



# The Transposition of Narrative Texts onto the Albanian Theatrical Stage as a Sign of Departure from Socialist Realism's Schematic Aesthetics

Esmeralda Hidri

Aleksandër Xhuvani University, Elbasan, Albania

## Abstract

This article examines the transposition of narrative texts, particularly novels, onto the Albanian theatrical stage during and after the socialist period. While the adaptation of narrative literature has been widely theorized within European theatre studies as part of postmodern dramaturgical reconfiguration, its development in Albania emerged under distinct socio-political conditions. Drawing on theatre semiotics, adaptation theory, and Albanian theatre historiography, the study argues that narrative transposition functioned not merely as a formal experiment but as a mode of aesthetic mediation within an ideologically constrained cultural system. In the context of socialist realist dramaturgy, such adaptations introduced structural, temporal, and psychological complexity that exceeded schematic dramatic models. Through selected examples, including the staging of ideologically aligned works and the recurrent dramatization of Ismail Kadare's prose, the article demonstrates how narrative adaptation enabled negotiated artistic agency without overt ideological rupture.

**keywords:** narrative transposition, socialist realism, adaptation, Albanian theatre, ideological mediation, intermediality

## 1. Introduction

The staging of narrative texts constitutes one of the most significant structural developments in post-World War II Albanian theatre. Although European theatre scholarship has extensively examined the repositioning of narrative within performance, often associating it with postmodern dramaturgy, intertextuality, and the destabilization of dramatic hierarchy, the Albanian case requires contextual differentiation.

In Western Europe, the renewed presence of narrative forms on stage frequently emerged from modernist exhaustion and postmodern experimentation. In Albania, by contrast, narrative transposition developed within a cultural system governed by socialist realism. The

phenomenon must therefore be understood not solely as a formal shift, but as a historically situated response to ideological regulation of dramatic production.

This study proposes that the adaptation of narrative literature in Albania functioned as a form of aesthetic mediation: a practice that expanded theatrical expressivity while operating within, rather than directly opposing, institutional constraints. By situating the phenomenon within its socio-political and theoretical frameworks, the article aims to contribute to a comparative understanding of adaptation practices in ideologically regulated theatrical systems.

### **1.1 Methodological Approach**

This study adopts a flexible and interdisciplinary methodological framework, determined by the hybrid nature of its object of analysis: the theatrical adaptation of narrative texts within the context of the ideological pressure exerted by the communist regime on Albanian artistic production. The decision to move beyond the boundaries of a fixed theoretical model arises from the need to examine adaptation not merely as an intersemiotic process, but as an aesthetic and cultural strategy of resistance to the indoctrinating instrumentalization of art.

Within this perspective, the transposition of narrative texts onto the theatrical stage is approached as a mediating practice that enabled artists to negotiate the constraints imposed by ideological orthodoxy, while simultaneously preserving spaces for alternative modes of expression. Rather than functioning as a simple formal transformation, adaptation becomes a performative act that reconfigures the relationship between artistic creation and political authority, allowing narrative structures to enter the theatrical domain as vehicles of implicit dissent and symbolic rearticulation.

The methodological framework combines analytical tools drawn from theatre studies, cultural historiography, and adaptation studies in order to investigate both the formal reorganization of narrative material in its transition to the stage and the ideological implications of this transformation. Particular emphasis is placed on the ways in which theatrical adaptation destabilizes prescriptive aesthetic norms by introducing narrative complexity, polyphonic structures, and character constructions that resist schematic representation. Furthermore, this approach considers theatre not solely as an artistic medium, but as a communicative and socially embedded practice capable of influencing audience reception within specific socio-political contexts. In this sense, the adapted performance is examined as a site of negotiated meaning, where the interaction between staging strategies and spectatorship contributes to the production of alternative interpretative frameworks that operate beyond the officially sanctioned discourse.

The study also incorporates a comparative analytical dimension aimed at identifying structural affinities between narrative and dramatic forms that facilitate intergeneric transition without compromising the linguistic and compositional autonomy of the source text. Attention is therefore directed toward those narrative works whose latent theatricality and dialogic configurations enable their transformation into performative structures capable of sustaining critical distance from dominant ideological paradigms.

Finally, adaptation is treated as a collective creative process that extends beyond the individual agency of the playwright or director to include the collaborative contributions of the entire theatrical ensemble. In this regard, the methodological analysis takes into account the interaction of performative and technical elements involved in staging, recognizing their role in shaping the aesthetic articulation of resistance embedded within the adapted work.

## **2. The Phenomenon of Theatrical Rewritings in Post-WWII Albania: Between Ideology and Artistic Survival**

The socio-political context within which the Albanian theatre appropriated narrative literary materials reveals that many of these choices signaled a departure from the schematism of socialist realism—an artistic model imposed by the political demands of the totalitarian state. The staging of texts drawn from broader literary fields, particularly the novel, became a strategic means of evading ideological censorship and revitalizing theatrical expression.

The turn to narrative sources during and after the socialist era marks a meaningful shift away from dramaturgical orthodoxy. By staging texts not originally intended for performance, theatre practitioners created spaces of aesthetic resistance and creative subversion. Drawing on literature, history, and folklore enabled theatre-makers to negotiate ideological constraints while renewing the expressive autonomy of the stage. (Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Pavis, 1998)

This tendency may be interpreted as a postmodern gesture privileging intertextuality, hybridity, and the transgression of genre boundaries. (Hutcheon, 1988) As semioticians argue, the appropriation of literary texts into performative frameworks produces a new semiotic organism in which meaning is negotiated between textual origin and theatrical embodiment (Elam, 1980). Consequently, such adaptations function as both aesthetic and political acts, transforming the role of the Albanian stage within a controlled cultural environment.

### **2.1 The Reasons for Such an Aesthetic Choice**

Among the dramatic works staged during this period, adaptations based on narrative texts from the Albanian literary canon proved particularly revitalizing and artistically refined. As this trend gained international momentum, Albanian directors engaged with a form already present on European stages, where the staging of narrative texts had begun to redefine theatrical concepts and the hierarchy of scenic elements.

In the first decades following the establishment of the Albanian totalitarian state, theatrical evolution did not unfold along an extended experimental trajectory. While European theatre underwent a gradual process of rediscovering major narratives, often through the displacement of authorial and textual centrality in favor of performance, gesture, and directorial intervention, Albanian theatre maintained a relative balance among the constituent elements of the theatrical spectacle. This less experimental orientation was largely shaped by historical and social conditions, as well as by continuous artistic censorship, which limited the theatre's ability to follow emerging international trends.

The simultaneous emergence of narrative adaptations in both Albanian theatre and cinema during this period suggests a complex dynamic. On the one hand, it reflects the influence of Russian theatrical culture; on the other, it signals a context-specific response to the aesthetics of socialist realism. Whereas postmodernism in Western contexts functioned as a rupture with modernist aesthetics, in communist countries it emerged as a reaction to ideologically conditioned artistic production. In this framework, Lyotard's critique of "grand narratives" may be interpreted not as a rejection of classical literary works, but as a response to the ideological narratives promoted by the totalitarian regime. (Hidri, 2016)

Socialist realism itself functioned as the dominant grand narrative of the state, producing ideologically conditioned representations of collectivist identity and the "new socialist man". Literary and theatrical works were often selected for their capacity to communicate such messages clearly and persuasively. Sabotage, class struggle, and the punishment of the "enemy of the people" became recurring themes that moved from narrative prose to theatrical performance as instruments of ideological indoctrination. (Skena dhe ekrani, 1981, p. 46)

Amid the evident impoverishment of socialist realist dramaturgy, Albanian novels increasingly appeared on stage. This development marked the emergence of a new theatrical tendency which, although not yet theoretically articulated, had already matured in performative practice. Despite material limitations, both professional and amateur theatre companies produced adaptations that resonated with audiences seeking narrative vitality and intellectual depth.

Viewed through the lens of postmodern aesthetics, this phenomenon reflects a context-specific response within the theatre of a totalitarian state. In contrast to Western postmodern approaches, the reaction to so-called “grand narratives” in communist contexts such as Albania did not entail opposition to classical or canonical literary works. Instead, these works experienced renewed vitality on stage, offering an alternative to the canonized ideological texts promoted by the regime.

In Albanian theatre practice, where textual centrality had never been entirely abandoned, the adaptation of well-known literary works became a means of preserving a sincere relationship with audiences. It served as a reminder of authentic literature and artistic integrity in contrast to the distortions of socialist realism. After the 1990s, the return to classical dramaturgy and the staging of previously marginalized works did not diminish the presence of narrative adaptations. On the contrary, works from the Albanian literary canon continued to acquire a second performative life on the theatrical stage.

### **3. Specific Characteristics of the Phenomenon**

In post-war Albania, literary production was rapidly reorganized in accordance with the ideological and aesthetic model imported from the Soviet Union. The institutionalization of socialist realism imposed a literary system whose political function was explicit from the outset and increasingly restrictive over time. Within this framework, artistic production was expected to serve processes of ideological consolidation rather than autonomous aesthetic inquiry.

Prior to the emergence of narrative transposition as a theatrical practice, Albanian drama underwent a phase of ideologically induced structural contraction. As one of the first genres to be codified under socialist realism, drama was required to reflect concrete social, political, and moral phenomena in accordance with Marxist–Leninist doctrine (Papagjoni, 2004, 2011; Kola, 2014). This alignment produced a significant reduction of dramatic complexity: conflict was simplified into binary oppositions; character construction became typological rather than psychological; and the universal dramatic protagonist was replaced by the politically exemplary figure of the “new socialist man,” designed to embody the regime’s normative values (Llotina, 2016).

Such transformations resulted in both formal and thematic impoverishment. As Papagjoni (2004) observes, the fabrication of ideological myths and the reduction of drama to political didacticism weakened internal tension and diminished narrative ambiguity. Although occasional attempts at renewal appeared prior to the 1990s, particularly through temporal experimentation and innovations in acting dynamics (Papagjoni, 2011), these efforts remained constrained by systemic limitations. Unlike the Western European theatrical crisis, which emerged from modernist experimentation and existential fragmentation (Féral, 2002), the Albanian crisis stemmed from prescriptive cultural policy and ideological overdetermination.

Within this context, the search for alternative artistic pathways became inevitable. The adaptation of narrative literature offered one such pathway. The theatricalization of novels introduced broader temporal frameworks, complex psychological interiority, and layered narrative structures that exceeded the schematic conventions of socialist realist dramaturgy.

This shift did not constitute overt opposition; rather, it functioned as a structural recalibration within institutionally permissible limits.

The emergence of stage adaptations coincided with another significant cultural phenomenon: the centrality of literary translation. For many intellectuals, translation represented one of the few sanctioned artistic practices that enabled sustained engagement with world literature (Dervishi, 2007). Just as translators could foreground aesthetic and philosophical dimensions within ideologically filtered texts, directors and dramatists found in narrative literature an interpretive latitude largely unavailable in contemporary socialist realist plays. Even when translated works were selected for ideological compatibility, such as those by Gogol, Pushkin, Yesenin, or Balzac, skilled translators frequently emphasized poetic and formal qualities over propagandistic content. A parallel dynamic operated in theatre, where directors confronted with ideologically aligned novels or politically charged plays redirected scenic emphasis toward visual composition, ensemble structuring, or symbolic layering, thereby redistributing ideological weight without altering textual fidelity.

A revealing example is the stage adaptation of Fatmir Gjata's *Kënetë* (The Swamp), directed by Pirro Mani at the "Andon Zako Çajupi" Theatre in Korça. Although the novel adhered to socialist realist conventions, the production sought to mitigate schematic characterization through performative strategy (Orgocka, 1981; Papagjoni, 2011). The artificiality of figures such as Stavri Lara posed a constant risk of theatrical caricature. Directorial choices, particularly the emphasis on large-scale collective scenes such as the dam explosion or the evening gathering, shifted audience attention toward visual dynamism and ensemble coordination. This scenic reorientation functioned as a mediating device that displaced the ideological density of the source text without openly contesting it. Consequently, the performance privileged spatial organization and rhythmic interaction over narrative didacticism, allowing secondary characters and collective movement to acquire an aesthetic prominence that exceeded their ideological function.

Another opportunity to circumvent ideological topicality was offered by themes derived from Albanian legends. While folklore was itself appropriated as a source of national pride within the totalitarian cultural framework, its mythopoetic structure allowed for interpretive flexibility. Director Serafin Fanko's staging of F. Kraja's *Gjaku i Arbërit*, based on the legend of Constantine and Doruntina, the epic of the *Kreshniks*, and the legend of *Ago Ymer*, exemplifies this tendency. The expressive scenic conception anchored the work within a figurative theatrical frame that foregrounded physicality and symbolic resonance.

This trajectory culminates in the staging of Ismail Kadare's *Kush e solli Doruntinën*, which Papagjoni identifies as a particularly significant scenic parable in its production by the People's Theatre. The use of the chorus as a persistent on-stage presence reactivated a dimension of ancient orality while simultaneously enabling a modernized literary procedure and a reconfiguration of character relations. The hypertextual structure of the novella provided the director and ensemble with an expanded conceptual framework for scenic experimentation, marking one of the earliest instances of postmodern theatrical sensibility in Albanian theatre prior to the 1990s.

As Leif Zern has noted, the turn toward major narrative works often reflects a desire to maintain a close relationship with the audience through engagement with structurally complete written texts (Teatro e Storia, 1995–2010, p. 218). While in European theatre this phenomenon was frequently interpreted as a repositioning of the written text within theatrical functions, in the Albanian context, where the centrality of text had never undergone radical destabilization, it can be understood as a strategy for preserving a meaningful relationship with spectators

through recourse to literary forms capable of sustaining aesthetic density beyond ideological prescription.

These strategies demonstrate that theatrical practice could recalibrate narrative emphasis through spatial and rhythmic organization. Rather than directly contesting ideological material, directors introduced aesthetic density at the level of performance. The result was not ideological rupture but mediated transformation: a redistribution of meaning within the theatrical event.

Thus, the defining characteristic of this phenomenon lies in its structural ambivalence. Narrative adaptation in Albania did not function primarily as avant-garde experimentation nor as explicit resistance; rather, it operated as a negotiated practice that expanded dramaturgical structure while maintaining institutional viability. Through this process, Albanian theatre gradually recovered psychological complexity and temporal multiplicity, thereby laying the groundwork for broader transformations that would become more visible following the political shifts of the 1990s.

#### 4. The Kadare Case

Ismail Kadare authored only one drama conceived explicitly for theatrical performance, *\*A Gloomy Season on Olympus\**, which remains his final work in the dramatic genre. Nonetheless, his relationship with theatre is not limited to this isolated instance. Rather, it is mediated through his narrative prose, which has repeatedly undergone theatrical and cinematic transposition. Frequently described as one of the most dramatized narrators across multiple artistic media, including theatre, film, music, and choreography, Kadare constitutes a paradigmatic cross-genre paradox, as his works are often perceived as resistant to scenic realization and described as “anti-theatrical,” “anti-cinematic,” and “anti-musical” (Papagjoni, 2011, p. 430).

Kadare’s prose operates according to internally coherent and highly individualized structural principles that undergo significant alteration when detached from their original narrative framework. In this respect, Papagjoni situates Kadare among authors whose works pose substantial challenges for theatrical and cinematic adaptation. Despite such resistance, Kadare’s literary corpus has exerted a persistent attraction on both theatre and film. Numerous dramatizations, including *The General of the Dead Army*, *Who Brought Doruntina*, *The Three-Arched Bridge*, *The Southern City*, *Moonlit Night*, *The H File*, *The Eagle*, and *The Wrong Dinner*, have been staged, accompanied by a comparable number of cinematic adaptations.

The continuity of these transpositional practices suggests that the differences between narrative and dramatic forms are not as absolute as theoretical considerations might imply. The sustained presence of Kadare’s prose on the theatrical stage indicates an ongoing process of intermedial negotiation rather than a definitive incompatibility between forms.

Kadare’s case invites comparison with Dino Buzzati, particularly with regard to the latter’s dramaturgical trajectory. Both authors construct narrative worlds characterized by a strong visual dimension, in which imagery functions not as an ancillary feature but as a constitutive component of narrative organization. This interaction between verbal and visual registers—often conceptualized as intermedial or intergeneric contamination, facilitates a continuous exchange among expressive modes subordinated to narration. From this perspective, such authors demonstrate a pronounced capacity for genre crossing and for the reconfiguration of narrative techniques. As Roland Barthes suggests, theatricality is not constructed but emerges subsequently: it is configured on stage, yet must be present from the outset as “une donnée de création, non de réalisation” (Barthes, 2002, p. 123). A particularly illustrative example is *\*The*

General of the Dead Army\*, dramatized six times in Albanian theatres, while numerous fragments have also been staged internationally (Halili, 2016, p. 270).

Both Kadare and Buzzati thus exemplify the transfer from one expressive form to another without fundamental modification of linguistic structures, operating instead through processes of direct transposition constrained primarily by the spatial and temporal conditions of theatrical performance. Even in Buzzati's explicitly dramaturgical texts, thematic material derived from narrative prose often produces semantic opacity and limited organic integration. By contrast, Kadare's novella-length narratives, extended across temporal and spatial dimensions—offer a distinctive example of intergeneric osmosis within Albanian literary production, from which Albanian theatre has derived considerable benefit.

Unlike many major world authors, Kadare encounters in theatre sustained respect and critical engagement, evident not only in the selection of his texts for adaptation but also in the directorial commitment to preserving authorial meaning. Adaptations and appropriations may vary in the extent to which they foreground their intertextual purpose. (Sanders, 2015)

From the perspective of adaptation theory, the structural features of Kadare's prose would appear to resist scenic realization. Nevertheless, theatrical language permits formal risk and enables alternative modes of transposition. Stage adaptations of *The Wrong Dinner* and *Who Brought Doruntina* incorporate motifs not only from specific source texts but also from Kadare's broader oeuvre and from legendary variants. Such elements are reintroduced through creative reconstruction based on procedures analogous to those of the source narratives. In this expanded sense, "language" operates as an expressive code encompassing gesture, voice, lighting, sound, and spatial organization.

Within these scenic configurations, the theatrical text is generated through formal strategies that parallel those of the original narrative. In *The Wrong Dinner*, although the narrative impulse derives from a historically grounded and widely debated event, the dramaturgical structure remains non-linear. The scenic text is conceived as a form of musical composition in which thematic motifs recur and develop through repetition, producing a dramaturgy based on rhythm and variation.

The repeated displacement of narrative voice provides directors with the means to destabilize linear narration through the insertion of multiple scenic perspectives. This procedure allows the projection of alternative interpretative hypotheses, transforming narrative suggestion into performative fact. The reconstruction of historical events through fragmentary scenic division demonstrates an attempt to preserve the structural logic of the source text within its theatrical transposition.

Kadare thus exemplifies the fact that not all narrative works can successfully undergo dramaturgical reduction in order to acquire a new theatrical existence. Such transitions are feasible primarily in the case of narrators whose inclination toward an intermediate expressive space produces a typology often described as the dialogic novel. Within this framework, a transitional line emerges between novel and theatre, writing and recitation, character and actor. In this sense, the Kadare model may be regarded as paradigmatic, as his prose, marked by literary allegory and intellectual resistance under totalitarian pressure, retains its structural and semantic integrity even when subjected to intermedial transposition.

## 5. Conclusion

The transposition of narrative texts onto the Albanian stage constitutes a structurally significant development in the evolution of national theatre. Emerging within a system regulated by socialist realism, the phenomenon cannot be reduced to postmodern experimentation nor to direct political dissent. Rather, it functioned as a form of aesthetic mediation that:

- expanded dramaturgical structure
- reintroduced psychological and temporal complexity
- redistributed ideological emphasis through performative codes
- enabled negotiated artistic agency

While certain adaptations reinforced official narratives, others subtly displaced schematic dramaturgy by foregrounding literary depth and visual composition. The persistence of this practice beyond the political transformations of the 1990s suggests that narrative transposition became not merely a circumstantial response to ideological constraint, but a foundational structural strategy within Albanian theatre.

By situating the Albanian case within broader adaptation theory and theatre semiotics, this study contributes to comparative discussions on how theatrical systems operating under ideological regulation generate forms of mediated aesthetic transformation.

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