

Helena Kadare.
Një grua nga Tirana.
Tirana. MÇM. 1994. 190 ALL.

Helena Gushi-Kadare.
Une femme de Tirana. Jusuf Vrioni & Anne-Marie Autissier, tr.
Paris. Editions Stock. 1995. 267 pages. ISBN 2-234-04409-X. 120 FRF.

Elena Kadare (b. 1943) has never been content to stand back devotedly in the shadow of her more illustrious spouse, Ismail Kadare. Indeed she has become somewhat of a literary monument herself. It was in the year 1970 that she published the novel *Një lindje e vështirë* (A difficult birth), becoming the first woman ever to publish a novel in the Albanian language. Since that time, Elena Kadare has been a visible and creative element in her country's contemporary literary culture.

With the exception of the rare short story in French, English or Italian which may have appeared at the time in inaccessible publications from Tirana or in equally obscure books and periodicals in western Europe, none of the works of Elena Kadare, prose for the most part, have ever been published on the Western market. *Një grua nga Tirana / Une femme de Tirana* is thus a welcome addition to confirm the literary presence of this Albanian writer at the international level.

Who is then the protagonist in 'A woman from Tirana'? Probably none other than a personification of Elena Kadare herself, at least with respect to the milieu of the novel. Suzana lives a tranquil life in intellectual circles in Tirana during the final years of the Hoxha dictatorship, working in the translation department of the state publishing company. It is here that she has the dubious honour and privilege of translating the works of the Leader himself, comrade Enver Hoxha.

Day-to-day existence of Albania's humdrum socialist society of the eighties was only humdrum at the surface, though. The extreme level of political vigilance, evinced by compulsory workers' meetings and by almost regularly recurring purges, kept the population and the intellectuals in particular, in a permanent state of collective anxiety. Suzana abandons all hope of change and improvement when her translator colleague Robert is unexpectedly arrested and sentenced for 'agitation and propaganda'. And what of the allegedly seditious manuscript of noted writer D. H.? Due to the laxity of her colleagues, the work had circulated freely in the translation department until some more vigilant eye realized how politically explosive it might be. The manuscript vanished into the sombre vaults of the *Sigurimi* and the writer's situation was now more precarious than ever. With the breakdown of her marriage to the vain and ambitious Victor, Suzana is increasingly fascinated by and drawn to D. H., and feels compelled to warn him of the frightening turn of events at the publishing company. It is the inevitable consummation of this attraction that brings the novel to a rather abrupt conclusion.

'A woman from Tirana,' based on a much-altered short story entitled *Përrulja* (The humiliation) published in the eighties in the Tirana literary monthly *Nëntori*, is quietly persuasive and constitutes a significant addition to Western translations of contemporary Albanian literature. Though the Albanian reader, having lived through the period, may be disappointed at the lack of political 'meat' in the novel, the foreign reader will certainly find enough material, both political and literary, to gain insight into the realities of daily life in that long exotic and elusive society, Stalinist Albania.

Independent of the narrative, one might, in passing, criticize Kadare's 'appellative indecisiveness' which will have created something of a nightmare for bibliographers. The author, whom Albanians have known for three decades under the name of Elena Kadare,

appears in the Albanian edition of her latest novel as Helena Kadare and in the French-language edition indeed as Helena Gushi-Kadaré. Whether this is the result of an identity crisis or simply of a dynamically evolving personality is beyond the scope of this review.

Robert Elsie
Olzheim / Eifel, Germany