

It starts at the top



Ismail Kadare's *Broken April* features the tale of a region in rural Albania where members of rival families take turns killing each other in an endless cycle of blood and revenge. In this region, the High Plateau, the laws that dictate this cyclical killing are called the Blood Code, or the Kanun. As the chief enforcer of the Kanun, the steward of the blood, Mark Ukacierra's observations and titular role reveal that traditions are fading and the Kanun is slowly losing its grip on the people of the High Plateau. In chapter 4 of his story, Kadare utilizes many aspects of Mark Ukacierra and his role as the steward of the blood to reveal the decreasing influence of the oppressive Kanun, subtly critiquing Enver Xohxa's brutal communist regime in Albania.

Prompting thoughts over the strength of communism, Kadare compares blood to the flow of water to expose Mark's inklings of realization that the Blood Code is not as strong as it was. As the Prince of Orosh notes that their subjects seek a less stringent Kanun, Mark is forced to admit that indeed, "Blood was not rain falling from the sky," (135). In old times, blood reliably flowed plentifully. However, it does not fall like rain any longer, planting seeds of doubt in Mark's mind over the strength of the Blood Codes on its subjects. Kadare subtly seeks to reveal the effects of doubt and resistance on sources of power, such as communism, in Albania. After painfully noticing that on some days no blood is even spilled, it becomes apparent to Mark that "the blood that once flowed in a torrent flowed scarcely at all, in droplets," (138). Mark is now progressively realizing the extent of the Kanun's loss of influence, as it flows not like rain, not even like a torrent, but instead, in unpredictable droplets. Over time, the Kanun has grown increasingly peripheral in the lives of those in the High Plateau, and as such, Mark fears

the impact his will have. As the Blood Code loses importance to its subjects, Mark loses power, as he ponders what he can do about “ blood that comes from who knows where, and stops flowing who knows where,” (155).

Because the people of the High Plateau have stopped coming to him with their blood tax, Mark has no idea about the state of the blood feuds, thus rendering him powerless as he does not know where blood is being spilled, and where it isn't. Kadare conveys the effects of Mark's gradual realization of the state of observance of the Kanun in the High Plateau, and thus urges Albanians to carry out their lives freely and independent from the restrictions of communism, thus planting doubt in the minds of their government, and gaining power over their controller.

Kadare compares the Kanun to a machine in order to reveal its emotionless hold on its subjects, and why its power is diminishing rapidly, in order to reveal the evils of Xohxa's communist regime. As Mark reads a criticism of the degradation of the Blood Code, he reads that it has “ chang[ed] gradually into an inhumane machine,” (141). Although disgusted by this criticism, his focus on revenue from the blood tax shows that the Kanun has indeed become a sick, income-churning machine. Further supporting this, when Mark reads through the names of the thousands of victims of the blood feuds “ coldly” (136), he skims them as their “ syllables were as alike as the pebbles of the endless beach,” (137). Treating the death of a person in such a compassionless way, equating them to pebbles, or minuscule rocks, he shows how evil the Kanun truly is, as throughout the chapter, he is focused on the machine of custom generating income, while showing a complete disregard for the lives it takes. Kadare depicts the Kanun in this way to

compare how truly similar the Kanun was to Xohxa's regime, as both establishments of power sought first and foremost to keep and maintain their framework for power, as well as their ideology, even if it created a brutal, painful, oppressive atmosphere. Continuing his ignorance of his subjects, Mark vows to "examine the entire mechanism minutely in order to find out what was blocking its action, what was rusted and what was broken," (152). His care for his machine goes into minutia, but never does he pause to think why it has stopped working. His only concern is to figure out what stops it from churning, what is "rusted" and "broken," again showing his desperation to keep income coming and keep his power over the people. This is eerily similar to the infatuation of communist governments with maintaining communist societies despite obvious negative effects on their people. As Mark reflects on the possibility of a day where no blood tax was paid, he notes that "its many springs and gears would make an ominous grating sound, would shake from top to bottom, and break and smash into a thousand pieces," (153-154). If the Kanun lost so much influence that a day passed without the spilling of blood, Mark and the Kulla of Orosh would start to lose all power over the High Plateau, as the people's disinterest in continuing the blood feuds would result in a "grating" against the central source of power, and would create such a shift in power, that the Kanun would "shake from top to bottom," and finally have absolutely no impact on the High Plateau anymore, fracturing "into a thousand pieces:" the machine's disregard for humanity would have cost it its power and influence. Kadare uses this metaphor to show the power people can have if they refuse to be part of the machine that controls them, such as the communist

Albanian regime, which suppressed and fractured its people for over 50 years.

As outsiders begin to question the legitimacy and ethics of the Blood Code, Kadare reveals that Mark Ukacierra's power slowly capitulates as he loses support, showing how weak Albania's communist regime would be rendered if they lost support. As he encounters for the first time one who easily resists the influence of the Kanun, Mark notices that "the words dissolved in her eyes, lost all strength," (133). Mark's power is directly tied to his influence on his subjects, and, if in the eyes of his subjects the laws he seeks to preserve are meaningless, then they lose "all strength." Revealing the effects of a loss in power, Mark asserts that if the words of the Blood Code lose all import, then "a wing of the Kulla collapse[s], and then [he does]," (133-134). If the source of power has no control on those it seeks to control, then it is rendered worthless, and "collapses." Kadare uses this idea to inspire fellow Albanians to not let themselves remain under the cruel influence of Xoxha's communist dictatorship. After noticing discouraging numbers of blood spilled in the High Plateau in recent years, Mark sighs, "feel[ing] as if his ribs were creaking like the timbers of a hut someone was trying to tear down," (145). His external loss of support and control is mirrored internally, as his ribs, the framework of the entire upper body, feel as if they were being torn down. Kadare seeks to exemplify how crucial support is to strength and power. As the true extent of the Kanun's loss of influence becomes tangible, Mark feels an "uneasiness of a very special kind, like a damp, gray mass that invaded him everywhere, softly, without any sharp edges nor painful pinches," (154). Kadare uses words such as

damp, which implies a slight wetness, gray, which implies a lack of noticeable color, and softly, which implies a slight pressure, to show that the loss of power is a gradual process, one that is hard to stop, as it is slight and hardly noticeable. However, it is also unstoppable, as it invades “ everywhere,” showing that faltering support of the Blood Code is becoming increasingly prevalent. Kadare highlights what a lack of support does to those who assert uncompromising power over their subjects, and by doing so, urges Albanians to not be subjected to the brutal, restricting ways of life that Xoxha’s regime forcefully implemented.

The Kanun, despite hundreds of years of immense power, has slowly lost its influence on the High Plateau, as its subjects grow weary of the blood feuds. As Mark and the Kulla of Orosh, the facilitators of the machine of custom that is the Kanun, lose influence, their power dwindles and they become increasingly fearful of the ramifications. Kadare utilizes this slow degradation of the importance of the Blood Code as well as the inhumane effects it has on its subjects to criticize Albania’s communist regime, led by Enver Xoxha. In doing so, he urges fellow Albanians to question the influence of their repressive government, which took rights away as quickly as lives, and their role in the cycle of suppression under communist rule.