Hamid Ismailov’s *Dance of Devils* could be summarised as a hybrid of Solzhenitsyn’s *First Circle* and of *A Thousand and One Nights*: the (very real) writer Abdulla Qadiri, among a group of prisoners of the NKVD in Tashkent awaiting execution in the Great Terror of 1938, tries to reconstruct and finish his novel set in the 1840s about the unhappy Oihon, wife of khans, who desperately survives as those who love her are slain. In the end, the ending of her story remains untold, while Qadiri is taken, with the flower of Uzbek intelligentsia, to be shot as ‘spies, traitors, nationalists and saboteurs’.

The title refers specifically to a hallucinatory dance of devils that the hero’s father is drawn into, and which he subsequently tells his son about, as a warning about the perils of creating fictional characters. More broadly, the dance can be seen as that of the crazed authorities, both the 20th century NKVD interrogators tormenting their prisoners, and the 19th century depraved, unpredictably murderous khans of Kokand and Bukhara causing havoc to their peoples.

The hero, Abdulla Qadiri, is a real figure – one of the most important Uzbek poets and novelists of the last century – who was executed in 1938, one of the hundreds of thousands of victims of Stalin’s purges. In *Dance of Devils* Ismailov recreates not only his last months in an Uzbek jail but also parts of the novel that Qadiri had been planning to write and which Ismailov imagines him continuing to think about after his arrest. This novel-within-a-novel is set in the first half of the nineteenth century. Three of the main characters are Nasrulla (the Emir of Bukhara), Madalikhan (the Khan of Khokand) and Oihon (stepmother and wife to Madalikhan). Both Bukhara and Khokand lie within present-day Uzbekistan.

One of the many sub-plots is centered on two real historical figures from the mid C19: Connolly and Stoddart, British intelligence officers executed by the Emir of Bukhara. (It was Connolly who first coined the phrase “The Great Game”.) While in jail, Qadiri learns a great deal about them from one of his cellmates, a historian. As a result, he decides to include them in his novel. A parallel sub-plot is centered on two British mining consultants, almost certainly figments of Qadiri’s imagination, who also, at one point, end up in the same cell as Qadiri; like many foreigners who came in good faith to help build the Soviet Union, they end up being arrested.

Qadiri’s cellmates also include Afghan and Persian mullahs as well as Russians; he discusses his novel with all of them to obtain different perspectives on the stories he is telling. There are debates about the effects of Russian and Soviet involvement
in the culture and politics of the region. Have the Russians brought destruction or progress?

Many chapters are structured around direct parallels between Qadiri’s experiences in jail and episodes from the novel he is composing. Just as Qadiri’s interrogators beat him up in an attempt to make him “confess” to crimes he has not committed, so Oihon, the long-suffering heroine of his novel, is beaten up by her evil second husband, the Khan of Khokand, who wrongly suspects her of infidelity. Similarly, both Qadiri and Oihon, at least on occasion, possess the power of imagination to understand, and forgive, those who have tormented and betrayed them; they understand what terrible pressures they have been exposed to.

The novel of some 90,000 words is organized into ten chapters and an epilogue. Each chapter is named after a game that typifies the intrigues of the NKVD with the prisoners or the Khans of Kokand and Bukhara with their womenfolk, servants and enemies: Polo, Knucklebones, Cricket (which in Uzbek is parsed as kir-ket, ‘enter and exit’), Chess, Pigeon-Fancying, ‘Guess Who Hit You’, Scrabble (which the translator will rename, since the game was only invented in 1948), Polemics (the national sport of Jews), Russian roulette, Fuss-and-Fun.

The novel starts with Qadiri’s arrest on New Year’s eve, after he has pruned his vines, and ends with his execution in October, when the grapes are ripe and the leaves are falling off the vine. These ten months (from renewed life to death) are a process of resistance and then resignation to his fate, studying his interrogators (who end up as suicides or refugees), gathering information from his fellow prisoners, Jewish, Russian, Iranian and (imaginary) Englishmen about the fate of his heroine Oihon and the khans of Kokand and Bukhara and, in particular, of the fate of Connolly and Stoddart, two English emissaries who ended up as hostages and possibly victims of the Khan of Bukhara. The Great Game in central Asia played out by Britain and Russia is a parallel with the great game of Stalinism versus Uzbek national pride, and the desperate fate of Oihon, deprived of family and love, parallels the fate of the writer Qadiri, torn from his family and his writings.

The structure of the novel is reinforced by poetry: some is the courtly lyrics in the classical (Turko-Iranian) tradition of the Turkestan courts. The main impact, however, comes from the very real poetry of Uzbekistan’s greatest poet Chulpan (real name Abdulhamid Suleiman), who can only be compared with Osip Mandelshtam in his ability to write poetry about totalitarianism and the death of free culture, while...
remaining faithful to his classical traditions. Half a dozen of Chulpan’s major poems form the novel’s armature.

The novel itself is satisfying as a psychological study of prisoners and interrogators, as a reconstruction of the politics of the Great Terror that annihilated Central Asian culture, and as a portrayal of a writer trying to finish in his mind a story he has only begun to draft. What makes it exceptional is the cement of poetry, Chulpan’s ironic, stoic and Sufic acceptance of the cruelty of fate and emphemerality of human life. While there are comic and dramatic moments, the infusion of Chulpan’s imagery, reinforcing the idea of the vineyard in which only the vine survives, while the leaves must perish, turns this novel into a work of unforgettable philosophical power and an exploration of Sufism.

Unlike Ismailov’s earlier two novels, this one is presented in a Russian version not prepared by the author; the Russian is fluent and accurate, but not completely satisfactory: the translator must take account of the original Uzbek, for many passages need re-translation directly into English. This applies especially to the poetry. Uzbek is close to English in that it has a native (Anglo-Saxon or Turkic) layer, on which a culturally more sophisticated medium (Norman French or Persian) has been imposed. Russian cannot easily reflect this duality and, while Ismailov himself writes a fundamentally Turkic Uzbek, the poetry he quotes often has a strong Persian element. The translator must therefore have by his or her side the Uzbek original and a good Uzbek-Russian dictionary, as well as access for consultation to the living author.

In a more didactic way the novel brings to Europeans’ attention the extraordinary culture of what once was Turkestan, in its 19th century decadence, in the revival (jadidism) of the first quarter of the 20th century, and its brutal suppression from the 1930s to the death of Stalin (and, after the breakup of the USSR, under the dictatorship of Karimov). The reader will be awoken to the richness of Uzbek culture and language, the heir of Chaghatai Turkish, and to the mix of cultures under a once enlightened Islam: above all, given the magnificence of Chulpan’s poetry, not to mention Qadiri’s historical prose, publication in translation of this unusual and important novel will do a great service to the cause of Uzbek culture.

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