

BOOK REVIEW

China Revitalized Through Memory in the Novel “Ivory Dragon”, by Fatos Kongoli

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Abstract

The subject of this novel takes shape and begins and elaborates on an event in the 90s, when Genci Skampa, a reporter in a daily newspaper, is invited to a meeting of journalists from the Balkan Peninsula in the capital of France, Paris. The events and destinies of the characters, who sometimes surrender to memory and sometimes return to objective reality, follow a trajectory that is not at all chronological, moving from Tirana, towards Beijing, then towards Paris and vice versa. However, the road remains one and only, and the main theme of this work is about the life of the Albanian student in Beijing during the 60s, of the last century, centred on the university corps of that city, where young people who came almost from prosperous communist countries world, they experience redemption and freedom for the first time, but this freedom remains conditioned under the unspeakable atmosphere for the mentality of these teenagers, that of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. At that time, i.e. in his student years, the young Albanian Genci Skampa met and fell in love with the elegant Chinese student, Sui Lin.

In the chapters of this novel, all the deformations of living as well as the occasional contrasts are arranged somewhat carelessly: the permanent pressure exerted by the wild discipline, the silent temptations, but also the spiritual and psychological related disturbances that one experiences during the experience of first love. At the same time, some elements and phenomena make up a somewhat separate world, forged by events and people who leave behind indelible traces, imbued with pronounced notes of lyricism and drama at the same time, gradually transforming into shadows of the past that haunts the protagonist of this novel on his way back from Beijing to Tirana, but also that of his departure years later from Tirana to Paris, to crucify the main character forever in the memory.

Keywords: love, Albanian, Chinese, student, memory.

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Literature in all its dimensions remains a space and possibility of communication between many peoples and undoubtedly between their cultures, which outlines not only the distinction between different societies of human communities but also naturally reinforces the notion of nation.

The ways and forms of coexistence between these nations have recognized and continue to affect the most unique relationships between them, starting from the commercial, military, diplomatic, etc., but undoubtedly in these developments with the most diverse rhythms and directions, literature compared to other genres and genres of artistic practices, it occupies a place that no other approach or effort can replace.

In some cases, this form of coexistence has continued even in periods when politics, with its unstable nature and conditioned by circumstances and geostrategic factors, set in motion with all its visible and invisible mechanisms, has faced dilemmas or serious conflicts between countries. This repeated phenomenon throughout history has occupied a by no means accidental corner in Albanian Literature, it is enough to mention such important authors and works that belong to different periods and ordinal systems such as; *Twilight of the Eastern Gods*, *The Great Winter* or *The Concert* by Ismail Kadare, *Hasta la Vista* or *Night of Ustika* by Petro Marko and what constitutes the uniqueness of this approach is the novel *Ivory Dragon* by Fatos Kongoli.

Due to the fact that well-known authors such as Kadare or Marko, for the important role that their work has played in the currents of literature, are widely treated within but also beyond the contours of Albanian thought, it is very

interesting to analyze the novel *Ivory Dragon* of Kongoli. The subject of this novel begins and elaborates in the 90s, when Genci Skampa who works as a reporter in a daily newspaper, is invited to a meeting of selected journalists from the Balkan in the capital of France in Paris.

The events and destinies of the characters, who sometimes are surrendered to memories and sometimes returned to objective reality, follow a trajectory that is not at all chronological, moving from Tirana, towards Beijing, then to Paris and vice versa. However, the road remains one and only, and the main theme of this work is about the life of the Albanian student in Beijing during the 60s, of the last century, focused on the university corps of that city, where young people who came almost from prosperous communist countries the world, they experience for the first time the freedom and redemption of the young age, but this freedom remains conditional under the unspeakable atmosphere for the mindset of these teenagers, staying throughout that life fragment strained under the pressure exerted on the entire society of those years *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*. The unfolding of the protagonists' drama revolves around the climate created and intertwined between interlocutors of languages and nationalities from around the world and beyond, the narrative transcends itself in unlimited time and space, where the main character finds himself stuck by the nightmares of memory and neglect he encounters and experience years later in the free European world.

There will always be a point or milestone or even a motif where everyone feels the need to stop and look back in time, or even within themselves, facing the gravity that the future brings. At that time, i.e. in his student years, the young Albanian Genci Skampa met and fell in love with the graceful and fragile Chinese student, Sui Lin. In this idyll and love relationship born between young people, the dilemma revolves around the only question repeated time after time in the consciousness of everyone who experienced those beautiful but also difficult years at the same time: Can there be hope to build a future feeling of an Albanian boy with a beautiful Chinese girl, this love protected in the conditions and circumstances dictated by social-political resonances?

In the chapters of this novel, there are listed all the deformations of living somewhat carelessly, as well as the occasional contrasts that the atmosphere around the lives of the characters of this novel experienced. The pronounced notes of lyricism but also of tragedy, that are felt in the compositional spirit, embodied in the entire bed where the subject of this work lies and develops, intertwine between them not only as a connecting element between the chapters of the novel but also as a re-establishment in an almost ethereal scene of parts of a drama, almost bordering on the absurd. The drama of Genci Skampa in all the chapters of the novel appears in the conditions of a self-judgment of the main hero, raised on the motives and contexts of the events that happened in conditions outside of any

normal imagination and created in well-observed environments, gaining to some extent a self-control under the strict measures exercised by the wild discipline, in contrast to the silent temptations but also the spiritual and psychological connection disturbances that one experiences during the experience of first love.

The day would come when Genci, suddenly awakened from a nightmare that had been lurking in his consciousness for a long, long time, trying to connect through the memory that reawakened to appear complete, alcove and side of some fragments lives separated from each other, summed up in the fatality of some almost defeated lives in this novel, Kongoli brings himself back transformed in the fate of this protagonist who has remained hostage to the conflict and the era that he had to experience throughout his life. In the atmosphere created between two countries but also at the same time two distant ends of the planet, human lives have been built unknowingly, protected with an unusual, almost hallucinatory mentality.

At the same time, some elements and phenomena make up a somewhat separate world, forged by events and people who leave behind indelible traces, imbued with pronounced notes of lyricism and tragedy at the same time, gradually transforming into shadows of the past that haunts the protagonist of this novel on the way back from Beijing to Tirana, but also that of his departure years later from Tirana to Paris, to eternally crucify the main character in the hons of memory.

When he returned to his past through this novel, the author himself would define with these words; “The book that tired me the most and took the longest to finish is *The Ivory Dragon*, a novel that I thought I would finish very quickly, but the opposite happened. This book is related to the time I was a student in China from 1961 to 1963, but I started writing it in the years of democracy. At that time, I didn’t even think of such a thing. The publication was finished in 1999. I returned it several times and I could not solve the idea I had in mind, but after a lot of work, I finished it. This work, which I thought was easier for me, turned out to be longer in terms of publishing. This book tired me out (Kongoli, 2014).

In this perspective, we would like to emphasize precisely not only the concentration of creative energies on the irrevocable past utilizing optics that lie between two opposite ends; of yesterday and today, but also on the fact known since the time of Homer, as he described the return of Ulysses to Ithaca, to understand that returns are always exhausting and thus they last, beyond all imagination, as long as the years that bind them with the intended subject or objective.

It is no surprise at all that Kongoli returns at different times to his somewhat isolated corner of the writer and through it begins to tell about some social as well as artistic motives that influenced the creation of this important novel. In the interview given to the well-known French writer Jacques Jouet, the connection

between the novel *Ivory Dragon* and the novel *The Palace of Dreams*, a very important work in the history of Chinese literature, is extensively touched upon.

In this joint conversation between the two authors, Jouet focuses precisely not only on the content but also on the subtext where a meeting point between the two novels is observed. As the well-known journalist Jacques Jouet asks the question; “In the *Ivory Dragon* reminds you of a scene from the book *Dream in the Red Palace*, a classic Chinese novel, where the character is cured by inhaling some tobacco from the West. Isn’t smoking from the West carcinogenic?

Regarding the submission of such a question by the French journalist, which aims to shed light on this somewhat hidden labyrinth, but which creates a not-at-all-random corridor that connects these two novels, Fatos Kongoli does not hesitate to give his explanation regarding the influence of natural but also the meeting point with classical Chinese literature but also on the open and timeless background that lures the far west; “I have captured this moment from the novel in question, very famous in classical Chinese literature, because in my opinion, in the given historical context, this was a beautiful, universal metaphor.

The China of that era was immersed in immobility, nothing moved. During the endless decades of dictatorship in Albania, hermetically isolated from the outside world, especially from the West, this appeared before our eyes as a mirage. The West above all was a space of freedom, which we lacked cruelly, freedom of ideas, of thought, etc. The West represented the great values of humanity in all areas of life and progress. But, of course, beyond this metaphor, in the given historical context, I agree with you, that any type of tobacco, even if it comes from the West, is carcinogenic. As an Albanian, I know this very well”, (Kongoli, 2011).

It is worth emphasizing a fact that is by no means accidental, but on the contrary quite obvious that unfolds in this work, since the *Ivory Dragon* restores in a way of change and communication with Chinese culture, after reflecting an honorable climate full of surprises which version of the disturbances and two-way tensions that existed in Ismail Kadare’s novel *Winter of Great Solitude*, in which, among other things, are the crises that led to the big four of reflection in several decades of silence between other countries and Albania.

In general, the returns are always late and not at all easy to be faced by both camps, the spaces and societies that the latter represent, but literature in this aspect has often assumed the decisive role by first submitting to truth and a fair relationship established between the two countries.

Fatos Kongoli’s novels, mainly those belonging to the cycle *Prisons of Memory*, have messed up and laid a unique track in the form that the Albanian novel would take after the fall of the dictatorship. The author himself would express himself regarding this role played by his literary corpus with the attitude and view that: “However, I think that most of my novels are built like ellipses, have an ellipsoidal

structure. They start at a given point, expand, to end at another point, symmetrical to the starting point, but with a displacement in time and space. Perhaps this is a reflection of my early mathematical background. At least that's my preference, I aim to find the shortest paths to get from the start point to the endpoint (Kongoli, 2011).

Critical and scientific thought has already accepted this principle as a right that, as far as the compositional side is concerned, belongs only to the author, who not only intuitively but also with full awareness has been able to shake the conscience within me but then also the collective one, returning to the past not only as an impossible mission but moreover with the high goal of increasing the role and protagonist of everyone against the objective reality. According to this attitude, only through free and unconditional thought will it be possible to build such a future where the life of the individual cannot be pre-ordained towards a rigid framework, within which he would never want to suppress his years, dreams and aspirations as a human being and part of the activity and evolution of all humanity.

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