ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance:An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VII, Issue-1, June 2026

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THE MONSTER: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND POWER DELINEATED BY ISMAIL KADARE

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Abstract

Ismail Kadare's The Monster presents a profound critique of authoritarian power by examining the intricate relationship between ideology, fear, and political control in communist Albania. Employing the symbolic motif of the Trojan Horse, Kadare transforms an ancient myth into a powerful allegory of totalitarianism, revealing how regimes sustain authority through the construction of external threats and the cultivation of collective anxiety. The novel explores the psychological and social consequences of propaganda, surveillance, and ideological manipulation, demonstrating how political power penetrates both public and private spheres. Through the experiences of Gent Ruvina, Lena, and other characters, Kadare exposes the uncertainty and suspicion that characterize life under a repressive regime. The recurring image of the Trojan Horse challenges official narratives by suggesting that the true danger may originate not from external enemies but from the state itself. Furthermore, the novel interrogates the regime's attempt to create a "New Albania" and a "New Man" by erasing historical memory and reshaping individual identity. By blending realism, myth, and surrealism, The Monster offers a compelling exploration of the dynamics of power and ideological domination, establishing literature as a significant medium of political resistance and cultural critique.

Keywords

Trojan Horse, Ideology, Political Terror, Totalitarianism, Surveillance, etc.

Full Article

Looking back on his literary career, Ismail Kadare remarked that his greatest challenge was creating "normal literature" within the constraints of an abnormal political environment. This tension lies at the heart of *The Monster*, a novel that intertwines a conventional love story with a surreal depiction of Tirana engulfed by fear, uncertainty, and invisible threats. Drawing partly on his own experiences after returning from Moscow, Kadare transforms a personal narrative into a political allegory that examines the intrusion of authoritarian power into everyday life.

Central to the novel is the symbol of the Trojan Horse, a mythological image traditionally associated with deception and invasion. Reinterpreting this classical motif, Kadare presents a Wooden Horse that remains permanently outside the city rather than bringing about its destruction. Its constant presence generates anxiety and suspicion, transforming it into a powerful metaphor for political terror and ideological control. Through this innovative adaptation of the Trojan legend, *The Monster* shifts attention from external enemies to the psychological effects of fear, exposing how authoritarian regimes sustain power through uncertainty, surveillance, and the perception of hidden threats.

As Kadare explains:

> The Monster is the story of a town in which one fine morning the Trojan Horse appears. Inside the horse there are characters from antiquity like

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> Ulysses-who just wait for the day the town will fall. But I did something odd: Troy does not fall; the horse stays there forever. The people live in a permanent anxiety. They say, how are we going to live? […] Because the totalitarian regime is founded on this paranoia about threats from outside, it needs an enemy to justify repression. (Guppy, "Ismail Kadare")

One of the novel's central concerns is the manner in which authoritarian regimes sustain power through the construction of external threats. The Trojan Horse functions not as an instrument of invasion but as a symbol of manufactured fear that legitimizes surveillance, repression, and political control. By leaving the Horse permanently outside the city, Kadare transforms it into a metaphor for perpetual anxiety, reflecting the psychological condition of life under totalitarianism.

Against this backdrop, the narrative follows Gent Ruvina, a young intellectual who returns to Albania after studying in Moscow. Although his story appears to be a conventional romance, it is deeply intertwined with political and mythological symbolism. As a scholar researching the fall of Troy, Gent becomes a link between classical history and contemporary political realities.

Gent falls in love with Lena, whose resemblance to Helen of Troy gives her symbolic significance. However, Lena is engaged to Max, a privileged member of the bureaucratic elite whose family has arranged the marriage for reasons of status and influence. When Gent and Lena elope, they challenge both social convention and political hierarchy, provoking Max's obsessive desire for revenge.

The Trojan Horse assumes a modern form in the shape of an abandoned van on the outskirts of Tirana. Ordinary by day yet mysterious at night, it gradually becomes a source of public unease, demonstrating how fear can transform everyday objects into symbols of political menace. Max further connects the realistic and allegorical dimensions of the novel. His fascination with ancient weapons and his violent threats against Lena and Gent embody the destructive impulses that underpin both personal vengeance and authoritarian power.

Kadare establishes a parallel between Max and Menelaus through Lena's recollection of his threat: "He told me clearly that if I'm unfaithful to him, he will kill me with one of those terrible ancient weapons which he has there" (*The Monster*, 17). This allusion connects personal revenge to the enduring legacy of the Trojan myth.

The symbolism of the Trojan Horse is reinforced through contemporary political discourse. In a 1960 speech condemning Yugoslav revisionism, Ramiz Alia employed the Horse as a metaphor for ideological infiltration and internal subversion, reflecting the regime's obsession with hidden enemies. Alia warned that:

> like the Trojan Horse [...] in order to undermine them from within and ... to overthrow the Marxist-Leninist parties and the peoples' democratic regimes. Above all, at present, when one can perceive symptoms of a detente in international relations, the danger of revisionism, of dissemination of illusions on the question of building socialism, on the class struggle, and on the problems of peace, becomes greater […] (Vickers & James, *Albania* 158).

In *The Monster*, Gent returns to Albania during the critical historical moment marked by the deterioration of relations between Tirana and Moscow. He re-enters a society saturated with official rhetoric warning against ideological revisionism, internal subversion, and the ever-present threat of foreign infiltration. Political discourse increasingly emphasizes vigilance, cultivating a collective consciousness shaped by suspicion and uncertainty. The ideological climate of the period is vividly captured in the novel:

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> A short time later, it was announced officially that the students would not be returning. Along with the cold and rain of autumn, relations among the countries of the socialist bloc became colder and colder. And while the tense relations were not mentioned at all in the radio or the press, it was well-known by now what the situation was. The rumour-mills were gathering steam: capture from within of the socialist citadel, vigilance towards the new Trojan Horse standing out on the horizon (*The Monster,* 16).

The passage effectively captures the atmosphere of ideological uncertainty that characterized the period of the Soviet-Albanian split. In the absence of transparent political communication, rumours and unofficial narratives assumed increasing significance, fostering a climate of collective anxiety and suspicion. Within this context, the Trojan Horse emerges as a powerful metaphor for an unseen yet pervasive threat, reflecting the regime's preoccupation with infiltration and ideological subversion. Khrushchev's programme of revisionism is consequently represented as a modern incarnation of the Horse, symbolizing the perceived danger of external influence undermining socialist orthodoxy from within.

Kadare demonstrates how such political narratives gradually penetrate everyday consciousness, transforming abstract ideological conflicts into lived psychological realities. The symbolic potency of the Horse is reinforced through both political rhetoric and popular culture, until even an abandoned van becomes an object of public suspicion: "For a good while its presence went unnoticed, but one spring day, in the course of a picnic, some people voiced the suspicion that the abandoned van was harbouring characters with subversive motivations" (*The Monster,* 7–8). As mechanisms of surveillance and information control intensify, fear becomes internalized, reshaping individual perception and social behaviour. This transformation is reflected in Gent's substitution of the phrase "big abandoned van" with "large Wooden Horse" (*The Monster,* 56), a symbolic shift that illustrates how authoritarian discourse constructs political reality by investing ordinary objects with ideological meaning.

The gradual internalization of the Trojan Horse motif is particularly evident in Lena's reflections. As she walks home, her thoughts reveal the convergence of multiple layers of meaning associated with the symbol. The ancient myth, Gent's doctoral research on Troy, contemporary political developments, and her personal fear of Max increasingly merge within her imagination. This convergence is articulated through the following dialogue:

> Do you know" "what I was looking for," she said after a moment's pause. "Your, wooden horse." [...] "Look, over there on the right. You can make out an isolated black spot. Maybe that's it?" "Perhaps," said Gent. "Yesterday at university they were talking openly about the split in the communist camp. By the way, how is your doctoral thesis coming along?" [...] "Sometimes I seriously think: if the Horse of Troy were to appear one day on the outskirts of the city, in . . . I wanted to say in the flesh," she exclaimed, laughing. "Made of planks and nails, just like it used to be." "It amounts to the same thing." "Ever since you spoke to me about your notes, I have often asked myself: what if the Horse were to appear one day and my ex-fiance were to be found there dressed in his coat of mail? (*The Monster,* 84)

As the image of the Trojan Horse recurs throughout the narrative, it increasingly shapes the consciousness of the protagonists and becomes a dominant metaphor through which political reality

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is interpreted. Lena gradually associates the Horse with Max, merging personal fear with broader anxieties surrounding invasion and persecution. Simultaneously, Gent's scholarly engagement with the fall of Troy enables him to perceive contemporary political tensions through a mythological lens, particularly in relation to the Soviet-Albanian split. Consequently, the novel shifts its focus from the notion of external enemies to the internal mechanisms through which fear is produced and sustained. The pervasive atmosphere of suspicion transforms insecurity into a collective condition, illustrating how totalitarian systems rely not only on coercion but also on psychological manipulation. As Kadare notes, "everyone feels threatened in one way or another, sometimes without knowing quite by what" (*The Monster*, 68).

This critique reaches its most subversive expression through Lena's reflections, which challenge the official interpretation of the Horse as a symbol of external revisionist danger. Instead, she raises the unsettling possibility that the Monster itself may be a construct of the state, designed to legitimize surveillance, intimidation, and political control. By questioning the origin of the threat, Lena exposes the instability of official narratives and redirects attention from foreign enemies to the internal operations of authoritarian power. Her insight marks a crucial moment in the novel, revealing that the most dangerous forms of domination often emerge from within the political system itself.

> Suddenly she looked at him [...] 'And what if there was nothing true in all of that?' she said in an icy voice. 'What? Nothing true in what?' 'Everything around us: the Wooden Horse, the tension, the growing dangers. If all that were nothing but fabrication?' 'Fabrication by whom?' 'I don't know. I don't really know anything. Maybe I'm just talking nonsense. (*The Monster,* 94)

This episode marks a decisive moment in the novel's critique of authoritarianism. By suggesting that the Monster may be an instrument of internal political manipulation rather than an external threat, Lena exposes the epistemological uncertainty fostered by totalitarian regimes. Kadare portrays a society in which ideological propaganda obscures the distinction between truth and falsehood, leaving individuals unable to discern whether perceived dangers are genuine or politically manufactured. The novel thus shifts attention from the existence of threats to the political uses of fear itself.

This ambiguity is reinforced through the depiction of the six men concealed within the Horse. Their setting simultaneously evokes an abandoned van, a bureaucratic office, and the legendary Trojan Horse, collapsing distinctions between myth and contemporary reality. The inhabitants themselves occupy unstable identities, functioning variously as infiltrators, bureaucrats, revisionists, and ordinary citizens. Led by the enigmatic Builder, they embody both the extraordinary rhetoric of political conspiracy and the mundane routines of everyday life. Their conversations, marked by trivial concerns and casual desires, reveal the ordinariness underlying structures of domination: "Do you want a bite to eat?" asked Milosh. "No, thanks. I had a snack in a grill." [...] "Talk to me about women," said a mellow voice. "Are there any good sorts knocking around on the streets?" (*The Monster,* 30)

By juxtaposing fantasies of conquest with bureaucratic banality, Kadare demonstrates how authoritarian systems are sustained through the actions of ordinary individuals rather than exceptional villains alone. The anticipated destruction of the city further extends the Trojan parallel, re-enacting the fall of Troy within a modern political framework. Through this analogy, the novel suggests that subjugation often results not merely from external invasion but from internal compliance, ideological conformity, and the gradual erosion of critical resistance.

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The disturbing intensity of these fantasies is most clearly embodied in Max, whose desire for revenge assumes increasingly sadistic dimensions. His imagined violence toward Gent and Lena is rendered in graphic detail:

> I could do it in April, on a balmy clear moonlit night," Max replied darkly. "I would wait, I know that a night like this will come, when the two of them, forgetting all precautions, leave the city and go for a walk on the empty plain which belongs to everyone. Then I'll grasp my ancient lance and I'll go softly, softly along the ground. I'll find them, maybe nestling in each other's arms, lying on the grass in springtime, drunk on love and the scents of the plain. [...] You don't know, Acamante, what horrible wounds an ancient lance of this type can cause. [...] An enormous red wound with lacerations around its edges caused when the metal blade is withdrawn. [...] A wound which leaves our contemporaries terrified (*The Monster,* 34–35).

Max's obsession with archaic weaponry is particularly significant because it symbolizes the persistence of primitive impulses beneath the veneer of modern civilization. The violence he imagines is not merely personal but archetypal, connecting individual revenge to broader patterns of political and historical brutality. Through Max, Kadare illustrates how authoritarian environments cultivate fantasies of domination and destruction that transcend the immediate circumstances of the narrative.

Despite the significance of Max and the other inhabitants of the Horse, it is ultimately the figure of the Builder who embodies the novel's most profound political insight. The Builder functions as the archetypal engineer of political terror, the intellectual architect responsible for transforming fear into a mechanism of governance. Unlike his subordinates, he is not motivated primarily by personal vengeance, material gain, or the pleasures of violence. Rather, his concern lies with the design and implementation of systems capable of controlling human behaviour on a collective scale.

Friendship, infiltration, manipulation, ideological subversion, and coercion serve as instruments through which he achieves his objectives. Violence is not an end in itself but a strategic tool deployed in the pursuit of power. Having successfully initiated the process of destruction, the Builder withdraws from direct involvement and leaves the practical execution of brutality to others. While refugees flee the city and chaos unfolds, he retreats into contemplation, satisfied by the effectiveness of his creation.

Significantly, the Builder soon loses interest in the concrete manifestations of violence. Torture, rape, and theft are delegated to his followers, whose limited horizons prevent them from understanding the broader significance of their actions. The Builder, by contrast, derives satisfaction from abstraction. His true achievement lies not in individual acts of cruelty but in the creation of a system that mobilizes human fears and desires in the service of political domination. In this respect, he closely resembles the totalitarian dictator. Kadare demonstrates how authoritarian power appropriates personal motives, redirects individual energies, and transforms ordinary people into both victims and perpetrators.

The Builder's capacity to unite diverse individuals under a single ideological project constitutes his most threatening characteristic. He manipulates disparate ambitions and anxieties, forging a collective instrument of control from otherwise unrelated human impulses. As such, he anticipates many of Kadare's later representations of Enver Hoxha. The Builder belongs to the category of ideological engineers who seek to reshape society according to their own vision while concealing personal megalomania beneath rhetoric of paternal concern and collective welfare.

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Kadare further develops these concerns through a series of intertextual reflections embedded within Gent's doctoral research on Troy. Excerpts from his speculative notes and fragments of a novel based upon his relationship with Lena are interwoven with the primary narrative, creating an additional layer of political commentary. Chapters Ten and Twelve, each marked by distinct subtitles, reconstruct the fall of Troy from the perspective of the defeated Trojans rather than the victorious Greeks.

One narrative strand follows Helena after her return to Sparta, depicting her domestic life with Menelaus. This alternative perspective implicitly suggests the future Lena might have experienced had she remained with Max—a life characterized by security, social prestige, and submission to established authority. A second strand focuses on Laocoon, the Trojan priest who warned King Priam against accepting the Greek gift. His fate parallels that of intellectuals who challenge official narratives within authoritarian regimes.

Recognizing the danger represented by the Horse, Laocoon attempts to expose the truth. However, much like critics within Hoxha's Albania, he is marginalized, discredited, and ultimately eliminated. In Gent's interpretation, Laocoon becomes a powerful symbol of the intellectual whose commitment to truth places him in direct conflict with political authority:

> That afternoon at the meeting of the Council, I had the impression that everyone was aware of my meeting with the king. The looks of my enemies were more piercing than ever. [...] was accused of being an enemy of peace and therefore a cause of the sufferings endured by the Trojans, etc. They called for my resignation. But that's the least that they have demanded. I have the impression that they will insist on more yet. Maybe my appearance before some tribunal or other. Prison, then; after that my death- why not? (*The Monster,* 158–159)

The figure of Thremoh, the forgotten Trojan bard and Gent's anagrammatic counterpart to Homer, serves as a powerful symbol of exile, cultural memory, and literary loss in *The Monster*. Having survived the destruction of Troy, Thremoh flees to the Hittite lands, where he attempts to record the Trojan version of the siege and fall of his city. Despite preserving this history on cuneiform tablets, his narrative is received with suspicion and incomprehension. Through Thremoh, Kadare explores the predicament of the exiled writer whose language, culture, and historical experience remain inaccessible to those around him.

The episode highlights the fragility of cultural memory and the marginalization of the defeated in historical narratives. While conquerors preserve their victories, the voices of the conquered often disappear. Exile severs the organic connection between literature and communal life, transforming living oral traditions into fragile written records. Although writing seeks to preserve memory, its survival is never guaranteed. Thremoh ultimately fails in his mission to save Troy through words. The tablets on which he records its history are gradually lost, leaving behind only a fragment: "Perhaps you will weep, Troy, but it will be too late, forever too late" (*The Monster,* 173). The surviving fragment symbolizes both remembrance and loss, preserving only a faint trace of a vanished civilization. Thremoh himself dies in exile, and his work disappears into history.

This theme of exile and cultural disappearance reflects Kadare's own anxieties as a writer. In *The Weight of the Cross* (1991), he recalls considering exile in Czechoslovakia during the early 1960s. Thremoh's displacement mirrors Kadare's fear that prolonged immersion in the Soviet sphere would lead to the erosion of Albanian language and culture. His decision to return to Albania was therefore motivated not only by personal attachment but also by a commitment to preserving and enriching his nation's literary heritage.

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Kadare believed that Albanian identity had survived through its poetry, folklore, and collective memory. Like Thremoh, he saw literature as a means of safeguarding cultural continuity. Unlike the exiled bard, however, he chose to undertake this task within Albania itself, drawing creative strength from his native language despite political repression. This commitment reflects the romantic nationalism that remained a constant feature of his literary vision.

Through the figure of Thremoh, Kadare transforms a mythological narrative into a broader meditation on the fate of literature, the vulnerability of cultural memory, and the writer's struggle against historical oblivion. Thremoh thus emerges as an enduring symbol of artistic resistance and the fragile survival of truth in the face of political and historical destruction.

As Laocoon, his face torn by monstrous fangs, Gent becomes a powerful symbol of the silenced intellectual. Although he attempts to reveal the truth, he is rendered incapable of speech. The classical image of Laocoon, long debated in Western aesthetics as a representation of suffering and truth, is reinterpreted by Kadare as an allegory of the writer under dictatorship:

> He is to be found in the museum, in the Louvre in London and in Madrid, surrounded by innumerable tourists and passers-by. […] The people point out to each other the gashes to his face left by the monsters. He wants to open his mouth to tell the facts of how they happened, but the marble of which he is made prevents him. (*The Monster*, 218)

Laocoon embodies the paradox of the intellectual in an oppressive regime: highly visible yet unable to communicate openly. Like the writer in Stalinist Eastern Europe, he becomes an object of public attention while remaining deprived of a political voice. His suffering can only be expressed indirectly through artistic representation. Gent alone succeeds in transforming the image of the abandoned van into a meaningful intellectual and creative inquiry. Through his reflections on the Horse, Kadare traces the writer's political self-education and examines how fear distorts both public discourse and private relationships. The surreal structure of the novel mirrors the workings of imagination under conditions of political repression.

By transforming the Trojan Horse into an allegory of political terror, Kadare explores the psychological foundations of authoritarian power. The Horse repeatedly shifts across time and space, reflecting the anxieties and fears of the characters. Gradually, it becomes clear that the true danger does not originate from external enemies but from the internal mechanisms of control that exploit fear and suspicion. The novel therefore critiques not foreign threats but the siege mentality cultivated by totalitarian regimes.

The novel's strength lies in its imaginative symbolism: the continual transformations of the Horse, the doubling of identities between those inside and outside it, and the historical digressions involving Menelaus, Helena, and the exiled bard Thremoh. Equally significant is the contrast between the idyllic love story and the pervasive atmosphere of political anxiety. Drawing partly on Kadare's own relationship with Helena, the romance provides a personal dimension to the narrative. Although *The Monster* is sometimes structurally uneven, it remains a remarkable exploration of power, fear, and ideological manipulation. Its publication history is equally revealing. Initially prohibited and only partially published in *Nentori* in 1965, the novel appeared in its complete Albanian form only in 1990, shortly before the collapse of the communist regime. The delayed publication demonstrates both the political sensitivity of its themes and Kadare's unique position within Albanian literary culture. Even under censorship, his extraordinary talent continued to secure a degree of protection, allowing one of the most significant literary critiques of totalitarianism in Albanian literature to survive.

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Article Received:14/06/2026
Article Accepted:23/06/2026
Published Online:30/06/2026

To Cite the Article: Gayathri, M. V. "*The Monster: Relationship Between Ideology and Power Delineated By Ismail Kadare*." *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.-VII, Issue-1, June, 2026, 130-137. www.literarycog nizance.com