

English A: Literature - Written Assignment

To what extent does the motif of blood allow Ismail Kadare to explore the inescapability of violence under the dictates of the *Kanun* in *Broken April*?

Reflective Statement

How was your understanding of the cultural and contextual considerations of the work developed through the interactive oral?

In our interactive oral, we explored the influence of the intricate traditions and tumultuous political history of Albania on the portrayal of the *Kanun* in the novel *Broken April*. The rural setting of the novel made it difficult to gauge the time period in which it takes place, but after noting a reference to “King Zog”¹, we concluded that it is set in the late 1920s or 1930s (though published in 1978). Most students agreed that the cause of the *Kanun*’s strong influence in the novel was the absence of strong centralised power throughout Albania’s history, an issue that plagued the country well before Zog’s regime and persisted with the unstable Stalinist government that reigned when the novel was published.

The novel is also intriguingly devoid of religious influences, which reflects the fact that Albania did not have a single dominant religion. In its stead, the *Kanun* seems to form the central belief system of the people of the highlands. This, along with the unstable nature of Zog’s rule, gave me considerable insight about the omnipresence and idolisation of local authority figures who enforce the *Kanun*, such as Ali Binak and Mark Ukacierra.

As we attempted to understand Ismail Kadare’s intentions as an author, it became increasingly evident that providing social commentary was a central aim of his written work. Many of his novels had been banned by Albanian authorities as they resisted the ideals of Communist Albania, but he still maintained relations with controversial figures such as Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha², which meant that his political stance was clearly more complex than it seemed. However, most of his novels are still reflective of an anti-totalitarian stance, and that emerges in his portrayal of the *Kanun* as a nearly dictatorial force in its own right. *Broken April* itself does not always directly criticise the

¹ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 44.

² Likmeta, Besar. “Letters Reveal Kadare’s Ties to Albania Regime.” *Balkan Insight*, 26 Sept. 2012, balkaninsight.com/2012/09/26/letters-reveal-kadare-s-complex-relationship-with-albania-s-regime/. Accessed 28 Jun. 2019.

Kanun or any particular political belief, but the rationality and outsider perspective of Diana — who is perhaps a surrogate for Kadare's own distaste of the *Kanun* — provides a counterweight to the dogmatic beliefs of the other characters.

I think that understanding *Broken April* would be difficult without an acute awareness of the oppressive structures that plagued both the historical setting of the novel and Kadare's own career. Learning about these allowed me to appreciate the importance of his work as a subtle and humanistic take on Albania's ruthless cycle of violence.

Word Count: 395 words

To what extent does the motif of blood allow Ismail Kadare to explore the inescapability of violence under the dictates of the Kanun in *Broken April*?

Ismail Kadare's novel *Broken April* narrates the final weeks in the life of Gjorg, a man whose family has been embroiled in a blood feud for several generations. The novel is saturated with uses of the word "blood", especially when referring to the *Kanun* (the traditional set of laws governing the people of the Albanian highlands) and its propagation of cyclical violence through the *Gjakmarra*³, an ancient system of blood feuds. The word itself carries many different meanings throughout the novel, but Kadare uses it as a consistent motif to illustrate the overwhelming influence of the *Kanun*'s on life in rural Albania, and the inescapability of its violent dictates.

Although the *Kanun* itself is an elusive force throughout the novel, "terrifying but... majestic", Kadare is able to render its power tangible using the motif of blood. The *Kanun*'s emphasis on revenge is conveyed directly through the mutual killings of the *Gjakmarrja* — a system that necessitates murder in the name of ancestral honour — but Kadare rarely refers to them as such. Gjorg's unfortunate mission to kill Zef Kryeqyqe is described as taking "back his brother's blood"⁴, which establishes the immediate relationship between blood and the *Kanun*'s dictates on honour and vengeance. This is further solidified when his brother's bloodied shirt is said to be an "infallible barometer"⁵ which indicates that he is "yearning"⁶ for his family to retaliate as it slowly changes colour; as such, it becomes a physical symbol of revenge in Gjorg's life. The people's unflinching loyalty to the *Kanun* is demonstrated through their perpetual ignorance of changes in the weather, attributing the yellowing of the shirt's bloodstains entirely to the power of the *Kanun*. Conversely, these cyclical killings are not as invariably linked to "blood" for the characters of Bessian and Diana (who hail from outside the highlands). Bessian refers to the *Kanun*'s dictates on blood feuds as

³ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 14.

⁴ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 13.

⁵ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 22.

⁶ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 22.

the “laws of death”⁷, and later a public act of violence is simply referenced as a “killing”⁸. The shift in vocabulary uses the perspective of a foreign visitor to show that the connection between vengeance and blood is derived from the laws of the *Kanun*, allowing Kadare to establish an intricate link between the motif of blood and the themes of revenge and honour which permeate the setting of the novel.

The motif of blood also effectively showcases the excessive presence of violence in the narrative itself. Kadare employs metaphors such as “whirlpool of blood”⁹ and “blood... flowed in a torrent”¹⁰, which lends a certain sense of scale and immediate peril to the blood feuds by comparing them to the imagery of vicious natural phenomena. Furthermore, the repeated use of phrases containing the word as a pre-fix — including “blood feuds”, “blood-compensation”¹¹ and “blood merchandise”¹² — directly demonstrates the extent to which such violence plagues the highlanders, by explicitly connecting different elements of their lives back to the unbridled cycle of murders. Defining the natural and social environments of *Broken April* through the motif of blood enables Kadare to communicate the expansive and inescapable presence of violence in Gjorg’s life.

The link between blood and familial honour ostensibly indicates that Gjorg’s crime may be driven by personal hate or emotion, but Kadare uses the former to show the cyclical and detached nature of such killings instead. He contrasts murders “carried out... in hot blood”¹³ against those charged with the “cold calculation”¹⁴ of the blood feud, which implies that it is social pressure and not a genuine desire for vengeance that drives people to commit them. The mechanical nature of these murders is further highlighted when Diana compares Bessian’s description of the *Kanun*’s blood feuds to “bank transactions”¹⁵. Another direct indication of the impersonal nature of such

⁷ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 69.

⁸ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 79.

⁹ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 34.

¹⁰ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 138.

¹¹ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 48.

¹² Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 141.

¹³ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 112.

¹⁴ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 116.

¹⁵ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 116.

crimes is Bessian's allusion to the "machinery of classical tragedy"¹⁶¹⁷ while explaining the *Gjakmarrja*, one in which people are simply and inescapably "caught up". He also subtly relates Gjorg's perspective as a victim of the blood feuds to one of the men who propagates it, Mark Ukacierra, by showing each of them to be rendered "blood-sick" by their involvement in the cycle of violence.¹⁸ Mark's character is particularly surprised by his sickness as he had never "killed anyone"¹⁹, but the nature of his work as a "steward of the blood"²⁰ had nonetheless taken a toll on him. Here, Kadare seems to imply that the 'giving' and 'taking' of blood — or the cyclical balance of the *Kanun* — also extends to those who have supported the killings of multitudes of men out of financial greed. A certain irony of the *Kanun* system is demonstrated by Mark's desire to make blood "rain falling from the sky"²¹ by encouraging more killings, and although rain is associated with fertility, the blood feuds had only caused fields to lie "fallow"²² as men were mercilessly being killed throughout the lands of the *Kanun*. Blood also plays an important role in propagating the theme of identity in *Broken April*. Early in the novel, Gjorg observes the "streaks"²³ of blood on the foreheads of the Kryeqyqe family during his victim's funeral, which are said to act as "masks" as they mourn. Evidently, blood is used as an instrument to obscure the identities of the mourners according to Albanian social laws. The *Kanun* also seems to justify further violence by claiming that the family had been "blinded"²⁴ by the shedding of their loved one's blood, and could thus exact their vengeance. In a sense, their "blinding" also appears to indicate a loss of individuality for these people, as they are invariably bound to the dictates of the *Kanun*. Kadare later describes Gjorg himself as a "man stained with blood"²⁵, as if his existence was defined by his involvement in the blood

¹⁶ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 85.

¹⁷ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 85.

¹⁸ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 10.

¹⁹ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 154.

²⁰ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 130.

²¹ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 135.

²² Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 147.

²³ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 17.

²⁴ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 14.

²⁵ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 205.

feuds. Other men destined to a similar fate, the Gjaks, are referred to as “ghosts in the mist”²⁶, which further demonstrates the idea that they are inseparable from their inevitable death. The *Kanun* also uses the motif of blood in the demarcation of geographical boundaries in land disputes, as they are said to be “established by bloodshed”²⁷. Beyond merely human identity, the *Gjakmarrja* seems to shape all aspects of life in the highlands: it has the power to reduce people to instruments and targets of violence, and to practically define the identity of the region itself.

The inescapable *Gjakmarrja* and the recurring motif of blood finally enable Kadare to symbolically present his criticism of the *Kanun* by showcasing the dichotomy between unending violence and rare moments of tranquility. Kadare clearly outlines this division when it is stated that “the world was divided into two parts”²⁸, that which is under the *Kanun* and that which is not. The former appears to represent the chaos and cyclical violence of highlands, and thus when Gjorg envisages blood to have “shone red upon the snow”²⁹ in his world, it becomes clear that such violence is a disruptor of relative peace, which is symbolised by the snow. Here, it is claimed that “all that red was in his own eyes”³⁰, and this can be contrasted with the “white patches”³¹ he sees as he dies at the end of the novel. In a sense, Gjorg’s death is his escape from the endless bloodshed into tranquility, and as he passes, the “blood” that constantly plagues him also turns into a peaceful whiteness similar to the aforementioned snow.

In conclusion, the imagery of blood is a powerful and versatile motif that enables Kadare to deliver a complex portrait of the *Gjakmarrja* that showcases the cruel and inescapable nature of violence in the Albanian highlands. In Gjorg’s life, “blood” carries many connotations — of familial honour, revenge, and of death — but Kadare reminds his readers that these grandiose ideas shroud the inhumanity of the *Kanun*. It is shown to be a “colossal myth”³² of insurmountable power, one

²⁶ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 70.

²⁷ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 101.

²⁸ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 30.

²⁹ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 44.

³⁰ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 44.

³¹ Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 216.

³² Kadare, Ismail. *Broken April*. Vintage-Random House, 2003, p. 73.

that compels normal people to carry out barbaric tasks, stripping them of their humanity and their identities. The motif of blood becomes a crucial point in illustrating the cyclical and inescapable nature of the blood feuds, and the toll that they take on the people unfortunately embroiled in them, as well as those who continue to profit from them. Although Kadare clearly distinguishes between the violence of the *Gjakmarrja* and the tranquility of everything outside it, it becomes increasingly evident that the power of the *Kanun* is inexorable for the people of the highlands. Their world is defined in blood, their lives are governed by it, and death is seemingly the only escape from its grasp.

Word Count: 1,420 words

Works Cited

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Likmeta, Besar. "Letters Reveal Kadare's Ties to Albania Regime." *Balkan Insight*, 26 Sept. 2012, balkaninsight.com/2012/09/26/letters-reveal-kadare-s-complex-relationship-with-albania-s-regime/. Accessed 28 Jun. 2019.