

Divorce and Dialogue: Intertextuality in Amara Lakhous' *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi*.

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Key Words: Intercultural Communication, Postcolonialism, Intertextuality, Amara Lakhous, Italy.

Introduction

Amara Lakhous claims that “one must make a huge effort to communicate. [...] it is necessary to understand others' point of view, we must put ourselves in their shoes”¹; he advocates for the necessity to find “punti in comune”, common grounds by recreating a shared imaginary (Brogi, 2011, p. 7). Algerian-born author who writes in Italian, Lakhous is concerned with communication, especially in the intercultural context of contemporary Italy. His work brings to the surface a common, Mediterranean “identitarian context” (Esposito, 2011, p. 7) which seeks to enable social relations between migrants and hosts and foster intercultural communication. “In a country [Italy] where numerous media outlets are controlled by conservative Berlusconi enthusiasts and where, unlike France or Great Britain, debates around immigration, nationalism and multiculturalism are still relatively new, Lakhous' works forge a space of necessary awareness and dialogue” (Esposito, 2011, p. 2).

Intercultural communication is primarily concerned with creating and enabling spaces for dialogue. In the era of globalization and social networking, communication has paradoxically become more complex. The global war on terror, conservative politics, and the concerns over dwindling natural resources in the face of climate change significantly increase social and cultural tensions. As the past three decades have seen an intensification of migratory routes toward Europe, there is an urgent need for both “a new conceptual framework to understand the dynamics of global flows [...as well as] a new perspective on the relationship between the stranger and the resident” (Papastergiadis, 2006, p. 429-32). Debates about intercultural communication are becoming more prominent, and figures such as ‘cultural mediators’ begin to steadily multiply. For Liu, “[i]ntercultural communication can help us to build our knowledge of other peoples and their cultures, as well as enhancing and consolidating our knowledge about our own culture. The result is invariably greater intercultural understanding” (Liu, 2011, p. 23).

Whilst paying due acknowledgment to the plethora of scholarship on intercultural communication (which primarily focuses on the linguistic aspect), this paper approaches the subject of intercultural communication from a postcolonial literary perspective. As Condon has it: “[l]iterature and film can enhance intercultural communication [...] by expressing the significance of certain relationships, values, communication styles, and so on that are representative of the culture being described” (Condon, 1986, p. 155). Further, a postcolonial literary perspective offers critical strategies which are alert to the (inter)textual interplay of cultures, languages and narrative modes, thus providing a space of interaction between worlds.

This study addresses the underdeveloped dialogue in contemporary intercultural relations between Italy and its 'others' to examine the ways in which Amara Lakhous' novel *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* (2010) [Divorce Islamic style in viale Marconi] articulates a postcolonial response to Pietro Germi's 1961 film *Divorzio all'italiana* [Divorce Italian style] by initiating an intercultural dialogue among preexistent and emerging cultures. Foregrounding intertextuality and 'writing back' in a postcolonial context as intercultural communication modes, this paper explores the intertextual relations between the novel and the film; it examines the use of irony and multivocal narrative in Lakhous' novel as strategies of intercultural mediations. Moreover, it interrogates the works' social, cultural, historical and linguistic movements to analyse the narrativizations of familiarity and estrangement. *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* enables a dialogue between local cultures and 'guest' cultures by tracing (obliterated) common histories, shared experiences and similar social and cultural predicaments across the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, remapping geographical and cultural terrains.

Italy's early days of Postcolonial Literature

Describing the social and cultural map of contemporary Italy, Amara Lakhous says that "there are all types: young Africans and Asians selling counterfeit goods on the sidewalks, Arab children walking with father and veiled mother, Gypsy women in long skirts begging. In other words, I'm in the Italy of the future, as the sociologists say" (Lakhous, 2011, p. 41). Multicultural Italy is already a reality. Interestingly, Allievi points out that "Italian can be considered a multicultural society only with some difficulty. While empirical evidence would point in this direction, Italy is normally considered a monocultural and monoreligious (Roman Catholic) country" (Allievi, 2010, p. 85). The ever-increasing number of migrants has contributed to the proliferation of nationalist sentiments – systematically fuelled by institutional discourses – hence, the relationships between preexistent and emerging cultures remain problematic, tense and surrounded by anxieties. "This nationalistic mythology", as Bourchard calls it, "has accompanied a series of violent episodes of hostility coupled with a fortification of juridical borders and frontiers regulating and redrawing the boundaries between the inside and the outside, the native and the foreign, the self and the other" (Bouchard, 2010, p. 106).

Italy's struggle to acknowledge the redefinition of its national subjectivities and to deal with its migrant population is rooted in its postcolonial unconscious, as Ponzanesi put it (2004, p. 26). Indeed, whilst other European countries have dealt with the legacy of colonialism and the recent global migratory flows, Italy has only just started confronting its colonial past and the consequences of global migration (Coppola, 2011, p. 121). Thus, "the collective amnesia of the colonial enterprise obscures the fact that at least some of the guests of today were the hosts of yesterday. [...] The colonial adventure is removed from the Italian imaginary and from historical memory; it is not studied in school, and until recently has rarely been the object of research and reassessment" (Curti, 2007, p. 60-62). Italy's colonial chapter is erased by a cultural amnesia; its colonial expansion to Africa was archived until very recently, as "mainstream culture selectively recollected the past while cultivating the idea of Italians as "*brava gente*," or good people, and of their colonialism as "*straccione*," that is to say, done on the cheap and somehow benign"

(Bouchard, 2010, p. 109). Bouchard's view on the allegedly "benign" Italian colonial enterprise, hence not really significant, echoes other critics (Coppola 2001, Curti 2007, Ponzanesi 2004, Parati 2005, Allievi 2010).

The country's failure to acknowledge its colonial memory, its histories of racism and cultural plurality, its chapters of mass emigration, prevent it from understanding migrants' socio-cultural and legal situation (Allievi, 2010, p. 97). Indeed, Curti reminds us that Italy, with its history of emigration unconsciously mirrors itself in today's migrants and ignores or forgets that some of them come from its ex-colonies (Curti, 2007, p. 62). In order to reconceptualize and understand contemporary migration, it is crucial to retrieve the legacy of Italian colonialism and Italian emigration, to be reminded that "the face of the other is also the face that was one's uncle or one's father, that the affective and cultural dispositions necessary to overcome separations and divisions can be mobilized" (Bouchard, 2010, p. 110).

Whilst Italy slowly and belatedly recalls its colonial experiences, contemporary postcolonial writers are enabling the recovery of the country's colonized, colonialist and migrant pasts (Bouchard, 2010, p. 106), as well as challenging the dominant nationalistic agenda sustained by social, legal and political institutions. Postcolonial Italian literature facilitates the rehabilitation of texts from Italy's colonial and migrant past, as the country "morphs from an emigrant to an immigrant country" (Bouchard, 2010, p. 105). Furthermore, Parati argues that due to its history of internal migrations and social and cultural divisions (North and South), Italian culture offers an ideal space to reopen the discussion on the relationship between outside and inside (Parati, 2005, p. 25). In a context of hostile conservatism, Italian postcolonial authors initiate a necessary dialogue among cultures and shake the grounds of Italy's indifferent attitude to its increasingly culturally diverse population. This body of counter discourses consolidates the literary postcolonial in Italian language; indeed, as Brancato advocates, there is an "urge [for] incorporating more linguistic contexts other than the Anglophone and the francophone into postcolonial discourse" (Brancato, 2008, p. 1); a position which echoes Moore-Gilbert's call for a postcolonial in "non-Anglophone worlds" (Moore-Gilbert, (2000)[1997] p. 187).

In the past two decades, the Italian literary scene has witnessed a proliferation of postcolonial, 'migrant', 'hyphenated', 'in-between' authors. There are ongoing debates on the labeling of this specific literary strand; however, as Curti observes, there are limits to the term migrant (Curti, 2007, p. 66); "'migrancy' is now ubiquitous as a theoretical term. It specifically refers to migration not as an act, but as a condition of human life" (Smith, 2004, p. 257). Thus, the creation of a discursive category on this basis is far more complex. Alternative terms have been suggested; for instance, Portelli, considers the label 'migrant literature' inadequate and suggests 'multicultural Italian literature' instead (Portelli, 2006, p. 475). Although the debate about 'labeling' goes beyond the purpose of this study, I want to briefly challenge and depart from one of the proposed terms: 'Afro-Italian' literature (Portelli 2004, Brancato 2007, Ponzanesi 2003). Reproducing problematic power relations – extensively explored in the black American context – the 'Afro' included in this hyphenated labeling literally reduces (and suppresses) the African presence in the definition; indeed the term 'Afro-American' has been replaced with the more inclusive, non hyphenated African American. Postcolonialism in the Italian context – whilst being a belated experience – has the

opportunity to avoid the shortcomings of previous critical discourses; thus, it seems irresponsible to replicate previous faux pas of discursive categories. ⁱⁱ

Migrancy, Intertextuality and Intercultural Dialogue

Lakhous' work posits itself amidst this social and cultural scene, in an effort to "speak back" to dominant mis-representations and engage in an intercultural and intertextual dialogue. In Parati's words, this is a literary 'writing back' "both to the alarmist press releases concerning mass invasionsⁱⁱⁱ from poorer countries and to the opposite excess embodied in the construction of immigrants as pitiful entities in constant need of assistance' (Parati, 2005, p. 31). Although Lakhous consciously seeks – in his own words – to "extricate [him]self from this postcolonial discourse" (Esposito, 2011, p. 3) by writing in Italian rather than in French (his colonial language)^{iv}, his work participates in the production of counter-discursive strategies, endemic to the postcolonial process (Tiffin, 1995, p. 98). Lakhous' writing represents an anti-systemic act which challenges coercive social and cultural practices and initiates liberation. In Edward Said's words, "liberation as an intellectual mission, [...] has now shifted from the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentred, and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation today is the migrant" (Said, 1994, p. 403). Echoing Said's stance, Andrew Smith explores the relationship between migrancy, postcolonial literature and liberatory narratives: "[i]t is often the migrant writer who is taken to be the figure of this new liberation, prizing the lid from locked histories and self-centred stories. [...] By becoming mobile and by making narratives out of this mobility, people escape the control of states and national borders *and* the limited, linear ways of understanding themselves which states promotes in their citizens" (Smith, 2004, p. 245). Interestingly, intercultural communication is realized by those who move across borders and cultures (Piller, 2011, p. 174); thus the link between migrancy and agency in the intercultural dialogue seems evident. In the context of contemporary Italy "the literature produced in Italian by African writers aims, in the first place, at spreading awareness in order to facilitate intercultural communication" (Brancato, 2007, p. 657). Lakhous' *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi*, recasting past histories and reaching back and forwards among cultures and places, contributes to the postcolonial process of re-drawing and re-charting contemporary Italy's identitarian cartographies.

One of the devices for the postcolonial author to write back is 'intertextuality' (Weir, 2006, p. 1). Coined by Julia Kristeva in her essay 'The Bounded Text' (1960), *intertextualité* is a series of relationships between texts, as well as between readers and texts. For Kristeva, a literary text "borrows always from the discourses of the press, from oral discourses, from political discourses, and from other texts that preceded it, that provide vehicles in turn for those cultural and political texts of history (Kristeva, 1996, p. 53). Textual and intertextual encounters generate radical and – to recall Edward Said – liberating energies that allow re-definition of subjectivities. As Weir points out: "[h]ere, in the postcolonial present, texts and discourses intersect and intersperse, freeing up any inherent ideological underpinnings and recombining in unpredictable and potentially politically liberating manners. As a theory of textuality and subjectivity, Kristevan intertextuality addresses such liberative concerns of the postcolonial critique and its

continual attempt to level any essentializing discourse insisting upon the arbitrary boundaries between Self and Other” (Weir, 2006, p. 10).

Intertextuality in Lakhous’ novel functions as re-writing or writing back to re-appropriate and reclaim histories that have been erased by the canon. Further, it maps out a novel literary territory in which intercultural encounters are made possible; as López-Varela Azcárate has it, “[t]he intertextual phenomenon is thus closely linked to the negotiation of authority and to issues of mediation of values and emotions, and thus of cultural forms” (López-Varela Azcárate, 2011, p. 10). Mediation is a key concept in intercultural communication, especially with reference to contemporary Italy where migrancy is experienced, both by ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’, with anxiety, fear, misunderstanding and prejudice. Intertextuality is not mainly a “matter of multilingual punning and allusion-mongering broadly within the same culture [...] but [it has] the function of a more deeply permeating intermingling of two radically different cultures” (Trivedi, 2007, p. 132).

Divorzio all’islamica a viale Marconi is a re-writing of Germi’s film *Divorzio all’italiana*, a comedy milestone in Italian cinema, and in itself an intertextual, satirical response to a precedent text, Giovanni Arpino’s novel *Un delitto d’onore* (1960). A parallel between Lakhous’ and Germi’s titles begs for consideration: whilst *Divorzio all’italiana* suggests homogeneity – a divorce Italian style –, Lakhous’ work immediately signifies difference and heterogeneity both by inserting the Islamic element in an Italian context, and by localizing it to viale Marconi in Rome, one street in one city. Germi’s film – a parodic remediation – narrativizes and problematizes the indissolubility of marriage in 1960 Italy, while Lakhous recounts how divorce is easily obtained in Islamic law. Starring Marcello Mastroianni, *Divorzio all’italiana* tells the story of a Sicilian baron, Ferdinando Cefalù, called Fefè, and his machinations to rid himself of an unwanted wife. Taking advantage of article 587 of the Italian Penal Code (only abolished in 1981) – whereby the killing of a wife, daughter or sister caught in flagrante in an adulterous relation, was punished with 3 to 7 years imprisonment – Fefè plans to find a lover for his wife Rosalia and then murder her. In *Divorzio all’islamica a viale Marconi*, Safia, an Egyptian migrant living in Rome, is in conflict with her husband for his overzealous approach to Islamism and for his marital demands. Safia often challenges him and, in the course of their marriage, she is repudiated by her husband three times. As Islam prescribes, the third repudiation renders the divorce definitive; thus, whilst Safia’s husband, Said, tries to win her back, she turns the repudiation into a liberation and releases herself from social and cultural oppressions. A re-vision of the film, Lakhous’ novel “updates it and transfers it to the female sphere”, indeed whilst in the case of Safia it is a woman who is empowered by the divorce, in “the Italian film, however, divorce is understood to serve the interests of male desire” (Spackman, 2011, p. 11).

Postcolonial Italian texts “offer a comparative perspective, through which a dialogic process is established between the culture of origin and the host culture. They do so by addressing various frames of reference (religion, food, weather, landscape, traditions, clothing, etc.) and by highlighting common and differing aspects in the two countries. In this way, Italian readers are not only made familiar with cultures often remote to them, but they are also offered a view from the outside of their own culture and society, so that they can look at it from a different – and critical – angle” (Brancato, 2007, p. 656). Ironically, it is through divorce that Lakhous’ novel articulates a dialogue among

cultures to annul divisions and to bridge gaps in communication. Narrativizing ‘Islamic style’ divorce in contemporary Italy by re-visiting a 1960 canonical text, Amara Lakhous’ postcolonial counter-discourse opens up multiple spaces of intercultural communication. Bringing to the fore the arbitrary boundaries between self and other, between Italian and foreigner, the novel draws “punti in comune”, common grounds, to begin an intercultural dialogue.

The Intertextual as Intercultural

Divorzio all’islamica a viale Marconi adopts and adapts the style of 1960 ‘commedia all’italiana’ which “skillfully manages to make fun of serious matters” (Esposito, 2011, p. 3). In an interview, Lakhous explores the significance of self-irony in contemporary postcolonial Italy: “when a world that suffocates us is so irrational [...] there is no way to face it rationally. But we have irony and the possibility of sacralizing. [...] if you use irony, you shake things up, move things around” (Esposito, 2011, p. 9-10). Lakhous’ use of irony responds to rigid and nationalist identitarian discourses produced by institutions; in his words: “when people say Italians are those who speak Italian [...] this discourse of identity being tied to some sort of grid, of linguistic entrapment, of nationalism, is troubling. With irony one can create doubt” (Esposito, 2011, p. 9). Orton points out the values of “reappropriation by speaking in an ironic key and especially by emphasizing the ironies surrounding immigration legislation. [...] Multiple ironies operate as social critique, and resist discourses of power by revealing their contradictions and absurdities” (Orton, 2001, p. 383). Irony is inscribed in the predicaments of Christian, one of the protagonists in *Divorzio all’islamica a viale Marconi*; he is a Sicilian who studied Arabic at the University of Palermo and in 2005 is asked by the SISMI (Servizio per le Informazioni e la Sicurezza Militare) to work on a mission as part of George W. Bush’s War on Terror. Christian – renamed Issa for the purpose of this operation – has to impersonate a Muslim Tunisian migrant and gain access to an alleged terrorist cell in the Roman neighborhood of viale Marconi, known as “Little Cairo,” home to an immigrant community, mainly from northern Africa.

Set in the alarmist climate that followed the 2005 London and Madrid bombings, the novel follows Christian/Issa on his mission to uncover the allegedly imminent Rome bombing being plotted in Viale Marconi. Parati recalls Étienne Balibar’s concept of the “imaginary singularity of national formations”, that is to say that institutions “produce” homogeneous national communities (and identities). [...] A construction of homogeneous *italianità* is necessary in order to create dichotomies such as ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘Italians’ and ‘foreigners’, *comunitari* and *extracomunitari*” (Parati, 2005, p. 24-25). In Lakhous’ oeuvre, the use of irony challenges the dominant view of a monolithic and homogenous Italian identity. Christian/Issa plays the Fanonian dictum at the reverse; Black Skins/White Mask is inverted as the ‘white’, Western man plays the ‘black’ migrant. Furthermore, the blending of Christian into Issa is a reminder that one can be the other^v, that otherness is inscribed in the self. Aptly referring to ‘terror’ and the anxieties surrounding otherness in our contemporaneity, de Sousa Santos observes that “[t]error shows us what Benjamin had already demonstrated, that the other is inside us and is not a foreigner, so we need to develop new strategies of trust and reciprocity in this context” (Phipps, 2007, p. 99). Lakhous’ character, Christian ‘exits’ his Italian identity to inhabit

that of a migrant, Issa; as Lakhous points out it is “una grandissima opportunità”, a very big opportunity, as certitudes produce fundamentalism (Brogi, 2011, p. 8).

Christian/Issa’s narrative is parallel to that of an Egyptian woman, Safia, who comments on her culture of origin and shares her experiences of a Muslim migrant in contemporary Italy. Obligated to wear the veil by her husband, Said – a devout Muslim and a pizza chef in Rome who renamed himself Felice – Safia is an acute observer caught in between Islamic religious practices, and contemporary Italy’s discriminatory patterns. In this context, Safia develops a series of empowerment strategies to defy both her husband’s patriarchal power and the discriminatory gaze she is often subjected to in a reluctantly multicultural Rome. She becomes a clandestine hairdresser and happily embraces the name Sofia, both for her resemblance to Italian 1960 cinema star Sofia Loren, and because often people fail to grasp her name correctly (Lakhous, 2010, p. 25). The ambiguity imbricated in the naming and the slippage of one into the other is reflected in the novel’s narrative strategies, in which both Christian/Issa and Safia/Sofia – the two narrators – articulate a dialogue between the centre and the margin, between Muslim northern Africa, and catholic Italy.

It is through the ‘Islamic style’ divorce that the stories of Safia/Sofia and Christian/Issa meet. In a series of accidental encounters along the streets of ‘Little Cairo’, the two characters/narrators exchange glances; interest, fascination and attraction grow between them. Safia/Sofia fantasizes about Christian/Issa and significantly renames him “il Marcello Arabo”, the Arabian Marcello. A reference to Italian actor Marcello Mastroianni (and also a further intertextual reference to Germi’s film), Safia/Sofia’s re-naming multiplies Christian/Issa’s identities in an intricate sequence of ironic performative acts: a Sicilian Italian plays a Tunisian who in turns embodies a male, Italian icon. This series of ironic identitarian slippages is imbricated in an entanglement of roots and routes between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. Moreover, at the end of the novel we discover that – ironically – Christian/Issa’s mission to uncover a bomb plotting was just a test concocted by the SISMI to train him; hence the notion of performance and *mis-en-scène* reaches yet another narrative level. As Spackman has it: “the revelation that the migrant reality in which Christian/Issa posed and passed was itself one big pose erodes the ground upon which any reliable distinction might be made between authentic identities, and those assumed as part of a ‘messa in scena’” (Spackman, 2011, p. 13).

In Germi’s film Mastroianni ‘plays’ the “stigmatized southerner” and “participates in the generalization of stereotypes”. Mastroianni’s “performance of Southern-ness includes an exaggerated facial tic, greasily pomaded hair, and a use of the *passato remoto* [preterit] that stands out from his otherwise standard spoken Italian” (Spackman, 2011, p. 11). Germi’s film is not only echoed in the novel’s themes and plot, but also in its language. Indeed, Christian is a Sicilian and his narrative combines both Sicilian dialect and standard Italian (Spackman, 2011, p. 10): “insomma, irricoscibile sono” (Lakhous, 2010, p. 11), here words in Italian are arranged in a Sicilian sentence structure where the verb is placed in a non-normative position. Christian speaks Arabic with a Tunisian accent, “like a native”; his linguistic predicaments bespeak of his family’s history of emigration to Tunisia. A Sicilian Italian, Christian admits that “in Rome I really am a stranger”^{vi} (Lakhous, 2010, p. 12). Thus, the ironic passing for a Tunisian Muslim only adds to the multiple migrations embedded in his cultural,

geographical, and linguistic identities.

Christian/Issa's linguistic predicaments articulate a 'double-voiced' narrative; its 'heteroglossic' characteristic reveals a non-heterogeneous, 'in-between' nature. "The identities of the Sicilian-Tunisian-Italian and now Egyptian Christian/Issa are thus not untangled in the final moment; instead, Christian/Issa becomes the site of the proliferation and crossing of languages and identities that is generalized as an Italian future in which it is no longer possible to say who is a migrant and who is not" (Spackman, 2011, p. 13). Lakhous' text plays with performing 'otherness' through a multiplication of voices and identities that are fluidly cast upon his characters. Moreover, in *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* both narrators make extensive use of different languages: Italian, Sicilian, French, English, Moroccan, Egyptian and Standard Arabic (Lakhous, 2010, pp. 37, 53, 74, 87, 143, 170). Christian/Issa's hybridized language occurs with the juxtaposition of multiple idioms: "non guardare in faccia a nessuno [Italian] e avere il tradimento rint 'e vvene, [Neapolitan] come dicono i napoletani. Però 'un sugnu fisso [Sicilian]. [...] Mi sottopose al suo quiz preferito, quello delle cinque "w": where, when, why, who and what [English]" (Lakhous, 2010, pp. 31). This multilingual intermingling of proverbial and idiomatic expressions – whilst inserting locality in a cross-cultural and global context – signifies Italy's diverse linguistic cartography; furthermore, it also challenges notions of homogeneity of Italian identity, so forcefully advocated by dominant, institutional and official discourses.

Amara Lakhous' novel draws attention to otherness in sameness: the multivocal narratives, the double-naming of each character, along with the linguistic shifts in the text alert to the intercultural embedded in Italy's own social, linguistic and identitarian tissues. Otherness is thus within, rather than in the foreign, beyond the borders; it is to be found in the allegedly homogenous Italianness, within Italy's very social, cultural and identitarian threads. For Parati, destabilizing definitions of Italianness "generate[s] questions and answers that interpret the present multicultural profile of Italy, grounded in continuity with a Mediterranean, already multicultural, past. [...] Literature [...] tells stories that run counter to any homogenizing project and allows the individuation of experiences that are excluded from public political discourse" (Parati, 2005, p. 51). Lakhous' *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* demonstrate this by articulating a series of intercultural and inter-identitarian encounters between 'hosts' and 'guests', challenging dominant discourses of homogeneity and enmeshing the inside and the outside.

'Southern' Women: Internal and External Otherness

Fokkema observes that "there is more cross-cultural intertextuality now than ever before. [...] the creative assimilation of texts and ideas from another culture in new work – indicates an ultimate form of cultural integration, an explicit sign of transcending cultural barriers" (Fokkema, 2011, p. 8). Safia/Sofia's accounts of her past are imbued with intercultural 'lessons'^{vii} in which Italian and Egyptian customs and cultures entwine. Taking the reader back to her life in Egypt as a child and young woman, she tells about the importance of virginity for Islam "an obsession, a sacred thing"^{viii} (Lakhous, 2010, p. 41). Similarly, Geremi's film represents the significance of virginity in post-WWII Sicilian moral codes. When Fefè's cousin, Angela, is suspected to have a lover (her father finds her diary in which she recounts of a romantic and platonic encounter with Fefè), a

midwife is called to validate her purity. Addressed as 'svergognata', shameless, Angela is taken to her bed while the household women enact what looks like a ritual. A bowl of water and white cloths are taken in the room as a stern, old woman, comes in closing the door behind her. Dressed in black, this old, androgynous looking woman is a product of patriarchy, a menacing middle figure who enacts violence on the female body as a social ritual.

This powerful sequence is uncannily echoed in Lakhous' narrative. Safia/Sofia recalls "a toothless old woman, she seemed the incarnation of the fables' evil witch" (Lakhous, 2010, p. 123), who practiced circumcision on young girls in her neighbourhood. This frightening figure was a "specialist in this practice"; Safia/Sofia describes her as "di una durezza incredibile"^{ix} (Lakhous, 2010, p. 123), incredibly harsh. The word 'durezza' also signifies toughness, cruelty, and austerity – Angela's midwife is compellingly recalled in this passage. Safia/Sofia remembers the psychological and physical violence inflicted on her sisters and the traumas left by this practice. Whilst being spared from this violence, she has been haunted by the image of the old, toothless woman, and afflicted by a sense of guilt for having been 'lucky' to escape circumcision.

Lakhous' narrative, through Safia/Sofia's perspective, explores the theme of violence against women as a widespread practice across East and West, South and North. An Italian radio program catches Safia/Sofia's attention as it reveals statistics about the number of women victims of physical or sexual violence in Italy, 6.5 millions (Lakhous, 2010, p. 122). This figure leaves her "senza parole", speechless; she thought that: "women were victims of violence in places stricken by war like Afghanistan or Iraq, in countries where there is racial hatred like in some African or Muslim states, and where ignorance and poverty are widespread. But not in Italy! I mean, Italy is a European country, a Western country, part of the G8, and so on, am I not right?"^x (Lakhous, 2010, p. 123). Safia/Sofia's rhetorical and ironic reflection challenges the dominant and received views of Italy as an advanced, Western, democratic country. The reference to Europe and the G8 signifies Italy's intimate association with the powerful and rich north; further, the unambiguous allusion to its status as a Western country, powerfully articulates the binary relations between war/violence/poverty/Africa and peace/democracy/Italy/Europe. Angela's and Safia/Sofia's past experiences and memories of violence function as backdrop to the theme of violence against women both in the West and elsewhere.

Lakhous' text draws undeniable connections and intercultural paths between contemporary Italy and its 'others' which Safia/Sofia sarcastically groups as 'Afghanistan or Iraq', 'African or Muslim states', places with war and poverty. Whilst hinting at the vague and homogenous labeling of 'others', this reference alerts us to Italy's oblivious attitude to its internal issues. Safia/Sofia's surprise at the content of this radio programme is a metaphorical transposition of Italians' disbelief at how their cultural and social heritage is entwined with its 'others'; how it uncannily resonates with places elsewhere, beyond the Mediterranean. As a founding member of this democratic entity called Europe, Italy perceives itself as far removed from the worlds beyond the safe (southern) frontiers of Fortress Europe. López-Varela Azcárate observes that with the intertextual "the written text can become a contextualization cue in itself; an artefact for crosscultural negotiations" (López-Varela Azcárate, 2011, p. 13); this is indeed the case in *Divorzio*

all'islamica a viale Marconi where the use of intertextuality functions as (inter)cultural mediation.

Safia/Sofia has long and articulate debates about wearing the veil, about the general predicaments of Muslim women being marginalized in their home and rendered invisible, even in public, by their veil. Recalling her first discriminatory experiences and people's "obsessive" gaze, for Safia/Sofia her "veil was like a traffic light where people must stop. That compulsive stop was an ideal moment for people to unload tensions, fears, preoccupations, anxieties, and so on. People needed to unburden themselves"^{xi} (Lakhous, 2010, p. 62). In this passage she critically examines social dynamics (and halts!) around the veil, in contemporary Italy, where the scarfed woman becomes an embodiment of otherness, a visible alien to be scapegoated^{xii}.

These images powerfully echo Germi's film. As Fefè introduces viewers to the social and geographical reality of his village in Sicily, he tells of the "invisible women of Agramonte [who] hid their beauty behind chaste shutters"; and of the "natural reservation of *our* southern women"^{xiii} (Germi, 1961). In this discourse Sicily is placed in the profound 'backward' south of an Italy striving to break through as an advanced, and emancipated Western country whose stories of mass emigration, post-war depression, and colonial enterprise were duly obliterated by the positivist dream of 'development'. This image is in sharp contrast with Safia/Sofia's ironic reference to Italy as a G8 country; as a matter of fact, Italy, in Safia/Sofia's words, "is not too dissimilar to Arab and to third world countries"^{xiv} (Lakhous, 2010, p. 82).

The reference to the subject of women in the 'south' is revisited toward the end of the film by a socialist politician from northern Italy (this can be inferred by his accent) in a speech to Agramonte's villagers: "in your beautiful south it is time to tackle the problem of women's emancipation and to resolve it" (Germi, 1961). This quotation articulates a romanticized, paternalistic vision of the south: the politician fully celebrates Sicily's beauty alongside its women's 'problem' (omitting the fact that in the north of Italy too such 'problem' existed). This rather colonial approach toward Sicily is another reminder of Italy's multiple internal divisions and divisive nature: the country's south holds all the connotations of subalternity. Within this context, Agramonte's women occupy a similar peripheral space to Muslim migrant women, closed behind screens.

This association is rendered even more powerfully in the film by a solicitor's defense speech in court; addressing the judge, he presents the circumstances of his client, Mariannina Terranova, accused of murdering her unfaithful husband: "a poor southern creature in the black shawl, that symbolizes *our*^{xv} women's modesty, her hands clasped in her lap, the lap which God condemns to the blissful torments of maternity" (Germi, 1961). This quotation is packed with patriarchal and orientalist references; whilst the word 'creature' faintly alludes to an animalistic semantic, 'poor' insists on her inferiority and vulnerability. The perfect portrait of a subaltern, the woman in question is shrouded in a black shawl, her visibility obliterated. The possessive adjective 'our' (echoing 'our women' in Fefè's account) signifies ownership; subjugated to patriarchy and to God's will, the Sicilian woman portrayed in this passage embodies a double subaltern in 1960 Italy: female and southerner. Having killed her husband because he 'dishonoured' her, Mariannina's case makes it to national news: "southern honour found its heroin". The rhetoric of this news headline articulates the dichotomic relationship between the richer, more advanced north and the poorer backward south of Italy. Although a national

broadsheet, the paper speaks of a ‘south’ as a distinct entity with its distinct social and cultural heritage, its ‘honour’,^{xvi}.

These examples from the film are paradigmatic instances of ‘otherness’ within ‘sameness’, of Italy’s non-homogenous cultural and national identity. When Fefè manages to achieve his goal and kill his wife, his case too is recorded in the news with a similar orientalist rhetoric: “tragedy of honour in Catania”. Parati points to a significant shift in the dominant rhetoric brought about in the 1980s and 1990s, whereby headlines like “Calabrian kills his wife” or “Sicilian involved in a brawl” were replaced by “Albanian involved in the business of prostitution” or “Moroccans arrested for selling drugs” (Parati, 2005, p. 36). The discourse of discrimination has consistently articulated ‘difference’, what changes is the ‘other’. Italy’s ‘other’ today, the migrant, the Muslim, the Moroccan, etc. is not solely a product of conservative political and legal discourses, but rather a heritage of the country’s longstanding internal otherness. As Parati has it: “[p]ast and present narratives on internal and external otherness propose Italy as a crossroads where difference and the recognition of sameness meet and invade cultural and linguistic territories” (Parati, 2005, p. 37).

Shared Histories as Intercultural Dialogue

Said/Felice in Lakhous’ novel, just like Fefè, concocts and organizes an arrangement for his wife to be with another man. In order to restore his marriage – undone by three repudiations – Said/Felice once again observes Islamic law. For Islam, after three repudiations the divorce is definite; the husband can reclaim his wife only by marrying her again. This can occur after she is married to another Muslim man and then divorced (Lakhous, 2010, p. 84). Thus Said/Felice asks Christian/Issa, his co-worker in the pizzeria, to marry his wife. Once again it is through the ironic use of tropes such as divorce, repudiation and division that texts, languages and cultures enter in dialogue. The machinations surrounding divorce – both Islamic and Italian style – are only a superficial intercultural connection. Indeed, the social rituals surrounding both divorces and Lakhous’ intertextual references to Germi’s film unveil common pasts and uncover shared histories between the southern and northern shores of the Mediterranean.

Digging into his wife’s past, Fefè identifies a former lover, Carmelo Patanè, artist and painter. The revival of Carmelo Patanè in Rosalia’s life – retrieved from her letters stored in an old trunk in the loft – is a metaphor for his ‘resurrection’ in the memory of Agramonte’s community. Indeed, “thought dead in the desert in Africa”, Carmelo’s name figured among those of other fallen soldiers on a monument to commemorate victims of the second world war in the village’s ‘piazza’. His name was subsequently removed when he reappeared in the village. Germi’s film fleetingly refers to Patanè’s predicaments in the El Alamein desert in Egypt in 1942 during a battle between Axis forces, Panzerearmee Afrika and Allied. This short and peripheral sequence, whilst alluding to the marginality of Italy’s colonial enterprise in the country’s consciousness, ‘resurrects’ more than just Carmelo Patanè from the oblivion of the past. Germi’s film brings Africa, in this specific case Egypt, at the heart of Italian social history, and reveals Italy’s multiple others, its skeletons in the closet. The intricate threads of intertextual and intercultural connections woven by Lakhous’ text bring Safia/Sofia’s world closer to Fefè’s, as Egypt’s and Italy’s customs and histories entwine. Amara Lakhous’ novel retrieves Italy’s colonial past (only marginally narrativized in Germi’s film) and draws

attention to the undeniable social and historical proximity to Africa; “[a]s a border area on the fringes of Europe and as a Mediterranean region whose still-recent history is marked by poverty and migration, Italy is often seen, both from a northern and southern perspective, as culturally and even racially closer to Africa than other European countries” (Brancato 2007: 656).

As part of his mission, Christian/Issa shares a flat in Viale Marconi with other migrants. In a dialogue with one of his flatmates, the Moroccan Mohamed, they talk about the brutality of bureaucracy and Mohamed’s anxieties about receiving his “permesso di soggiorno”, leave to remain. Mohammed explores the significance of the word ‘Marocchino’, Moroccan, in the Italian language: “it does not refer to somebody who comes from Morocco. It is an offence, that’s all, like nigger, faggot, bastard...”^{xvii} (Lakhous, 2010, p. 74). The nineties saw the development of a significant migratory route – primarily from Morocco – to Italy. This might account for today’s derogatory use of the term ‘Marocchino’,^{xviii} a homogenizing label for all migrants and ‘others’, as Mohamed observes.

However, the origin of the term dates further back in Italian social history. Drawing on Miriam Mafai’s work, Parati reminds us of the late 1950 and early 1960 economic miracle that occurred in Italy. The country’s financial resurrection was also possible thanks to “southern Italians [who] migrated to the urban Italian north [...] Often called *Marocchini* (Moroccans) at the time, some southern Italians chose to migrate within national boundaries because they were unable to obtain the necessary documentation to expatriate” (Parati, 2005, p. 144). This passage clearly spells out the dynamics of Italy’s internal migration and its long history of discriminatory rhetoric, both linguistic and legal. The alleged homogeneity of Italy’s identity and history is shattered by these stories of othering discourses within the peninsula itself. As Brancato notices, this continues to be the case in Italy today, where “the marginal space to which African immigrants are relegated often coincides with the marginality of underprivileged locals, especially southern Italians” (Brancato, 2007, p. 656).

Mohamed speaks of Italians’ “odio”, hatred for Moroccans, rooted in the second world war, when some Moroccan soldiers, fighting for the Allies, raped Italian women (Lakhous, 2010, p. 74). Thus, ‘Marocchino’ denotes foreign, alien, savage, violent, an exotic and uncivilized other. A parallel between Italy’s past internal migrations and contemporary immigration seems apparent (Parati, 2005, p. 145): today’s ‘Marocchini’ are – literally – Italy’s past ‘others’. A powerful reminder of the country’s migrant history, this passage articulates correspondences between two sets of migrants (from southern Italy yesterday, and from abroad today) who share similar predicaments: issues in acquiring legal residency and civic legitimacy, discriminatory naming, stereotyping, etc.

After speaking to Mohamed, Christian/Issa reflects on these historical events involving Moroccans in Italy during the war – “a taboo in the collective Italian imaginary, despite De Sica’s beautiful film *La Ciociara*” (Lakhous, 2010, p. 74). While yet another intertextual reference (to *La Ciociara*) shakes the grounds of the Italian collective imaginary, Lakhous’ text brings up another obliterated page of Italy’s postcolonial unconscious. Through the use of a Sicilian proverb – “the wolf with a bad conscience thinks the same as it acts”^{xix} (Lakhous, 2010, p. 74) – he observes that Italian soldiers too are guilty of rape in Ethiopia and in Somalia. The proverb, powerfully

alluding to Italy's "bad conscience", functions as a mediating (Sicilian) voice between Italy's and Morocco's histories of brutalities; both practicing violence against women, both pointing the finger at each other, both affected by historical amnesia. Dwelling in the 'centre' and the 'margin', Christian/Issa's double and multifaceted perspective revisits past and present anxieties and prejudices about colonialism and migrations; it offers intercultural mediation through intertextuality and vernacular, proverbial references^{xx}. In fact, for Weir intertextuality "affords the text the ability to remain connected – even if arbitrarily – to the larger historical and social contexts in which it comes into production and/or interacts with its readership" (Weir, 2006, p. 6). In Lakhous' novel, the use of intertextual references, whilst opening up "archived" pages of Italian history, offers numerous examples of intercultural routes/roots among peoples, cultures, languages, between Italy and its 'others'.

Conclusion

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha rhetorically asks: "[h]ow do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities, where despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurate?" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). Homi Bhabha's preoccupation with the 'exchange of values' among groups divided by fears, prejudice and ignorance (about each other) pertains more than ever to our globalized humanity. In contemporary Italy, where new policies are implemented to defend the territory from 'illegal' migrants and Islamic terrorists, the different social and ethnic groups are struggling to enter into dialogue. The urgency to foster intercultural exchanges is key; "[i]ntercultural knowledge reduces anxiety and uncertainty, making the communication process more smooth and successful" (Liu, 2011, p. 25).

As Achille Mbembe observes, "[w]e are thus compelled [...] to pursue the question of all possible conditions of an authentic human encounter. Yet this encounter cannot begin with acute amnesia, [...] this encounter must begin through reciprocal disorientation" (Mbembe, 2011, p. 117). In order to pursue an intercultural 'encounter' it is imperative to rehabilitate the colonial past and to engage with it; thus, the 'reciprocal disorientation' advocated by Mbembe entails a renegotiation of subjectivities. The slippage of self into other, the use of irony, the intertextual references and the recuperation of past histories in Amara Lakhous' *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* 'disorientate' the reader and complicate homogeneous notions of national identity, national history and language. Despite a delayed reception and production of postcolonial texts, postcolonial Italian literature represents an invaluable tool of mediation and dialogue among cultures, people and languages; "[t]he object of postcolonial critique is best described in terms of the *interlacing of histories and the concatenation of distinct worlds*" (Mbembe, 2011, p. 86). Amara Lakhous' *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* 'interlaces' contemporary Italy with its pasts, and 'concatenates' Italy with other worlds beyond its southern frontiers. Lakhous' work offers innovative narratives and verbal strategies of intercultural enunciation which both problematize normative discourses on migration and propose alternative ethics of communication among cultures.

Endnotes

ⁱ “[b]isogna fare un grande sforzo per comunicare. Penso che sia necessario capire il punto di vista degli altri, dobbiamo metterci nei loro panni”. All translations from Italian in Amara Lakhous’ text are my own.

ⁱⁱ The term ‘Afro-Italian’ metaphorically reproduces current geo-political relationships between Africa and Italy: the hyphen keeps Africa away from Italian borders, it stands in between to curb interactions between the two shores, like European border control agency FRONTEX does.

ⁱⁱⁱ Moderate left wing Italian broadsheet *La Repubblica* reports that the second most common surname in Milan is Chinese, as they put it: “l’orientale Hu” [the oriental Hu]; however – the article reassures – no “invasion” of Italy’s demographic records is actually taking place (15 April 2012). Whilst acknowledging a change in the country’s ethnic and social profile, *Repubblica* reproduces in plainly orientalist language the alarmist rhetoric surrounding migration.

^{iv} In this context it is worth thinking about the significance of the ‘colonial language’; is it just the language of the former colonial power in the country of origin (in Lakhous’ case, French)? Is it not also the dominant language in the receiving country in which the migrant is usually treated as a subaltern?

^v *Divorzio all’islamica a viale Marconi* not only narrativizes the lives of ‘foreign’ migrants in Italy, it also forcefully reminds readers about the many Italian migrating abroad. Safia/Sofia’s Italian friend, Giulia, announces that she is moving with her partner to Australia because in Italy “non c’è futuro” [there is no future]; “Gli italiani lasciano l’Italia per cercare fortuna altrove! Ma noi immigrati veniamo qui per lo stesso ed identico motivo” [Italians leave Italy to find better chances elsewhere. But us immigrants come here for the very same reason!] (Lakhous, 2010, pp. 152) This is another instance of shared experiences where differences between Italians and migrants are obliterated.

^{vi} “a Roma sono davvero uno straniero” (Lakhous, 2010, p. 12).

^{vii} Lakhous’ mapping of intercultural routes and dialogues does not fail to explore even the smallest details where ‘North’ and ‘South’ unsurprisingly meet. As Safia/Sofia seeks to escape her husband’s attempts to conceive another child, she adopts “il trucco femminile del mal di testa” [women’s trick of the headache] (Lakhous, 2010, p. 130). This artifice, also employed by Rosalia, now fallen for her old time sweetheart, to deter her husband Fefè, allows both characters to escape marital obligations; moreover, it functions as an empowerment strategy to gain agency in the relationship. Within Lakhous’ text, this trope narrows divisive gaps between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, and identifies common social and behavioral patterns, shared experiences and secrets in the female world.

^{viii} “Un’ossessione, una cosa sacra” (Lakhous, 2010, p. 41).

^{ix} “[u]na vecchietta senza denti, sembrava l’incarnazione della strega cattiva delle fiabe” “una specilaist in materia” (Lakhous, 2010, p. 123).

^x “[I]e donne fossero vittime di violenza nei luoghi di guerra come in Afghanistan o in Iraq, nei paesi dove c’è odio razziale come in alcuni stati africani e musulmani, e dove sono diffuse la povertà e l’ignoranza. Ma non in Italia! Insomma, l’Italia è pur sempre un paese europeo, occidentale, che fa parte del G8, eccetera eccetera, o sbaglio?” (Lakhous, 2010, p. 123).

^{xi} “Il mio velo era come un semaforo davanti al quale la gente deve fermarsi. Quella sosta obbligatoria era il momento ideale per scaricare tensioni, paure, inquietudini, ansia eccetera eccetera. Le persone avevano bisogno di sfogarsi” (Lakhous, 2010, p. 62).

^{xii} Mbembe observes that the “repeated controversies over the Islamic headscarf or the *burkha* are saturated with the kind of orientalist imagery the Said denounced” (Mbembe, 2011, p. 94).

^{xiii} My emphasis.

^{xiv} “L’Italia non è molto dissimile dai paesi arabi e del terzo mondo” (Lakhous, 2010, p. 82).

^{xv} My emphasis.

^{xvi} The notion of honour, “l’onore”, begs for further discussion. Can the subaltern have ‘honour’? The terms seem to appear in a chiasmic relationship.

^{xvii} “non si riferisce a uno che viene dal Marocco. É un’offesa e basta, come negro, frocio, bastardo...” (Lakhous, 2010, p. 74).

^{xviii} Growing up in the south of Italy, I have been used to hear the word ‘Marocchino’ as an accepted and widely used term to signify a black person – regardless of their national, ethnic background – usually a street vendor to be encountered along the beach under the scorching sun of the summer season. This term is employed still today, and often without any recognition or even realization of its homogenizing and discriminatory nature.

^{xix} “U lupu r’a mala coscienza comu opera piensa” (Lakhous, 2010, p. 74).

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