Death by blood and stone

How does Kadare use the symbolism of blood and stone to explore the influence of the Kanun on Albanian society?

1978 novel Broken April by Albanian writer Ismail Kadare explores the influence of the *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjin*, a set of strict customary laws commanding the northern plateaus of Albania. The novel puts a particular emphasis on Albanian blood feuds, the cultural practice of killing an offender to salvage one's honour. Kadare writes to expose the tragedy of such traditional social obligations, asking readers to reflect upon a society that favours vengeance as opposed to forgiveness. Of particular literary curiosity is Kadare's reliance on symbolism to explore the Kanun's authority. The two most frequently seen, that of blood and stone, jointly exemplify the Kanun's spirit of retribution and desire for vengeance. Blood is symbolic of shame, provoking Albanian men to act violently to redeem their honour and avoid humiliation. Consequently, stones then symbolize the effects of such killings, the wasted fates of the Albanian people which become buried under piles of pebbles and stone-built *müranes*: graveyards. Hence, the novel questions Albania's blindly accepted social institutions, criticizing the cycle of violence which persists under the Kanun's codes. In turn, this essay will argue that though the Kanun has great influence over society, the culture it reinforces is morally questionable and only furthers to divide society in the long term.

Blood, as seen predominantly through the experiences of the main character Gjorg, is most symbolic of shame. In conforming to the Kanun's social codes, Gjorg is forced to avenge his brother by killing a man of a neighbouring clan, Zef Kryeque. For over a year and a half, however, his dead brother Mehill's shirt had "hung blood-soaked from the upper story of the house, as the Kanun required", turning "more and more yellow" as time passed. The yellowing bloodstains encapsulate Gjorg's increased anxieties and symbolise his feelings of shame. The shame the shirt carries haunts Gjorg, even so far as appearing in his dreams, "washed in water and soapsuds, its whiteness shimmering like the spring sky". As honour equates to social respectability in Albania, the shirt becomes an incessant reminder of his need to carry out societal obligations in order to redeem it. In not conforming to societal and familial expectations, Gjorg's sense of failure and guilt heighten. His identity would become a source of humiliation; shunned by his own family and ostracised by society. In avenging his brother, Gjorg thus liberates himself from guilt and redeems his honour. Thus, the Kanun is seen to maintain control by inculcating feelings of shame, reinforcing Gjorg's feelings of guilt as he attempts to avoid murder. Such guilt, in the end, propels him to avenge his brother against his morals, killing another man in blind submission to the Kanun's social codes. Kadare thus criticizes the absurdity of a system seeking to maintain social order through fear, and that would willingly sacrifice the lives of young men in the name of anachronistic cultural practices.

If blood represents Gjorg's shame, stones represent his predetermined fate. Death holds a powerful certainty life fails to supersede in Albania. Even before Gjorg avenges his brother, he hears a "desolate grating of pebbles", which he later understands is but a "sense of desolation… inside *him*". The sounds of the pebbles become a metaphor for his own feelings of emptiness, his touching them a physical connection to his already sealed fate. His destiny is guaranteed by the Kanun, the emotional 'desolation' a mere indication of his understanding the definitiveness of his own death to come. Themes of fate and destiny are re-emphasised by pebbles and graveyards once more in chapter five when Gjorg returns to his village from his

travels from the Tower of Orosh. Upon reaching Brezftoht, he passes a stone burial mound, the *mürane* of someone who fell victim to the blood feuds. Rocks and pebbles become a recurring motif, oftentimes associated with these *müranes*, cairns made of small piles of rock marking the spot where someone died. For an instant, Gjorg felt compelled to "pull away the stones" spreading them out "on every side to leave no trace". In seeing the graveyard, he's reminded of his mortality, a reality in which he attempts to erase by destroying the stones and what they represent. Finally, he "tosses the pebbles onto the cairn", hitting the stone with a "dull sound", the same sound paralleling the grating of the pebbles at the very start of the novel. Gjorg eyes it, afraid it would "shift" again, "but now it seemed that it was in its natural place as if it had been thrown there long ago", his fate already pre-determined. In trying to confront this, Gjorg, "like someone who, confronted by the body of a dying man", attempts to "find the wound". This becomes a metaphor for Gjorg's own life. As he can't comprehend why he's destined to die, he constantly tries to give meaning to his life and alter the direction of his fate. Like a man already struck down, he does it to no avail, unable to revive his life against the powerful influence of the Kanun. As he looks at the cairns, he admits that "here's what will be left of my own life", a pile of rock, a graveyard.

If Gjorg is the victim of this perverse blood feudology, Mark Ukacierra is blood personified. As the blood tax collector, Mark lives in submission to the Prince of Orosh, maintaining the cycle of violence perpetrated under the blood feud. Mark fears the discontinuing of Albania's culture of revenge, seeing Albanian society only through the filter of the Kanun's codes. Mark sees Albania *defined* by blood vengeance, drawing up and dividing the fertile fields of the High Plateau into two parts: "cultivated fields, and the fields lying fallow because of the blood feud." To Mark, the whole of Albania is subservient to the code. Those who had blood to redeem "tilled their fields because it was their turn to kill, and accordingly, no one threatened them, so they could go to their fields when they pleased." Albania becomes isolated, controlled by the Kanun on all levels. Mark's perception of the High Plateau is thus only seen through the veil of the Kanun's laws, filtered by what is and isn't accepted, with no connection whatsoever to its people. He sees "the blood feud and everything connected to it in "jeopardy" because "the number of killings had fallen year after year", morbidly hoping for more deaths to maintain tradition rather than preventing the deaths of countless people. Kadare uses Mark's obsessions to criticise and highlight those oblivious of the Kanun's power, and the lives of young men like Gjorg which are irreversibly altered as a result of its codes. Readers may feel disturbed by Mark's ill-nature, a man excited by power and that maintains it through furthering death in society.

With so much emphasis on death and retribution, justice becomes nonsensical in the Albanian highlands. In chapter three, justice is seen to be dealt with by the Albian people. Instead of a legal system replete with lawyers, Albanian justice is ruled by a handful of arbitrators and surveyors to which their import hardly amount to any value. Instead, justice is dealt with by heaving up piles of rock in symbolically "swearing by the stone", reciting age-old "curses" to solve boundary disputes. Even the arbitrators themselves recognize the ludicrous nature with which disputes are settled. It is nothing but a "tragi-comedy", a "farce"; "a bloody drama" in which people are forced to participate. Here, authorial intrusion by Kadare emphasises the artifice of the highlands, a gory drama all too outdated. Justice becomes ineffective without violence and should laying stones be insufficient, bloodletting again becomes the only solution. Therefore, a false sense of justice takes place in this system of murder and retribution. Justice only becomes legitimate when killings from "*justicers*" like Gjorg are involved, "the marrow" and "flower of a clan", "the tiny extinguishable flames". In Kanun-ruled territory, *killing* becomes the life force, an ironic way out of death. Killing and

avenging become the simplest acts to avoid hostilities and quell anger. Kadare thus comments upon such nonsensical subservience to a social institution that proliferates murder, a frightening revelation of Albania's unchanged traditions to which readers may find difficult to comprehend. Kadare disparages these fruitless ways of gaining justice, and the Albanian people enslaved by the Kanun.

To conclude, through the symbolism of blood and stone, Kadare criticizes the Kanun's pervasive influence on Albanian society, and its livelihood so evidently threatened by the culture of vengeance reinforced within the plateaus. The Kanun's laws are cryptic, outdated; its people too deprived of freedom to challenge social mores. Honour is so intrinsically linked to the Kanun that people willingly accept the shedding of blood to avoid humiliation. Although evincing an appearance of stability, society thus feeds and survives off of the deaths committed at the hand of the Kanun.