about in recent years, suddenly began to seep back into the atmosphere. The feeling was fear. But this time it was no ordinary fear, like being afraid of sickness, robbery, ghosts, or death. No, what had returned was an ice-cold, impersonal, and baffling emotion called fear of the state. Bearing as it were a great emptiness in its heart, the fear of the state found its way into every recess of the mind. In the course of a few hours, days at most, hundreds of thousands of people would be caught up in its cogs and wheels. Something similar had happened six years previously, when here had been a campaign against forbidden sects (the latter had nonetheless managed to reemerge since then). An even earlier precedent came from fifteen years before, when they're unraveled a huge plot, which at first appeared to involve only a narrow circle of high officials but which came by stages to wreak its horror on many thousands of households.

People's natural inclination to erase collective misfortunes from memory made them forget - or believe they had forgotten - the peculiar atmosphere that arises just prior to a major outbreak of terror. Between the first hint of the threat and the first blow struck, in the time when the hope that the horror will not truly come, that evil might be thwarted and the nightmare extinguished, people are suspended in a state of paralysis, deafness, and blankness that, far from placating terror, only serves to aggravate it.

And the underlying atmosphere of living in a world where you can be anonymously denounced underpins this story (and the previous one).

I wasn't keen on the amount of sex though.

To me, The Great Wall was about the fixity of borders - that China (within it) could change (contract and expand), but the Great Wall remained fixed. The border is maintained by those without and those within - outside, the barbarians fear that they will be softened by China; inside, the Chinese fear that the barbarians will attack them. As the book puts it: *What China loses by the sword it retakes by silk*. But all of this is meaningless when the great boundary is between life and death; it is ultimately all about perception.

This is a very literary collection of short stories, but it's a book that is definitely not my cup of tea.

2.5 stars

Juliet Wilson says

There are three stories in this. Agamemnon's Daughter is Excellent. I like how the narrative shows the protagonist's thoughts and how he interconnects the myths that he is reading with what he sees going on around him. A very telling commentary on Albanian society of the 1980s with relevance to any oppressive regime.

The Blinding orders is also excellent. Set in the Ottoman Empire it is nonetheless entirely applicable to any repressive regime during any period of history.

I also enjoyed The Great Wall with its thoughtful insights into boundaries and ideas of cause and effect.

Kadare is a great writer.

Nicole G. says

Due to the oppression of Communism in Albania, this book actually had to be smuggled out of that country by the author and a friend of his in France, where it was first published. The novella, "Agamemnon's Daughter," tells the tale of an unnamed young man, who has the misfortune to fall for the daughter of a government official whose star is on the rise. As he walks through the streets on his way to a jingoistic parade (where he has an invitation to sit in the coveted stands, a consolation prize, in exchange for his woman being taken away from him), he recalls the story of the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter, Iphigenia, whose blood was supposed to calm the raging seas.

The second story, "The Blinding Order," is a scary tale set in the Ottoman Empire, wherein threats of the "evil eye" lead to barbaric torture, all in the name of keeping the peace. I think if this had been a longer tale, I might have been more emotionally invested. Even though there was some focus on a young woman whose fiancé is one of the officials leading the punishment (and is then summarily implicated), I think the story is too short to really have a personal impact.

The third story, "The Great Wall," actually didn't do much for me at all. Told by two different characters, a Chinese official inside the wall and a rebel outside it, I suppose there's a deeper metaphor about walls and such other than the obvious, but honestly, it was a little bit boring.

All that being said, I think that Mr. Kadare is a good writer, and I would select a novel next time.

jeremy says

as the inaugural recipient of the man booker international prize (in 2005), albanian poet and novelist ismail kadare's many works undoubtedly reached a wider audience. kadare's first novel was published nearly fifty years ago, and over two dozen of his books are available in english translation today. *agamemnon's daughter* is one of his more recent books to appear in english, though contains three pieces that were written some time ago (two in the mid-80s, and one in the mid-90s). as with some of kadare's other fiction, portions of *agamemnon's daughter* had to be smuggled out of albania before they could eventually be published.

the title novella takes place during the may day parade of the totalitarian regime, and, like many of kadare's works, takes aim at the oppressiveness of the albanian communist government. kadare frames the story within the greek myth of agamemnon and his daughter iphigenia, affording the story both an historical and relevant context.

the book's second story, "the blinding order", while sharing the similar themes of persecution and injustice, is far more haunting than the title story. an allegorical tale set during the ottoman empire (with veiled connotations), it deals with the witch-hunt like panic that ensues following a governmental decree aimed at abolishing misophthalmia, or, the 'evil eye.' foreboding and betrayal loom large throughout the story, and kadare's direct prose heightens the advancing action to great effect.

agamemnon's daughter was translated into english by david bellos from the french translation of tedi papavrami and jusuf vrioni's rendering from the original albanian. are there no albanian to english translators working in the realm of literary fiction? translations of translations, really?

the strange sensation of bewilderment persisted in my brain. it was probably euphoria induced by being so close to power. flags and marching bands had a purpose, after all.

Reid says

A truly brilliant evocation of the psychology of oppression from the unofficial poet laureate of Albania. The titular story is a novella based in Albania, and the remaining two short stories are based elsewhere, but also deal with the mindset of totalitarianism. It is always worth recalling the extraordinary danger of the leader or government with excessive power, and the coercive ways they can manipulate their citizens to turn against one another with distrust and even savagery. Far from being immune to this technique in democratic countries, every day we see the invocation of "us versus them" as a method of control a potentially disruptive populace. These are important cautionary tales.

Deena Metzger says

Smuggled out of Albania during the time of the dictator, this novella and two stories by Ismail Kadare speak to the nature of fascism and the ways people's lives and minds are controlled by fear and the desire for power and cruelty. Imagine Kafka, Saramago and Yasmina Khadra's *Swallows of Kabul* and you will have a glimpse of Agamemnon's Daughter and the second harrowing, unbearable story, *The Blinding Order*. Should we pass on reading this extraordinary writer, we will miss a literary feat and also will miss knowing, being prepared for what may well come to be here, in our country, if we are not aware.

Terence says

Rating: 2.0-2.5 stars

I wanted to enjoy these stories more than I did but they weren't particularly more original or affecting than others I've read; writing about the paranoia and corrosive brutality of dictatorships stretches back at least 2,000 years to Suetonius and Tacitus.

The first story, "Agamemnon's Daughter," is the best in the collection. The title refers to the episode from the Trojan War when Agamemnon sacrifices his favorite daughter, Iphigenia, to the gods so the Achaean fleet can sail. In this reworking of the tale, the narrator (a minor employee of the state's TV station), is the lover of the heir to the regime's leader (the Great Guide). The lover is the only person to get a real name - Suzana. Everyone else, including the narrator, remain unidentified or get initials. She decides to give the narrator up to protect her father's career. As a sop, the narrator is invited to a grandstand seat at a celebratory parade. The story recounts his journey from his apartment to the stands; and, as he walks there, he reviews episodes from

his life that reveal the paranoia necessary to survive and he considers parallels between what's happening to him and Iphigenia's tale. As he watches the parade and sees his former lover in the stands, the narrator realizes what Iphigenia's sacrifice meant 3,000 years ago and what his own means today - the state will trample all feelings of humanity, love and feeling, even the desires of the regime's highest members.

Largely, the story worked for me, especially the last few pages when the translator captured the narrator's epiphany in moving language, but there wasn't any emotional connection for me.

I found the same problem in story number two, "The Blinding Order," which recounts the events that follow an Ottoman sultan's command to eradicate the "evil eye." Again, it's a well written/well translated story but not engaging enough. **I wrote that sentence last night when I was drafting this review. This morning, reflecting further, I will say that this story did have a more human focus (on Marie, whose fiance is one of the inquisitors/torturers but who is sacrificed by the regime when it comes time to discontinue the edict) but the tone was too impersonal to engage me in her tragedy.**

"The Great Wall" takes place during the final years of Timur the Lame's reign of terror, when his armies were poised to cross into China (probably - he died before anything developed but, considering that he had slaughtered his way from the Bosphorus to the Indus, it's not unlikely that the Middle Kingdom was his next target). But this story isn't about that at all; it's more about "walls" and what they symbolize both to those within and to those without. To honest, I'm still not sure how to understand everything that happens in the story.

While I wasn't overly impressed with Kadare's writing presented here, I think I'll give him another chance with one of his novels. Perhaps in a longer work, he develops the emotional connection lacking in these stories.

Mimi says

A beautiful love story - crushed by the regime in power. At the same time, a daughter's great sacrifice for her father. Her love for her own father overcomes everything else. Poor Susana!! Once again, Kadare proved how great he is, the true Albanian Kafka.

A story you read and you want to go back and read over and over again... Loved it!

Rhys says

One of the best novelists I have discovered in recent years is Ismail Kadare. I find his work extraordinary. Kafkaesque, Voltairean, wonderful, disturbing, bizarre and just incredibly well-written. This book contains a long novella, a shorter novella and a short story. All three pieces are absolutely amazing. I was especially impressed with the middle piece, 'The Blinding Order', which is certainly one of the best novellas I have ever read. It's harrowing and awful but also sublime and revelatory. Kadare is a genius.

Nancy says

Fascinating intelligent writing infused with the shocking mixture of terror and banality that is life in a

totalitarian regime. Unlike many of the reviewers here I enjoyed the third short story 'The Wall' the best. It made me think about boundaries in a way that I have never thought before. The ultimate boundary being that between life and death. I liked the bleak humour of the ending about Jesus being most certainly the one most expected back on earth. Yet amongst all his fellow souls pleading for the chance to go over just one more time 'he is not optimistic. He comes and goes at the base of the wall, displaying from afar the marks of the nails with which they crucified him, but the guardians pretend not to see them. Unless, as we have long suspected, the guardians are truly eyeless'
