William Shakespeare in Albania

Abstract

This paper deals with three main issues:
1. W. Shakespeare in Albanian translation before and during the Communist Era,
2. W. Shakespeare in Albania after the fall of Communism,
3. A Revaluation and Re-interpretation of the Plot, Motifs, and Characters of the Tragedy of “Hamlet” in Ismail Kadare’s Book “Hamlet – The Difficult Prince”.

After a brief survey of the translation of Shakespeare’s works into Albanian during the 20th century and the reception of his works before and after the fall of communist dictatorship in Albania the paper focuses on Ismail Kadare’s book Hamlet – The Difficult Prince, which provides the interpretation and re-interpretation of Shakespeare’s name, biographical data, writing career, and The Tragedy of Hamlet in particular. It focuses on Kadare’s viewpoints about the origin of the play, story-lines, plot, motifs, and characters. It also points out Kadare’s interpretation of the reception of various aspects of Shakespeare’s play within Albanian culture. In conclusion, the literary article shows that Shakespeare endures and remains contemporary by being studied, read, taught at schools and translated extensively all over the world as well as in Albania.

Introduction

William Shakespeare’s life, poems and plays have been studied and interpreted extensively all over the world. But if research, study and assessment of his works have been going on since the Renaissance (cf. Ben Jonson’s apology in the Preface to the First Folio, 1623), the Albanian reading public were introduced to Shakespeare in the early decades of the twentieth century. His creativity is a gold mine of inexhaustible supply for scholars and theatrical companies; it provides a labyrinth of infinite galleries which are still being explored in old and new levels. Among the numerous “galleries” drilled by the end of the twentieth century is the socio-cultural and geo-political view of themes, motifs, characters, and setting of his plays.

During the last century, the translation of certain plays, their staging and the interpretation of specific characters, specific themes and specific theatrical action and specific setting in particular were used as a means of geo-political propaganda. In particular, during the communist regime Shakespearean references to Albanian/Illyrian setting were used to cultivate the “national pride”, to show boastfully that our country was important even to Shakespeare (!)

Now we can see such references from a wider perspective as a means of enhancing the atmosphere of European integration.
The first Albanian translator of Shakespeare’s plays, Bishop Fan S. Noli, the head of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church in Boston, USA, was politically motivated to translate the four tragedies Othello, Macbeth, Hamlet, and Julius Caesar. During the communist regime in Albania three other distinguished translators of Shakespeare’s works, Skënder Luarasi, Vedat Kokona, and Alqi Kristo, were also politically motivated to translate several Shakespearean tragedies, comedies and history plays. When “The Merchant of Venice” was translated by S.Luarasi due attention was given to Heine’s statement “O, Shylock, you are wronged!” Skënder Luarasi, a scholar well-known for his dissident views, translated “Richard III” and “King Lear” with the oblique hint of denouncing the tyranny of the communist dictator. For a time, he was denied the right to write and publish.

When I was asked to provide a preface to the translation of “Richard III”, everything I wrote about the play, I implied the tyranny of the dictator, who killed his own allies, who was hypocritical and cruel, who was interested in creating a formal “public” consent for his diabolical ruthless elimination of his “enemies” and tyrannical rule. S. Luarasi had translated the tragedy with the implication for the bloody end of the usurper and tyrant.

Noli translated Othello during the initial phase of his stay in USA (the first two decades of the 20th century), induced by his status as “another”, an “alien” in culture, origin, complexion, etc., like other emigrants. Coloured people in some parts of America were facing similar experiences in getting involved with native white girls; while their skills were being utilized by society, they remained unacceptable, “non gratta” as future sons-in-law and parents.

Noli translated Macbeth with his idea of attacking his political rival, Ahmet Zog. As a Republican, one who had given up the clerical duties of the autocephalous orthodox church of Boston to lead a leftist, republican government for six months in Albania in 1924, Noli was ousted by Zog. He found an expedient parallelism in “Macbeth” to allude to King Zog as a usurper and tyrant who came back to power with the help of a hired (Serbian) mercenary army, though there is an obvious difference in motives.

Othello” was shown in a Russian film version, to attack ‘racial’ discrimination. For the same reason, it was the first Shakespearean play to be staged and performed by the Albanian National Theatre. Othello treats various themes that have special resonance for Albanian audiences: the theme of the “other”, alienation, loneliness, the life of a soldier, the discrimination of a coloured man.

After 1990, many Albanian emigrant workers – especially in western, nominally Christian countries - must have felt the alienation and strangeness of contact with a foreign culture, and fully comprehended what it is to feel “other”. One reason why Othello is so easily swayed by Iago’s insinuations is the fact that he is not a Venetian. He is an outsider, a stranger, a foreigner. The generations of Albanian labourers from small Albanian villages and towns encountering European customs and values have experienced feelings similar to Othello’s rejection and loneliness.
Albanian people, like Othello himself, are proud, generous and soldierly. They can identify with Othello in Iago’s description:

“The Moor is of a free and open nature,
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so.” (I.3.388-389) (Bate and Rasmussen, 2007: 2101)

Albanians are tolerant and friendly with foreigners, but they are not in favour of cross-marriages, particularly with people of other races. There is a substantial Rom and Kopt minority throughout Albania, but no native Albanian family would be willing to accept a cross-marriage of their children with gypsies.

There is a more specific reason for Othello’s popularity among Albanians. Many Albanians identify with Othello’s jealous nature. Albanian men are jealous of their loved ones and cannot accept betrayal by women. This issue is particularly sensitive in cases of hasty marriages, when marriages are arranged by a go-between, or the couple have had limited opportunities to know each other before marriage. Othello, newly married to Desdemona, could believe Iago’s insinuation of her betrayal partly because he did not know her very well. Albanians can sympathise with a man whose honour has (supposedly) been besmirched.

The betrayal of fathers holds particular weight in patriarchal Albanian families. The patriarchal system of many of the rural districts and villages of this country still resonates. Some fathers expect their daughters to obey their wishes on matters of marriage. So, the words of Desdemona’s father - “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (Bate and Rasmussen, 2007: 2099) - carry special meaning for many Albanian patriarchal fathers.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, Europeans saw Turks as powerful, ferocious fighters. Ottoman forces had conquered the Balkan lands and had reached the gates of Vienna. Shakespeare shared the common European view of Turks and Islam; all the thirty-five references to Turks in his plays are disparaging or have negative connotations. This is understandable, as the Palestinian-American literary theorist and cultural critic Edward W. Said (1998) observed: “For Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma. Until the end of the seventeenth century the ‘Ottoman peril’ lurked alongside Europe”, endangering “the whole of Christian civilization”; “in time European civilization incorporated that peril and its lore, its great events, figures, virtues and vices, as something woven into the fabric of life”.

There was a political motivation behind every Shakespearean play either staged or translated. There were also omissions and changes (adaptations) imposed by political motivation. A political motivation guides even the contemporary translators of the post-communist era like P. Jorgoni, Q. Kurti, M. Hanxhari, etc., in their selection of Shakespeare’s works for translation. It is worth mentioning that besides the translation of most of Shakesperian’s plays into Albanian, there are also five translations of his sonnets by five different Albanian translators, all politically motivated too.
Lifting of the stifling communist censorship in early 1990’s promoted the reassessment of world literature, Shakespeare included. It was possible to provide new interpretations and new aesthetic theories which challenged the former Marxist clichés of literary critique. For the first time we had access to the new Freudian interpretations of Hamlet, the new theories about eroticism and sexual language in Shakespeare, the new critical approach to Othello’s Islamic faith, the newest interpretations of the authorship of Shakespearean works, etc., etc.

In this new climate of research and critical assessment I would venture a couple of suggestions and conjectures about Shakespeare’s comedy The Twelfth Night. It is well known and widely acknowledged that the setting of the play, characters and plot are situated in that part of Illyria which is unequivocally accepted to be present-day Albania. A distinguished American scholar, Robert Brustein, after visiting Saranda and Butrint with a group of American scholars from Harvard University, placed the events of the comedy exactly in Saranda, on the Ionian coast. We venture to say that Burstein’s theory is not quite accurate as that part of Albania is better known as Epirus, not Illyria. I would suggest a more acceptable hypothesis: that the setting of the events of the comedy should be Ulqin with its rocky bay and sand beaches and olive groves – the domain of Countess Olivia (the rich heiress whose name suggests the olive), and Scutari, as the ancient capital city of Illyria, and its surroundings, where Orsino, the Duke of Illyria, lived. The ship Captain who saves Viola’s life says that he is “from the interior of Illyria,” “Not three hours’ travel from this very place.” Seamen and ship captains “born and brought up” in the interior of a country could be only those who live in areas which have contact with waters. The city of Shkodër (Scutari) is surrounded by water – a lake (the Shkodra Lake, the biggest in the Balkans) and three rivers, one of which – the Buna River, is the only navigable river in the region and connects the Shkodra Lake with the Adriatic Sea. On the banks of the river, close to the city, there is a harbour where trade boats sailing from the Adriatic Sea used to drop anchor. The seashore and the mouth of the river are about “three hours’ travel” from the harbour.

Shakespeare continues to be performed and translated in Albania. There have been made no less than five translations of Shakespeare’s sonnets into Albanian. The plays which hadn’t been allowed to be published by communist censorship, such as Two Gentlemen of Verona, Henry the Sixth, The Tempest, etc., are already published in Albanian translation. Coincidentally, Verdi’s opera “Falstaff”, based on Shakespeare’s comedy The Merry Wives of Windsor, is being performed by the Albanian National Opera with great success now, in May-June 2009.

A Revaluation and Re-interpretation of the Plot, Motifs, and Characters of the Tragedy of “Hamlet” in Ismail Kadare’s Book “Hamlet – The Difficult Prince”

The well-known Albanian writer of international recognition Ismail Kadare, three-four times short-listed for the Nobel Prize, has shown a lifelong interest in Shakespeare. Shakespearean references are widely used by him in his novels and short stories. He has skilfully explored

In this book Kadare has given his own (re)valuation and interpretation on Shakespeare’s life, name(s), authorship, and on Hamlet – sources of the plot, themes and motifs (murder, revenge/ blood-feud, incest, etc.), the character of Hamlet, and other characters of the tragedy.

In order to support his viewpoints and re-interpretations Kadare has used a wide catalogue of references from scholars of various times and places, such as Thomas Heywood, Coleridge, Goethe, the French chronicler of the 16th century François Belleforest, the American journalist of “New York Times” Cyrus Sulzberger, Ernest Jones, James Joyce, John Dover Wilson (What Happens in Hamlet, Cambridge University Press, 1935), John Delong, the renowned Shakespeare scholar Walter Wilson Greg (1875 – 1959), T.S. Eliot, Ella Sharpe, the Polish Jan Kott (1914 – 2001), the Rumanian philosopher Mircea Eliade (1907 – 1986), and Pierre Bayard (Enquête sur Hamlet. Le Dialogue de sourds (Minuit, 2002).

In reviewing Kadare’s book we would sum up the following issues:

1. Interpretations about the plot and the main themes of the tragedy.

   Kadare begins his essay by asserting that Hamlet’s relationship with the public can be only difficult, even hardly possible. He stands alone, as he is unique, universal and mysterious. He poses the question: ‘Is the main theme about a classical blood-feud or a crime disguised as revenge or blood-feud?’ He refers to the original title, which suggests that it is a tragedy of revenge by mentioning the book called ‘The Revenge of HAMLET, Prince of Denmark’, lately acted by Lord Chamberlayne and his servants. Kadare shows the link of the three variants of the story: the ancient reality of the Norse ballad, Saxo Grammaticus’s story incorporated in his history of the Danes “Gesta Danorum”, and Shakespeare’s tragedy. He focuses on the themes of the Ghost, murder and revenge, tyranny, etc.

2. Interpretations of the motifs of the tragedy.

   Kadare believes that incest is one of the main motifs of the play. Hamlet has committed incest with Ophelia, who might be his own sister; so they are brother and sister. This is one of the multi-layered Freudian interpretations of the tragedy. According to him, Hamlet has killed three times; he has killed three fathers: He killed King Hamlet for going to bed with Gertrude, with Ophelia and with all the females of the clan; he killed Polonius for going to bed with Gertrude (his presence in her chamber, behind the arras) and for sending his own daughter to the king’s adulterous bed; and he...
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kills Claudius for going to bed with Gertrude and with Ophelia. Hamlet commits double incest for, apart from his incest with his sister, he is sensually inclined to his mother. This might explain Hamlet’s hallucinations and psychical disorders. Kadare also holds that two other motifs unexplored until now are: the theme of the dream of double life and the theme of infinite failure.

3. Interpretation and re-interpretation of the character of Hamlet.

Kadare says that the name of Hamlet for father and for son is a goldmine for interpretations: (a). as common sins committed by father and son; (b). as the split of the same man into body and spirit; (c). as the man with double consciousness and split personality; (d). as the symbol of murder and suicide. He suggests that Hamlet, like the Ghost, like Queen Gertrude, like Ophelia, seems to lock a guilt within his bosom, and we suspect this guilt to be heavier than that of the others.

4. Interpretation and re-interpretation of the other characters: the Ghost, Ophelia, Gertrude, Claudius, Polonius.

Kadare claims that, unlike Coleridge’s interpretation of the Ghost, Goethe’s interpretation of Hamlet’s delay of revenge, and interpretations of Hamlet’s pretended or half madness, he (Kadare) can provide a new interpretation: the two women of the tragedy, Gertrude and Ophelia, should be under investigation. Gertrude, who has been committing adultery long before the murder of her husband, is an accomplice in the plot. And Ophelia, who has lost her virginity, not with Hamlet but with someone else, feels guilty of something that she never dares mention. Hamlet refers to her sometimes as a whore, sometimes as a nun ("Go to a nunnery"; "marry a fool", “are you honest?” “Are you fair?” etc.). According to Kadare, Ophelia has “a crystalline cleft”, an irreversible flaw, like the cleft of a diamond stone which is irreparable and destructive to the precious stone.

5. Interpretations of Shakespeare’s life and name.

Kadare interprets facts of Shakespeare’s life, linking them with certain elements of the plot of Hamlet. He also comments on the 50 odd variants of the name of the great dramatist, mentioning such variants as Chacsper, Shaxpere, Sigiesberg, Schachsburg, Isaacsburg, Sheikh El Zubar, etc.

6. The reception and interpretation of Shakespeare’s play in the 20th-century societies suffering under tyranny (Albania, Kosovo, the former Soviet Union, China) by giving the play a wholly modern turn.

Kadare shows that in 1999 the play was interpreted by the theatre of Prishtina in Kosova to celebrate its freedom from the Serbian rule of Miloshevic. In every possible phrase of the text, in the setting, in the pathetic rendering of the actors, in every possible detail, particularly in the pantomime – ‘the dumb-show’ ‘miching
mallecho’ and the mini-play about Gonzago’s murder as well as in the appearance and words of the Ghost, there was an attempt to find a reference for an order of revenge against their ethnic cleansing. By referring to the reaction of the king during the performance of the ‘mouse-trap’, Kadare (2006: 48) shows that modern tyrants have reacted in a similar way. Thus, angry Stalin interrupted the performance of Shostakovich’s opera “Lady Macbeth of Mtsensky”; Mao Tse-tung interrupted a play in Peking, and Enver Hoxha did the same thing in Tirana with another play (Kadare, 2006: 48).

**Conclusion: Why Shakespeare endures and remains forever contemporary**

What we have shown briefly in this presentation, particularly what Ismail Kadare presents in his long “Essay” of 150 pages on Shakespeare’s tragedy Hamlet, above all proves that Shakespeare’s works belong to all times and all countries. The interpretation and re-interpretation of Shakespeare’s themes, motifs and characters are another undisputable testimony of the lasting influence and endurance of the great Renaissance dramatist. His plays speak to present times. As his contemporary Ben Jonson said, “He was not of an age, but for all time!”

“Shakespeare endures because with each new turn of history, a new dimension of his work opens up before us.... So long as we have wars, rape, codes of honour and violent acts of revenge, Shakespeare’s tragic vision will go on being contemporary. So long as we continue to be fascinated by human relationships – children rebelling against parents, mothers struggling to let their sons grow up and break free, best friends falling for the same girl, servants and counsellors who are wiser than their masters, ordinary people using jokes as a way of deflating those in authority – his comic vision will always remain alive.” (Bate and Rasmussen, 2007: 9-11)

The extensive treatment of Shakespeare’s works in high-school and university textbooks suggests that the young generation is still being nourished and cultivated with high taste and appreciation for the great dramatist. This is another testimony that supreme art knows no boundaries of place and time, and that it is a bridge of joining nations, races and people of diverse strata of mankind.

**Endnotes**


2 Noli translated the tragedy of Macbeth in August 1928, in Berlin. Ibid. pg 447..

3 In his Introduction to the tragedy Noli writes: “Thus, the history of Scotland continued with internal turmoil, with bloody terrorism and with invading, mercenary foreign armies and treacheries, until this kingdom perished and definitely fell under the English yoke, where it still continues to be. The tragic irony which stigmatizes this tragedy is that Malcolm, who
usurps the throne of Scotland with the support of an English army, is hailed as a liberator by both the social elite and the people. Ibid. pg. 444.

4 Viola: What country, friends, is this?
Captain: This is Illyria, lady.
Viola: …Know’st thou this country?
Captain: “Ay, madam, well, for I was bred and born / Not three hours’ travel from this very place.” (Act 1, Scene 2, 1-2, 21-23).

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