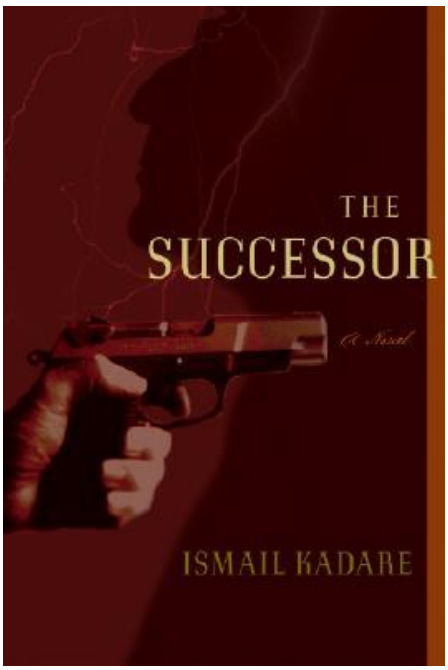

The Successor

Ismail Kadare , David Bellos (Translator)

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A new novel from the acclaimed winner of the inaugural Man Booker International Prize for achievement in fiction.

The Successor is a powerful political novel based on the sudden, mysterious death of the man who had been handpicked to succeed the hated Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha.

The man who died was Mehmet Shehu, the presumed heir to the ailing dictator. The world was so certain that he was next in line that he was known as The Successor. And then, shortly before he was to assume power, he was found dead. Did he commit suicide or was he murdered?

The Successor is simultaneously a page-turning mystery, a historical novel – based on actual events and buttressed by the author's private conversations with the son of the real-life Mehmet Shehu – and a psychological challenge to the reader to decide, How does one live when nothing is sure? **The Successor** seamlessly blends dream and reality, legendary past, and contemporary history, and proves again that Kadare stands alongside Márquez, Canetti, and Auster.

From the Hardcover edition.

The Successor Details

Date	:	Published October 5th 2005 by Arcade Publishing (first published 2003)
ISBN	:	9781559707732
Author	:	Ismail Kadare , David Bellos (Translator)
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From Reader Review The Successor for online ebook

Alta says

The Successor is one of those rare books that can be read with equal pleasure by lovers of psychological or analytical writings, and by readers looking for “action.” Written in the form of a thriller, the novel manages in some miraculous way to go to the essence not only of Communism, but of all dictatorships, revealing with unusual psychological finesse how throughout history there are some archetypal dramas that keep repeating themselves, from Greek myths to Macbeth to the history of the Balkans. Here too, Kadare’s most powerful gift resides in inserting a “regional” story within a universal model, in finding mythological equivalents to contemporary events, and in reading the signification of one through the other.

The novel’s plot, a fictionalized version of a political crime that happened in 1981 in Albania, is simple: on the night of December 13 the designated Successor of Communist dictator Enver Hoxha is mysteriously shot dead. From the beginning to the end of the novel, Kadare crafts a successful drama, in which the answer to the questions “Was it suicide or murder? And if it was murder, who was the killer?” shifts—as the genre of the murder mystery demands—from one chapter to the next. But unlike the usual mystery novel, The Successor doesn’t have a “shocking ending.” In fact, the narrator tells the facts as if even he didn’t know the answer. Moreover, the dictator himself, referred to as “the Guide”—an appellative shared by most Communist leaders—doesn’t seem to possess the key to the entire story either, although he obviously is the gray eminence behind the crime.

Kadare’s skill in creating an ambiguous situation that triggers the reader’s curiosity to the maximum matches his genius in going straight to the essence of things, particularly in the scenes involving the Guide before and after the Successor’s death, which reveal the mechanism of power in Communist dictatorships. To begin with, when the Guide summons to his office the Successor’s successor—Hasobeu—he never pronounces the words “Kill him!” though this is what he is getting at. What he says is so vague and ambiguous—he orders Hasobeu to go to the Successor’s house and do “what is to be done,” and, in spite of his confusion, Hasobeu doesn’t dare ask “What?”—that Hasobeu goes twice to the house, wandering around and trying to interpret the Guide’s words. The game of interpreting is present throughout the book whenever the Guide appears, revealing a system in which everything is a sign demanding to be interpreted correctly if one wants to keep his head. But the absurdity is that there are no rules one could follow in order to properly decipher the signs, and any head could fall at any time. Because of the system’s total arbitrariness it seems at times that the Guide himself, although theoretically the one who makes and changes the rules, doesn’t know everything, as if Power secreted itself like a mythological monster mortals cannot touch, but can only surrender to. Thus, Kadare’s numerous comparisons of the Communist regime to a religion aren’t simply metaphors, but deep insights into its power structure. He compares the ties of comradeship forged at the beginning of Communism between those who spilled blood to come to power, with

"the ties of clan and family, because it too was a tie of blood—but with a difference. It wasn’t based on inner blood, the blood in your veins, identical to the blood of your family going back a thousand years, according to genetics, but on the other kind, on outer blood. That’s to say, on the blood of others, blood they had drunkenly spilled in the name of Doctrine."

Trying to decipher the mystery of the Successor’s death, Hasobeu keeps asking himself what did the Guide actually believe?

"Perhaps, like half the population of Tirana, the Guide took him for the killer. Or did he suspect that his minister [i.e., Hasobeu:] had intended to commit murder, but hadn’t managed to do so, seeing as someone else got his bullet in first? Or that the Successor has beaten both his assassins to the wire by pulling the

trigger on himself?”

After leading us to believe that Hasobeu is the killer, Kadare implies that in fact he isn’t. But he also tells us that the Guide himself is engulfed in his own guessing game and deciphering of the signs, as if he didn’t know either who the killer was. Indeed, a few pages further we are told that the Guide “didn’t know and never had known, what had really happened at the Successor’s residence on that night of December 13. And since he didn’t know, it could take a thousand years for anyone else to find out.”

At this point, what we have suspected so far is confirmed: no one knows who the killer is. But immediately after this revelation we are led to another possible suspect: we are told that, apart from Hasobeu, the only other individual that seemed to have been implicated is the Architect of the Successor’s house. And then the story suddenly takes a turn, but the move is so subtle that the reader might still believe he is reading a murder mystery, when in fact the novel has become a reflection on art and the condition of the artist.

We know that the Architect had had his own reasons to hate the Successor for having been once publicly humiliated by him. We know that he had thought of punishing him, but when asked by the Successor to remodel his residence, the desire of punishing him by building something ugly is immediately replaced by a much stronger impulse: that of building something of unsurpassed beauty. In a Communist country where almost all buildings were state property and of a monotonous, uniform gray, the Architect has the rare chance of realizing his artistic vocation by building something unique. Indeed, once finished, his work is so beautiful that at the Successor’s party where the Guide himself is present, the gasps of admiration let out by the guests are indirectly saying the unsayable: the Successor’s house is more beautiful even than the Guide’s house!

Kadare’s psychological analysis of the oldest and most common reason for committing a crime—envy—is doubled by another legend, this time a Hungarian one, which narrates a monarch’s revenge on a vassal who not only had the cheek to have a castle built that was finer than his, but he had invited him to the inauguration party. Now, it appears that the Guide had been, after all, the one who had ordered the Successor’s death, because he was jealous of his house. But this hypothesis is, again, undermined in the last chapter written in the voice of the Successor, who speaks from beyond the grave, and we are back to the idea that the enigma remains unsolved. Even the opening of the secret archives after the fall of Communism hasn’t managed to uncover the secret, says the Successor. And if he tried to explain it, there is only one person who could understand him, Lin Biao, who had once been the Successor of Mao Tse-Tung, and whose life ended in circumstances similar to those of the Albanian Successor. No one will ever know what really happened on the night of December 13. Although, right before the end of the novel, the Successor seems to remember how that night, as he was dozing off, he saw his wife—whom the Guide called “Comrade Clytemnestra” after her husband’s death—point a gun at him... But did he really see her or was it just the vision of a man who was falling asleep?

K.D. Absolutely says

Based on real events, *The Successor* tells the story of **Mehmet Shehu** who was considered as the successor to the office of Albanian dictator **Enver Hoxha** who many people hated. However, on the night of December 13, 1981, Shehu was found dead inside his room with bolt-in lock from the inside. Despite the lock, people did not believe that it was suicide but foul play. His daughter, an architect and the minister of interior told different versions of the story based on the last interactions with Shehu. People also suspected the new successor, **Adrian Hasobeu** because he was the automatic heir to the position. But was it really not a suicide?

You have to read up to the last page of the last chapter to find out. Many of my friends here on Goodreads think that the last chapter was a letdown. Me? No. I thought it was clever as I did not expect it. I will not tell you who suddenly became the narrator in the end as I do not want to spoil your fun. But believe me, the thrill in eating the cake is in the icing.

According to Wiki, Kadare served as a member of the Albanian government during the Communist rule between 1970-1982. When he was accused of using his writings in deliberately evading politics, he claimed asylum in France where he wrote most of his novels that got included in the 1001 books.

This is my first time to read a work of Ismail Kadare (born in 1936) and I have a mixed feelings whether to like this book or not. The novel is short and easy to read. However, the prose felt (for me) verbose but considering that this book was originally written in French, maybe there were somethings that got lost in translation. Or maybe I had high expectations from Kadare considering that at least 3 of his books are included in the *1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die* and he won The Man Booker International Prize (2009). Or maybe I was expecting something like Kundera in Kadare because their books were originally written in French. The only difference is that Kundera was originally a Czech while Kadare was an Albanian. But they are both well-renowned and frequently rumored as strong contenders to Nobel Prize for Literature.

Well, at this point, I am more for Kundera rather than Kadare. But again, it's me.

Dave says

Fascinating. This is a novelization of the last days and death of Mehmet Shehu, the anointed successor of Enver Hoxha, the Stalin-like dictator of Albania. The names were changed (to protect the guilty?), and I don’t know of any evidence that things played out as Kadare describes. A fast, but not easy, read, it would be rewarding to readers who are curious about Albania, life among the elite in a Communist dictatorship, or dystopias in general. Kadare uses several narrators and a jumbled chronology to tell the tale. My appreciation benefited from several google searches of names and events in Albanian history.

I expect to read more of Kadare’s work.

Karen says

Two years ago I read Chronicle in Stone by the same author, and thoroughly enjoyed it. This book however, did not really live up to my high expectations.
December 13, 1981, the successor to the dictator of Albania died. The initial thought was that it was a suicide, then came the thought that it might be murder. Kadare tells his story through multiple points of view, each moves the plot forward or had the opportunity to commit the murder.
Even though I didn't like this as much as Kadare's other work (and I plan to read more of him), I did enjoy the book, and I am glad I read it.

Tony says

It is typical in a work of fiction to start with a disclaimer, something which includes the caveat “Names, places , and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.”

No such disclaimer here. Instead, Kadare promises “Any resemblance between the characters and circumstances of this tale and real people and events is inevitable.”

The eponym in *The Successor* is Mehmet Shehu, a Communist leader in 20th Century Albania known for his brutality and, later, his suicide. He could be inspirational, I suppose, in an Albanian sort of way, such as when he famously said, “Whoever disagrees with our leadership in any respect, will get spat in the face, punched on the chin, and, if necessary, a bullet in his head." You know, the better angels of our nature.

At the time of his demise, Shehu was the second in command to Enver Hoxha and his presumed successor. When Shehu died of a gunshot to his head one night in his home, it did not take long for suspicions to surface that perhaps he was murdered and not a suicide.

Kadare calls Shehu ‘The Successor’ and Hoxha ‘The Guide’ in this fictionalized account of those events. But everybody knows who he’s talking about. He expands the list of murder suspects, for artistic purposes, to include Shehu’s daughter (whose engagements he kept breaking for political reasons), another minister with ambition, and even an architect who may have created a secret passageway between Shehu’s abode and The Guide’s palace.

There are some almost humorous depictions of Communist paranoia. A pathologist who performs the autopsy on Shehu recalls another autopsy of a different suicide. That corpse was buried with full honors in the Martyr’s Cemetery. But then signs of anti-Yugoslavianism were found in his file so he was dug up and buried in a municipal grave. Then Albania broke with Yugoslavia, so he was dug up again and re-buried in his original tomb as a Herald of Anti-Yugoslavianism.

This had some moments but was ultimately unsatisfying. Although, I did learn a lot about Albania. Well, maybe not a lot, but a general sense. It reminded me of one of the early episodes of the American sitcom *Cheers*, when it was still funny, you know, before Kirstie Alley. In the episode I’m talking about, Sam and Coach are taking a night course to get their GEDs. Both are academically challenged. As a way to help his memory in Geography class, Coach puts what he needs to know about each obscure country to music. Thus is Albania immortalized in song:

Al-ban-i-a, Al-ban-i-a,
You border on the Adriatic,
You are mainly mountainous, and your major export is chrome!

You’re a communist republic,
You’re a red regime.…

If you don’t believe me:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-F_tT-...

MJ Nicholls says

Read this to help clear my desk. Interesting Albanian thriller with a clever structure. I wasn’t that thrilled. The writer looks like a sinister KGB Eric Morecambe.

Louise says

I was reminded of the Kremlinologists, looking for clues in nods and gestures. This book succeeds in illustrating what it is like to live in this kind of environment within a smaller totalitarian state. While the average people look for clues, the leaders of the state are also in the dark and even more desperately look for clues. This is the book's strength.

The good beginning depicts the paranoia the system produces, but the narrative is weakened by dwelling on side topics. For instance, the daughter's story fits the story line, her full sexual exploits do not. Also, for the plot, the Successor's relationship with this daughter and how he came to go out on a limb for her, (celebrating her engagement to an "unapproved" family) are not developed in a way that makes them seem to be real.

The ending is unsatisfying. There is some symmetry in the empathy of the "Guide" and the "Successor". The allusion to Lin Biao is interesting, but, perhaps, should have been shaded by some prior theme to not seem as an add on. There is a vague tie up about the Successor's youth and his daughter's. There is a long (in proportion to the book's length) mental dialog of the architect.

This short book has its highs and lows, unlike Kadare's The "Palace of Dreams" which covers similar turf where every incident supports the thesis.

Rhys says

Ismail Kadare is now one of my favourite ever writers. I only started reading him last year but his work is exactly to my taste and already I know I won't be satisfied until I have read everything of his that is available in English translation.

His style has a crystalline clarity but his themes are decidedly murky: the combination has an extremely powerful effect. *The Sucessor* is a novel that is related to his brilliant novella 'Agamemnon's Daughter' but it isn't quite a sequel.

The Kafkaesque madness of Albania under dictatorship is the setting for the action, in which nobody really seems to know what is happening, not even the all-powerful Guide, and where *not knowing* frequently confers more power than knowing. This paradoxical situation can never be fully resolved because not resolving it is the only way to preserve one's sanity if not one's life (preserving one's life is a task that is far too difficult under this ultra-paranoid regime).

Kadare is a genius.

Lisa says

Scary! And familiar!

“Dictatorship and authentic literature are incompatible... The writer is the natural enemy of dictatorship.”

Dictatorship cannot accept the multifaceted truth of a writer, and a writer cannot accept the empty propaganda words of personality cult. When a writer starts a novel, he puts himself into opposition to dictatorship, by thinking for himself. I wonder if that applies to readers as well?

Many years ago, I had a phase when I read almost anything by Ismail Kadare that fell into my hands. I proceeded to put his works on my top favourite shelf in the living room, and moved on, thinking that his fiction has its perfect place in European history, and his writing style its place of honour somewhere between Franz Kafka, Heinrich Böll and Herta Müller.

I honestly thought his depiction of dictatorship, and the paranoid, unstable environment it creates and nurtures, was a thing of the past in established democracy. The fears and conspiracy theories of the Albanian "court" seemed almost comical in their exaggeration, and the personality cult of the leader an impossible scenario in an enlightened, educated world without communication borders - in an era of internet-based news distribution, I thought, people would read the "facts" and oppose the lies of opportunistic populism.

How naive I was, and how right was Kadare! The past can never be buried. Layer upon layer of soil is added, but a short earthquake is sufficient to instantly bring historical layers back to the surface.

If you want to read a scary ghost story of dictatorship, based on real events, and including the psychological profile of a highly narcissistic regime in power and its internal break-down, Kadare delivers the truth in the way only a novel can - adding different interpretations, scenarios, questions unanswered, layers of emotional reality underneath the surface, hundreds of years of historical changes, all adding more reasons for conflict: political, social, religious, dogmatic marks of identity waiting for a fruitful moment to stir up dusty ideas and create new violence.

Can a dictator really have a successor? Is the concept even thinkable for a person who believes solely in his own person? And what kind of a life does a successor have, in the shadow of the leader, always fearing to be brushed aside on a whim, or killed for having dared to be more than a shadow, a person with a life and a brain of his own? Or just a person with enough personality to be a threat to a fragile, narcissistic ego?

At the court of a dictator, the air you breathe is foul, and nothing can ever be safe. Does it even matter whether the successor committed suicide or was killed? He had given up his identity long before he died. Should he have succeeded in becoming the next dictator, he would also have been a different person.

Sadly, we see that happening every day. Power eats people.

Kadare writes about them.

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jeremy says

the successor follows a plot thread established in *agamemnon's daughter* and is based on the apparent real life suicide of albanian chairman mehmet shehu. kadare's novel is a work of political intrigue and totalitarian excess framed as a murder mystery. told from multiple perspectives, the story leaves the reader, until the

conclusion, questioning whether the title character has indeed killed himself or has, in fact, been a victim of the repressive communist regime. while both the plot and the pacing lend an air of suspense to the story, it lacks an overall depth or richness that one would perhaps expect as complement to the action. kadare's prose often seems too reserved or impersonal for the reader to develop any allegiance to the characters or the tale itself. kadare writes about important themes, yet *the successor* lacks a necessary zeal.

> *we are a race apart, and we can only understand each other. but we are so few in number that amid the dark turmoil of this world above which human souls swirl, it is only rarely, extremely rarely- once every thousand years, maybe every ten thousand?- that we ever come across one of our own.*

Gumble's Yard says

Story about to the long-appointed number two “The Successor” to the country’s dictator “The Guide” who, just as the dictator’s health and sight are failing, is found dead after being denounced by the Guide in a party committee. Initially the death is reported as suicide, and the impression given that the Successor was going to be pardoned by the Guide after presenting his self-criticism the next day.

We follow the story through a number of different narrators: the Successor’s daughter (who had recently been engaged to a possible state enemy), the architect of the Successor’s new residence (whose elaborate design may have incited the jealousy of the Guide’s wife and which also had a secret passage rumoured to lead to the Guide’s house and only to be able to opened from that side), the Successor’s arch-rival (who was outside the residence on the night of the murder following uncertain instructions from the Guide), the Guide himself (who rules by fear and uses the device of a break before self-criticism to force rivals to commit suicide) and then from the Successor – commenting on the future fall of the Guide from beyond the grave.

Kafkaesque in its world of denunciations, double-speak and uncertainty, but without a K type figure. Interesting ideas about the very existence of a successor reminds dictators of their mortality. As with all Balkan type authors – style is fable like and very simple (actually too simple to seem engaging) – Kadare claims that this is in the tradition of the Greek epics, but also that was due to suppression of written forms of Balkan languages by Ottoman empire leading to the verbal form having to retain the culture’s memory and hence due to the continuation of literature as folklore.

Karen says

I do not know why this novel is on the list of “1,000 Books You Must Read before You Die.” I guess I am basing this thought on the fact that I found the sentences very awkward. Decided that the problem may have been due to a bad translation. Read article by translator and now see the difficulties.
http://www.complete-review.com/quarte...

Maybe the problem is my age. I remember reading Kafka when I was young and feeling that his convoluted style was necessary to match themes. Now in my seventies, I try to read so much faster: “so many books, so little time.”

I did like the way the mystery was presented from point of view of various characters. It helped that I

checked Wikipedia (again going for speed rather than solid authority) for background on Hoxha, Shehu, and Hasobeu. Otherwise, I would have been completely lost. I never noticed Albania in U.S. press headlines the way I did Yugoslavia.

Almost ready to give book 3 stars, but can't say that I really "liked" the book. At least now, after thinking about the purpose of the novelist, I understand why "The Successor" made the 1,000 books list.

Jose Carlos says

Mehmet Shehu, primer ministro y mano derecha de Enver Hoxha, fue postulado como sucesor del tirano al frente del país hasta que el propio Hoxha lo acusó de ser un espía de los yugoslavos y, más tarde, con el cargo de poliagente, se concluyó que espiaba a dos bandas, para Estados Unidos y los soviéticos. Aquello, desencadenó una purga cruel de dimensiones telúricas que socavó los cimientos de la clase política y de la sociedad albanesa de una forma terrible.

Al menos en dos ocasiones en su literatura, Kadaré se centra de forma directa en este episodio oscuro de la historia política de Albania. De una forma indirecta lo hará en El Palacio de los sueños, y después, lo abordará como el eje de la trama central narrativa en El sucesor (Tirana, 2003). De hecho, en la primera novela, el autor tomará un elevado riesgo político al coincidir los acontecimientos narrados en El Palacio con parte de la purga llevada a cargo por Hoxha –y resultar esas componendas más que reconocibles en el texto–.

El asunto resultó tan obsesivo para Kadaré que cristalizó en una pareja de novelas cortas y complementarias: La hija de Agamenón (Tirana, 1986) y la titulada El sucesor (Tirana, 2003) que, por lo delicado del asunto y su intento de arrojar luz sobre el tema, no apareció hasta años después del fallecimiento de Hoxha y la estabilización del país. Ambas conforman lo que denomino el Díptico de Ifigenia. Kadaré había estado en un peligro real por todo aquello; los familiares de Mehmet Shehu han confesado en alguna ocasión haber sido interrogados por la Sigurimi durante horas, con ahínco al respecto de dos aspectos fundamentales: todo lo que rodeaba el suicidio y el presunto comportamiento de su padre como poli-agente y, la segunda, sobre Ismaíl Kadaré.

Sin embargo, en esta novela, Kadaré no busca resolver un crimen de Estado llevado a cabo contra un inocente. El autor no ha perdido la perspectiva y sabe muy bien de qué tipo de personaje está hablando. En 1993, el hijo de Shehu, Bashkim, escribe un libro autobiográfico sobre cómo vivió aquellos días que rodearon la muerte de su padre, y le pide el prefacio a Ismaíl Kadaré. Las palabras del escritor vertidas en ese prefacio no pueden ser más concluyentes: "Mehmet Shehu era ni más ni menos que un segundo dictador de Albania y casi tan feroz como Enver Hoxha" (Kadaré citado en Mori, 2006: 85). La historia, repleta de conjuras, venganzas, mentiras y estratagemas políticas, reúne los mismos ingredientes que ya han fascinado a Kadaré en el Macbeth de Shakespeare o en el suceso real de la purga del político Lin Biao llevada a cabo por Mao y relatada pormenorizadamente en El concierto. Son, todas ellas, aristas de la misma trama, donde Shehu, como lo fueron Duncan en Shakespeare y Biao a manos de los acólitos de Mao, es la víctima del poderío totalitario y de los engranajes tiránicos.

El Sucesor, desde el momento en que plantea el enigma de un crimen de Estado, ya se hace imposible de resolver. El crimen de Estado es una pregunta: ¿quién disparó contra el Sucesor del Líder? Y es una pregunta sin respuesta. Realmente, lograr saber quién o quienes se encontraban accionando el gatillo, o tras los cañones de las armas disparadas, ni tan siquiera daría las identidades reales de los asesinos. Se trata de una red mucho más compleja de poderes, intereses y luchas internas que apunta al mismo Líder como autor intelectual del asesinato, al Estado como responsable, pero que tampoco puede dejar de lado a todo el

aparataje médico, judicial e incluso pericial, y al propio arquitecto que construyó la casa del Sucesor (una residencia que alberga pasajes secretos) como implicados en la conjura para anular al segundo de Enver Hoxha una vez caído en desgracia.

De esa forma, la cuestión deja de ser la pregunta que parece plantearse inicialmente, si el Sucesor se suicidó o fue asesinado, para al poco tiempo virar hacia un "¿quién asesinó al Sucesor?", y terminar preguntándose el lector si el propio Líder salió del pasadizo secreto empuñando el arma y le descerrajó el disparo. No se puede encontrar en todo el texto una respuesta clara a la pregunta de quién lo hizo, pero, la claridad absoluta que se desprende de que la cuestión se trata de un crimen de Estado, y la forma en que los pequeños misterios se resuelven con una autoría determinante, resultan contundentes. En este caso, la maraña de datos ambiguos, de sucesos que aparecen velados por situaciones contradictorias y por diferentes interpretaciones, buscan distanciarnos de la verdad: si el Sucesor fue asesinado por el Estado, la persona que apretó el gatillo importará bien poco, no así la persona que dictó la orden… Ahora, ¿quién dio esa orden? ¿Y por qué?

Kadaré ha dotado de atribuciones míticas al Sucesor y al Guía, y convertido el drama en una fábula mitológica tan antigua como el mundo. Como en cualquier historia mítica existe una indefinición del tiempo y del espacio, como esos espacios míticos indeterminados sobre los que se mueven Ícaro, Perseo o Teseo, fundidos en un tiempo indefinido. La casa en donde ha tenido lugar el suicidio se convierte en un lugar misterioso y laberíntico, casi impreciso a pesar de poseer pisos, habitaciones y paredes. El sonido a veces puede llegar de una habitación a otra, pero a veces no lo consigue. De repente, existe un pasadizo secreto que conecta la casa del Sucesor con el Palacio Presidencial, ¿o no ha existido nada más que en la cabeza de la gente? Incluso encontramos un arquitecto, una suerte de Dédalo, que al final ya no distingue entre lo real y lo ficticio.

La intención del díptico junto a La hija de Agamenón, se articula en El sucesor mediante los recuerdos de Suzana, que rememora su relación con el periodista, e incluso aquél Primero de Mayo de la ruptura. Suzana, la hija sacrificada, la Ifigenia comunista, es la pieza, la bisagra, que establece la conexión entre la narración de La hija de Agamenón y El Sucesor. La mujer, en esta ocasión, no ha llevado a cabo un nuevo compromiso prohibido por orden de su padre –ya superada su anterior relación con el periodista de la primera narración– sino que ha celebrado el anuncio de sus esponsales con Genc Dakli, hijo de un prestigioso científico. Esta unión complacía al propio Guía que en un principio la había bendecido en persona, aunque la familia de Dakli no fuera del todo afín al régimen, quizás por su intelectualidad. Aún medio ciego y enfermo el Líder asistió a la fiesta de compromiso de la que se marchó dejando la certeza de que algo había sucedido allí. Todo acababa de cambiar.

Algo había ocurrido ente el Sucesor y el Líder, la condena estaba firmada. Ahora bien, ¿qué puede acontecer entre la entrada y la salida del Líder en el baile? ¿Qué imperceptible suceso arroja en el pozo de la desgracia al Sucesor y a su familia?

El compromiso matrimonial coincide con la inauguración de la nueva residencia del Sucesor, reformada durante los meses anteriores. ¿Existe una ostentación burguesa en la familia del Sucesor, en su esposa, cuando enseñan las nuevas habitaciones? ¿El Guía se pone celoso, o es la mujer del Guía la que realmente, devorada de celos, derrama el veneno de la envidia en los oídos del Dirigente? O tal vez sea esa máxima de la dictadura de Hoxha, que todo está sometido al súbito cambio, la mayoría de las veces sin saberse los motivos reales, ni siquiera puede que exista un motivo concreto que lleve a los hombres a la muerte, a las cárceles, a la desgracia.

La existencia se ha convertido en un infierno para alguien que, tangencialmente, interpreta un papel en el drama: el arquitecto encargado de reformar la casa del Sucesor. Y no será este, ni mucho menos, el único arquitecto atormentado que aparece en las novelas de Kadaré. Desde los constructores de la Pirámide de Keops, pasando por el encargado de construir un palacete de caza en el bosque para el Conde Ciano, o el Constructor del Caballo de Troya, el responsable del puente de los tres arcos... todos ellos se sumen en la

desgracia agobiante de estar sirviendo al régimen totalitario.

En el caso de El sucesor, el arquitecto es consciente de que su actuación ha generado una parte del desastre, directamente imbricado con la muerte o el asesinato del político. En algún momento, el arquitecto descubrió una extraña puerta que conectaba la residencia de Hoxha con la del Sucesor, y que solo se podía abrir desde el lado del Líder. Este arquitecto conoce los misterios del edificio al estilo de los constructores de las pirámides y sus laberintos entrampados. Y si estos acababan enterrados con el faraón, o eliminados para no desvelar el secreto, el arquitecto que ha descubierto la misteriosa puerta se sabe, así mismo, condenado.

Kadaré ha ejecutado un salto mortal arquitectónico en el tiempo y ha trasvasado el mal desde una época distanciada por miles de años, establecido la Gran Pirámide Albanesa, con sus faraones, sus sacerdotes, su arquitecto y la enorme carga de muerte y destrucción que se eleva por encima de los tiempos. El arquitecto es uno de los personajes de Kadaré que ha entrado en contacto con una parte, por minúscula que sea, de la "Gran Estratagema" del Estado y debe pagar por ello. No en vano, toda la historia, además de estar atravesada por los códigos de las novelas negras, se alimenta de motivos que parecen sacados y puestos al día de las novelas del Egipto de los faraones.

En la acusación directa al crimen de Estado que se afirma en las páginas de La hija de Agamenón se adelanta la posible respuesta al misterio que se plantea en El sucesor, lo que viene a dar sentido a ambas obras en su concepción de díptico y las afianza como dos de los máximos exponentes de lo que he denominado la "Gran Estratagema". Aunque la fórmula oficial albanesa hablaba de que "había sido encontrado muerto", pronto la radio yugoslava –un país enfrentado a Hoxha–, empezó a barajar la posibilidad del asesinato de Shehu: eso era lo que faltaba para terminar de enmarañar todo el asunto, poner en pie diferentes teorías y arrastrar el problema en dirección al espionaje, que desembocó en el término "poliagente" que se utilizó con el Sucesor, acusado de trabajar para Norteamérica y, además para Yugoslavia, que tanto acusaba al gobierno albanés de su asesinato. Al incluirse ambas posibilidades, suicidio y asesinato, la "Gran Estratagema" se hizo muchísimo más fuerte, y el crimen del Estado pudo ocultarse allí en donde suele salir indemne: meandros, recovecos, responsabilidades delegadas…

De esta manera, el díptico que se ofrece en La hija de Agamenón y El Sucesor puede parecer que es un intento de comprender o interpretar la crueldad de las decisiones y de los actos de los tiranos que, como Agamenón, Stalin, o el Sucesor, pueden colocar a sus hijos (o a sus más queridos elementos independientemente de la consanguinidad) en la pira del sacrificio en beneficio de sus propias carreras. Sin embargo, por mucho estudio psicológico que hagamos de ellos, algo se nos escapa, sigue existiendo un componente de horror que hace que no comprendamos los motivos que mueven al Estado de Hoxha a asesinar a Shehu: ¿poseía una casa mejor que la del Líder? ¿El simple motivo de que Shehu sería el Líder futuro? Entonces... ¿todo se reduce, finalmente, a unos mundanos motivos de celos?

El ejemplo de la paranoia lo encontramos en la segunda parte de la novela, titulada "La autopsia". Aquí, en determinado instante, el médico encargado del informe sólo piensa determinar que el Sucesor ha sido asesinado, con lo que su figura ascendería a una categoría mitológica dentro del Partido, lo que acostumbraba a ser "una puesta en escena sobradamente conocida en los países comunistas" (173). Ello, automáticamente, desencadenaría el siguiente mecanismo represivo:

"el Sucesor sería declarado asesinado, es decir, mártir de la revolución, y que todas las dudas que, como nubes negras, habían oscurecido su nombre se disiparían en un instante. Y daría comienzo entonces el escarmiento de los otros, de los que le habían cavado al tumba" (154).

El problema radica en que a la "Gran Estratagema" quizás no le convenga tanto que el Sucesor sea tenido como un mártir, que se declare que haya sido asesinado, y entonces se determine que todo ha sido un suicidio. De ser así, entonces, se pondrán en marcha otros mecanismos, que vendrán a demostrar el desquiciamiento del sistema, como un buen ejemplo resulta el trato que ha venido recibiendo el cadáver del

ex miembro del Politburó Kano Zhbira, así mismo también suicidado muchos años antes y que recientemente había sido exhumado del cementerio de los mártires por tercera vez. “Cualquier viraje de la línea política, antes que afectar a la economía, lo acusaban sus restos mortales” (155), asegura el narrador de la historia, que califica esta continuada inhumación–exhumación como un “reumatismo de ultratumba o rheumatismus post mortem”. Zhbira, tras suicidarse y correrse los rumores de asesinato, fue enterrado con honores en el cementerio de los mártires. Después, a petición de los yugoslavos, fue desenterrado para su traslado al cementerio civil de Tirana, “dado que en su expediente se habían descubierto trazas de una actitud antiyugoslava”. Pero al cabo de un año, tras la ruptura de relaciones de Albania con Yugoslavia, lo habían vuelto a su lugar original, como “campeón de la resistencia antiyugoslava”. Después,

“su última exhumación, con subsiguiente enterramiento en el cementerio civil, tuvo lugar casi en secreto, por motivos que esta vez no conocía nadie”.

De mártir a culpable, de asesinado a suicida,

“no era conveniente descartar que el Sucesor transitara de una variante a otra como un alma en pena por los círculos del infierno de Dante” (173).

Incluso no decantarse por una decisión, puede ser una decisión política correcta. “Los recelos eran el elemento más sagrado en el cerebro de un Guía” (231), y por ello era más que posible que el Guía “no deseara esclarecimiento alguno”. Sin embargo, la decisión que finalmente se tomará es la de anunciar que se ha intentado un golpe de Estado por parte del Sucesor para derrocar al Guía…

“y eso dejaba suponer la participación de cómplices fieles y conjurados, de códigos secretos, armas, espías, enlaces” (217),

es decir, la activación de un nuevo protocolo, “el efecto complot” (219), muy conveniente a la “Gran Estratagema” urdida por el Estado; un complot, “el de mayores proporciones en toda la historia de Albania. El más aterrador”. Según esta nueva forma de actuar,

“la tumba del Sucesor había sido arrasada al caer la tarde y sus despojos mezclados con tablones del féretro y pellas de barro, empaquetados sin ningún miramiento en una gran bolsa de plástico para ser transportados con ignorado destino” (218).

Dentro de este desquiciamiento generalizado, del clima paranoico, la muerte del Sucesor se engrana como una última pieza del juego político de la “Gran Estratagema”. El Sucesor había muerto, se había suicidado, en la noche de espera de un discurso importantísimo, ese que el Líder debería haber pronunciado el 13 de diciembre, perdonando o culpabilizando de sus desviaciones al Sucesor, pero que se había aplazado porque se les hizo tarde. Al parecer, cuando se trataba de grandes cargos, esta era una práctica habitual del Líder, aplazar el discurso o la propia autocrítica del acusado para que la rumiara bien durante esa noche, dejar en suspenso el decisivo veredicto del Líder… una noche que solía saldarse con la muerte de los acusados, para, después, el Líder expresar en su discurso del siguiente día un perdón paternal, que llegaba demasiado tarde para el caído en desgracia.

El discurso del Líder terminaba anunciando el perdón del Sucesor, no podía ser de otra manera. De esa forma, el Sucesor aparecía como alguien que

“imaginando la vejación de que sería objeto al día siguiente por parte del Guía, no había tenido arrestos para esperar el momento del suplicio y se había anticipado a los acontecimientos poniendo fin a su vida” (169).

La maniobra era perfecta. En cualquiera de los casos, el Sucesor salía malparado. Lo que tampoco debería

extrañarnos, que el Líder se conduzca con crueldad con el Sucesor, dado que los dos pertenecen a una sociedad vinculada por las atrocidades de los crímenes cometidos por ambos, circunstancias que los unen. Unos vínculos que

“conseguían rivalizar con los del linaje, puesto que se basaban igualmente en la sangre, aunque con una diferencia de matiz: no en la sangre interior, la que discurría por las venas ramificadas de una misma estirpe (…) sino en otra sangre, en la exterior. Dicho en otras palabras, la sangre de otros, que ellos hacían correr como embriagados en nombre de la doctrina” (198).

Esta nueva genética, la nueva hermandad que permitía sacrificios como los del padre entregando a la hija, como Agamenón, validaba holocaustos semejantes al de ahora: el Líder ejecutaba al Sucesor, una ejecución acorde con esa nueva genética que “empujaba al hijo a vender al padre, el padre al hijo, la mujer al marido” (202).

El discurso de hora y media, grabado en una cinta magnetofónica, pronunciado como si el Sucesor aún estuviera delante, lo podría escuchar la gente convocada en las catorce grandes salas de Tirana, obligados a asistir a aquella asamblea de suprema importancia. Las palabras del Líder que tendrían que haber sido pronunciadas durante la tarde anterior sonaban ahora en las cintas grabadoras en esa mañana de la muerte del Sucesor, se dirigían al Sucesor y le decían, con un decalage macabro de apenas doce horas:

“Y ahora, después de que esta noche hayas reflexionado una vez más, estoy seguro de que mañana, cuando nos volvamos a reunir en esta sala, tú habrás comprendido mejor el error que has cometido, de forma que volverás a encontrarte de nuevo entre nosotros, entre tus camaradas que te quieren, tan valioso para el Partido como siempre” (170).

La maniobra es de una crueldad infinita: el Líder ha mandado asesinar al Sucesor en esas doce horas y ha mantenido inalterado su mensaje magnetofónico, aquel que no permitió difundir la tarde anterior porque se hacía ya tarde. Este suceso, la brecha en el tiempo, la disfunción, el desajuste de las doce horas, posee algo de una maldad cuántica:

“Esa interrupción, ese intervalo de tiempo entre el lunes y el martes, el oscuro surco que el Sucesor no consiguió franquear, le hizo precipitarse en el abismo. Todos pudieron asistir a su perdón excepto él mismo”.

La abominación del plan puesto en práctica es de tales dimensiones, el abismo negro tan devorador, que no puede pasar inadvertido para nadie:

“En todo aquello había algo antinatural. Esas palabras eran del lunes, cuando el Sucesor estaba aún vivo, pero habían sido pronunciadas el martes, cuando ya no era más que un cadáver. El pasado, en franca infracción de las leyes del discurrir del tiempo, se había transformado en futuro. El ayer en hoy. Esto era suficiente para que todos se sintieran perdidos” (171).

En efecto, al parecer las leyes de la mecánica cuántica no agradaban a la Albania del régimen de Hoxha: “Ese bucle del tiempo era lo que, según se veía, una capital se revelaba más incapaz de soportar”.

Finalmente, y en la voz del propio cadáver del Sucesor, la reflexión sobre la manipulación del espacio-tiempo adquiere toda su dimensión de tragedia cuántica:

“Mientras yo me encontraba ya en el depósito, ellos fingían que nada había sucedido, como si no hubiera existido una noche del 13 de diciembre, sino, en su lugar, hubiera transcurrido una secuencia de tiempo diferente, una suerte de sustituto, una especie de acoplamiento contra natura de la noche con el día posterior, impidiendo que el tiempo discurriera entre los dos".

Jan says

We are fortunate that Albania’s Ismail Kadare won the first Man Booker International Prize in 2005 because it resulted in his works being translated into over thirty languages and introduced to the world.

By the way, he faced serious competition for the award as the finalists included Gabriel García Márquez, Milan Kundera, Margaret Atwood, Saul Bellow, Gunther Grass, Naguib Mahfouz, Doris Lessing, Kenzabur? ?e, Stanis?aw Lem, Ian McEwan, Philip Roth, Muriel Spark and John Updike. I count six Nobel Prize winners in this group.

The Successor follows events from 1981 in Tirana about the unexplained death of Prime Minister Mehemt Shebu, the designated successor to dictator Enver Hoxha who ruled for 40 years and is referred to in book as The Guide. Kadare interviewed many eyewitnesses, including Shebu’s son. The story unfolds through the interior monologues of people directly involved. Several different theories are presented but never brought to any conclusion.

This book is much, much more than a detective mystery. Kadare provides insights into a world of irrational and always menacing paranoia that was Albania in the 70s and 80s. Kadare would know, since he was in Parliament at the time, although not a party member.

There are universal truths told here that are not limited to Albania. The mind of totalitarianism is shaped in similar manner, wherever we find it. The Guide prefers to avoid issuing direct orders and uses indirect hints for his acolytes to interpret. Without direct communication about the internal workings of the State, everyone obsessively searched for early warning signals – who was seated next to whom, in what order did the leadership enter a room, and so on. There was a continual feeling of uncertainty, new rules were invented and quickly changed. Since power is never static and the leadership was ruthless, the uncertainty lead to an overwhelming feeling of dread.

Kadare had been compared to Kafka and Orwell, but while they warned us about these dystopic conditions, they did not live it like Kadare did. For that reason, I find a stronger comparison with Arthur Koestler who wrote the magnificent Darkness at Noon and enabled us to understand the thinking inside the Stalin show trials.

Kadare dark disturbing story is told in a casual manner that allows us to get to know the flesh and blood characters and even appreciate humor when it occurs, but the absurd logic of a society ruled so arbitrarily remains very chilling.

Kadare sought exile in Paris in 1990, after Hoxha died but before Communists left office. Almost immediately, the Sigurimi, Albania's secret police, began discrediting him as a collaborator, an informer. Kadare admits he was not a dissident, but then no one was permitted to be a dissident in Hoxha’s Albania. In 2005, Albania’s National Archives, released internal documents that show Kadare was at risk of arrest, relegation or worse throughout the Hoxha years, and he was only kept free due to his enormous popularity as a writer among his countrymen.

A well written and very enlightening book about a country that is mysterious to most of us.

Leonard says

A whodunit about the death of the successor to Albania’s ruler. But also a political novel about the madness of a dictatorship. Fear, envy, suspicion, and whim disguise as loyalty to motivate political intrigues. And politics, whether in governments, corporations, churches, or families, don similar costumes.

Robert says

After reading The Successor (as an off comment this is my first Kadare) I was wondering if this was some sort of political allegory but after some research the events in this book actually did happen, so I guess there’s a more historical aspect to the novel.

The premise is simple but at the same time complex. The successor to the Albanian government is found dead in his room with a gun next to him. This triggers (no pun intended) mass speculation on whether the Successor was murdered or committed suicide. A lot of the book focuses on the events leading to this action and the reader is in for a mighty plot twist towards the end of the novel.

But this is almost secondary.

The real emphasis here lies on how The Successor’s death affects certain people, namely his daughter Suzane who was engaged to a person that could have created a civil Albania, The Successor’s pathologist and the architect who built his house. All of these three people feel that they contributed to his death and wonder how the state would react when faced with the evidence that they indirectly killed The Successor.

The other focus is on Albania’s political history. As we all know politics is a dirty business and Kadare shows no prudence in revealing corruption and the workings behind certain decisions. This is exemplified through Suzane’s memory, which takes place early one in the book.

Despite all these happenings, I felt vaguely unsatisfied when reading the book. I cannot say I loved it or will embrace it as on of my top books. Mainly because I felt that something was missing, it felt like a novel that didn’t want to engross you, rather create a barrier (except in the Suzane chapters.Those are fully realised). People have said that Kadare is Kafkaesque, which in a way is right but whereas Kafka could engross you with his intricate webs, I felt that The Successor didn’t manage completely.

However it still is worth a shot (argh I promise the pun was not intended) Mainly because the information about Albania’s history interested me . Just a bit of a soul and this would have been the perfect novel

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Steve mitchell says

Albanias "succesor" gets iced out and who is to blame? At first it looks to be a suicide, but after further review someone murdered him.

But who and why for? Hmmmmmmmm. Pretty good book, not great, but good, writing is clear and a bit like a journalistic entry, just the facts mam, the political fettering is entertaining and interesting.

I will hold my judgment of Kadare for another book, at present I could take him or leave him, leaning closer to the latter at this point. Good thing for Mr. Kadare he has 3 more books on the list!

Eadie says

Book Description:
A fictionalized political tale based on true-life events and the author's conversations with the victim's son follows the events surrounding the death of Mehmet Shehu, a hand-picked successor to hated ailing Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha who succumbs to an unlikely suicide and sparks a government maelstrom.

My Review:
This historical and political novel about the death of the successor to dictator, Enver Hoxha, in 1981 Albania read somewhat like an Agatha Christie novel. Was the successor's death a suicide or was it a murder? The author clearly shows the atmosphere that was happening at the time in the Balkans and the conspiracy theories which surrounded the death of the successor. The book leaves you guessing who could have killed the successor until the very end. I would recommend this book to those who are interested in the history of the Balkans and the part that Albania plays in the area in 1981.

Megan says

Struggled to get through the book.

Adam says

Another great book by Albanian author Ismail Kadare.

It deals with the 'disappearance' of Mehmet Shehu, Enver Hoxha's right hand man. When I visited Albania in 1984, Enver Hoxha was still alive but Shehu's face had been airbrushed out of photographs on display in museums.

The weird, frightening atmosphere of Albania, until recently the last bastion of Stalinism in Europe, is beautifully portrayed in this story.
