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Literature is language: An interview with Amara Lakhous

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Amara Lakhous, born and raised in Algeria, has had a significant impact on the changing landscape of contemporary Italian letters and cultural production. He is the author of three novels, all of which he has written in both Arabic and Italian. His best known work is the much-acclaimed *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio* (2006)/*Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* (2008), now translated into numerous languages, including French, German and Dutch. Lakhous draws on his position as cultural mediator to elucidate the importance of fiction in today's contentious debates over national identities. In the following interview, he speaks about his relationship to Arabic, Berber and Italian and the place these languages occupy in the conceptualization of his works. He also discusses the craft of writing, irony, politics, his views on Italy and Algeria today, and his latest novel, published in 2010.

Keywords: Amara Lakhous; fiction; language; politics; Mediterranean; Italoophone

Contextual background

Amara Lakhous was born in Algeria in 1970. A Berberophone raised in both Koranic and French schools, his upbringing reflects a life lived in several languages from a very early age. Widely read and acutely aware of the complexities of the human condition, Lakhous relates to the world through writing. An innovative novelist and outspoken journalist, he faced life-threatening conditions during the Algerian civil war of the 1990s. In 1995 a professional opportunity allowed him to leave Algeria for Italy, a country in great political turmoil over the systematic arrival of a growing number of foreigners. Attentive to this issue and driven by the desire to understand an increasingly timely phenomenon, Lakhous devoted his doctoral thesis (at the University of Rome) to an analysis of the condition of Arab Muslim minorities in Italy. Today Lakhous is the author of three novels: *The Bedbugs and the Pirate* (1993), *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* (2006) and *Divorzio all'islamica a Viale Marconi* (2010). He holds a doctoral degree in anthropology, and serves as a cultural mediator in the widest sense of the term.¹ Fluent in Arabic, Berber and French, Lakhous has chosen Italian as his adopted language and, along with Arabic, his chosen literary idiom. Multiple idioms traverse Lakhous's recent novels in subtle but striking and unexpected ways, inviting his readers to act as mediators and to be continually alert to the



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unfixedness of language *tout court*. His novel *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, written in Arabic (2003) and re-written – not translated – in Italian (2006), was an instant success in Italy and one of the first best-selling novels to treat directly issues of racism, provincialism and national identity in contemporary Italian society.

The novel is a tragicomic mystery set in an apartment building located in Piazza Vittorio, one of Rome's most diverse neighborhoods. A murder has occurred in the elevator and each of the residents, in turn, gives their version of the "facts" regarding their whereabouts at the time of the crime. As is the case with some of the most compelling mystery novels, the characters – all of whom are suspects – fascinate, seduce, anger, and intrigue. The quest for "truth" gradually becomes inoperative as different perspectives and positions are brought to the fore. The chapters are divided according to character, each of whom traces his/her origins to different places in Italy and abroad, providing a rich contrapuntal mosaic of voices and reflections on stereotypes, racial profiling, and discrimination.

In a country 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's works forge a space of necessary awareness and dialogue. Over the past 30 years Italy has witnessed a radical demographic change, with ever-increasing arrivals primarily from Eastern Europe, North and West Africa and Asia. According to the International Organization for Migration, immigrants currently account for 7.5% of the population.² Gradually moving from a country of temporary migration to one that has become a final destination for many, Italy is now more than ever in a period of transition, growth and re-definition. On the political side of the spectrum, embracing a new heterogeneity appears increasingly challenging in a climate driven by a hostile conservatism. Out of this embattled situation, however, a new literature has emerged; struggling to find apposite categories for such a body of work, critics have debated the terms Italophone Literature, Italian Literature of Migration, Nascent Italian Literature, and numerous others. Whilst the term Italophone echoes the better known term Francophone – and therefore risks setting up a hierarchical distinction between literature by writers who are "pure" Italians vs everyone else who writes in Italian, as is the case with French and Francophone – the coinage "Italian Literature of Migration" appears inadequate insofar as not all writers under this rubric have themselves migrated, nor do they necessarily all write about the experience of migration. "Nascent Italian Literature" risks infantilizing such works and treating them as yet-to-be-developed, immature products. Amara Lakhous resists such terms, extricating himself, as he says in the following interview, from a postcolonial discourse. He rightly suggests that excessive attention to the conditions of production obscures the aesthetic qualities of his texts.

When asked whether his relationship to language is purely aesthetic, or whether there may be an unconscious political explanation for the choice of Italian and the rejection of French, Lakhous leaves the door open, but ultimately suggests that despite his frequent allusions to political figures and events, he prefers not to combine politics with literature. Rather more striking than this statement, however, is his explanation of the manner in which he crafts his novels. Given that he is plurilingual, and perhaps because irony does not lend itself easily to translation, the way he negotiates different languages while writing is singular and complex. Alongside the practice of integrating Arabic words and structures into his Italian prose (a plurilingual phenomenon reminiscent of Francophone Maghrebi writers as well as several Anglophone Indian writers), Lakhous writes and re-writes his texts in Arabic and Italian. He does not translate between the two languages in the conventional sense, but, in keeping with his role of cultural mediator, adapts each text for its intended readership and

crafts each version of his novel differently with full artistic license and liberty. Our conversation raised interesting questions precisely around the issue of translation, as Lakhous invites us to consider the manifold nuances of what it means to live in different languages, particularly when it comes to writing fiction. Recalling Amedeo, the protagonist of *Clash of Civilizations* (who is himself a translator and who went by the name of Ahmed when he lived in his native Algeria), Lakhous advocates singular modes of expression that at times defy the conventional limits of words. Amedeo howls at the end of each chapter, eliciting in the reader both the recognition of singularity and an uncertainty of meaning. A traveling signifier – the howl – as Lakhous explains in the following interview, contains a multiplicity of references.

Despite his own references to, and echoes of, other writers, Lakhous is not easily assigned to a genre or trend. As has been the case for other authors before him, Lakhous's wish is to be considered as a writer – an original writer, he specifies – not a spokesperson for any one community. As one of his protagonists solemnly remarks in his 2006 novel, one must be able to “free oneself from the chains of identity that lead us to ruin”. Evoking a common problematic of much postcolonial writing, Lakhous is quick to add that identity is not a static, fixed grid, but something that is in constant, differential flux. Keenly cognizant of the potential dangers of espousing a rigid understanding of belonging and identity, Lakhous prefers to take his readers in another direction; despite the gravity of the issues addressed in his works, he underscores the extent to which irony is a fundamental tool for dispelling stereotypes and racism. *Clash of Civilizations* elicits frequent amusement, through the author's tongue-in-cheek treatment of critical matters of discrimination, provincialism and racial profiling, thus effecting a striking poignancy and satisfying Lakhous's desire for originality. Here, and in the title of his next novel *Divorzio all'islamica a Viale Marconi* (a play on words of the classic 1961 Italian comedy, starring Marcello Mastroianni, *Divorzio all'italiana*), his style recalls the distinct trait of Italian-style comedy which skillfully manages to make fun of serious matters. He spoke to me here about the craft of writing, irony, politics, his views on Italy today and his next novel.

This interview, which was undertaken as part of ongoing research for a book on the post-colonial Mediterranean, took place on 2 July 2010 in Rome, Italy, at the Foreign Press Association, an organization with which Lakhous is associated. It was conducted in Italian and then transcribed and translated into English by the interviewer. The format follows a standard question-and-answer model, and the interview was recorded. My aim in interviewing Lakhous was twofold. On the one hand, I sought to understand his decision to write in Italian, given that the prevalent literary languages of writers from the Francophone Maghreb are Arabic and French. On the other hand, I wanted to gain a sense of whether he finds an affinity with Francophone and Italophone writers and/or with a larger Mediterranean ethos. In addition, I wanted to discuss his much-acclaimed work *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*. This led to his discussion of his novel *Divorzio all'islamica a Viale Marconi*, forthcoming at the time of the interview, and published in October 2010.

Claudia Esposito Why did you choose to come to Italy? I ask because the common destination for Francophone Algerian writers seems to be France.

Amara Lakhous Because at that time (I'm talking about 1995), I was working at a radio station in Algiers and like many other journalists and writers who were threatened, I encountered numerous problems. I had the great good fortune to leave Algeria at a time when such a thing was very difficult. I had an Italian friend, Roberto de Angelis, an anthropologist to whom I dedicated my novel – he's a great friend. He invited me to his university

to give a seminar. This was the opportunity to leave. When I arrived, instead of continuing on to France, I stopped in Italy. I stopped there because I had a great great passion for Italian cinema. Even before coming to Italy I had seen Fellini and Visconti. Cinema was very important to me. When I arrived in Rome I said to myself I know French and it would be nice to learn Italian and to watch Italian films in the original. It seems infantile but I really believed in that. Seeing Fellini's films in Italian was a great gift to myself.

CE So you did intend to go to France, or not?

AL No. No my first trip abroad was to Italy. I didn't know France at all. I went to France for the first time only in 1999. And when I got to Paris I said, I'm in Algiers. It feels like Algeria, it's full of Algerians. At that time France was not for me.

CE But your father lived in France, right?

AL Yes, my father worked for Citroën for many years; he was an immigrant in France.

CE You mention in another interview that for those who did not live through the colonial period the French language is something positive and that for you the choice of language is aesthetic and not political. I would say that language always implies social or political consequences. Is your relation to language purely aesthetic? And what is your relationship to French, which I imagine enters into your creative activity, willingly and unwittingly, since you grew up with it?

AL This is quite a difficult theme. Let's try to be clear. My point of departure and one of my points of arrival is to be an original writer. This is my stance. To write in French ... there are many Algerian writers who write in French. Algerian writers who write in Italian are few. Also I continue to write bilingually, in Arabic and Italian. My next novel came out in Arabic the day before yesterday and it will be out in Italian at the end of September and in the United States next year.

CE Same translator and same publisher?

AL Yes. They are two books, like newborn twins, then each follows its own route. My aim is to be an original writer. Algerian writers who write in French ... it has been done. I've followed this theme very closely, the debates continue; they say they haven't been accepted, they feel rejected, some play on this because they find a country and a culture that houses them – France. Since I was born after independence, France did not force me to learn French. Assia Djebar says she writes in French because it is the trophy of colonialism, and she is right. Schools in Arabic were very few and marginalized, and if you wanted a career you had to go to a French school. She is right. But she belongs to another generation. I belong to another generation. There is a whole discourse on the politicization of French by Algerian writers themselves and there is a certain use of nationalism that bothers me – so I extricate myself from this. For me, French is not even a “spoil of war” as Kateb Yacine said, that is still the colonial context; it belongs to that generation. I belong to another generation. For me, French is a language like any other. Thanks to French I discovered Flaubert, who is, for me, one of the most important writers. It is a language like other languages. In my case, I prefer Italian to French, for aesthetic and creative reasons, and also to extricate myself from this postcolonial discourse.

CE So the idea of extricating oneself, of a relationship that can be suffocating ...

AL I extricate myself. There is a Cameroonian writer, Calixthe Beyala, whom I met at a festival in Algiers two years ago maybe.³ I reminded her that many years ago she had come to Rome where she had been asked about the issue of French. She answered “La France a colonisé mon pays, moi je colonise le français” [France colonized my country, I colonize French]. I don’t take this lightly but for me writing is an act of love, of creativity, of joy, of happiness. If I wanted to fight then I might as well do politics rather than literature.

CE Yes, it’s a difficult topic because French is so politicized when talking about Algeria, it’s virtually impossible to escape this.

AL Right, and even the French politicize.

CE Speaking of Francophonie and the label “Francophone”, there is now a parallel phenomenon that has emerged, that of Italophone writers, a term that is derived from “Francophone”. Do you feel any type of belonging to a community of writers? Is there is a relationship among writers, like you, who write in Italian, who have a common cultural background and who avoid a direct relationship with France?

AL No, I say this very sincerely, I don’t feel any belonging in that sense. Because things are not very clear. We are in the early stages and, as I’ve often said, I am still a minor when it comes to Italian literature. I have lived in Italy for 14 years. When they compared me to Gadda, I said you are crazy, this is folly, these people must be reported!⁴ We are in the early stages. Many writers, many of whom are friends, don’t have clear ideas about their literary projects.

CE Is that important when one is a writer?

AL The point is continuity. If one writes a book in six or ten years it doesn’t work. Literature is serious. I don’t mean one has to publish a book a year but there is no continuity, first of all. Second of all, there is more sociology than literature. In the forums in which I participate or when I’m invited to speak, I devote a lot of time to language, because literature is language. This way, I try to explain what it means to me to write in Italian, since I am also an Arabophone writer. I arabize Italian and italianize Arabic. This is an advantage. Even when I write in Arabic, my style is different from other [Arabic] writers.

CE Do you do this on purpose or does it happen naturally? I imagine that after so many years here there must be quite a sense of spontaneity with Italian.

AL Yes, absolutely. I never use a dictionary when I write. Right now I’m reading Atiq Rahimi’s book [*Pietra di Pazienza*].⁵ On the back cover it says he wrote the book in French with a dictionary by his side. I never use a dictionary when I write, it has to be spontaneous. I don’t search for the perfect word. If I don’t understand a word, it’s useless to use it. For me, spontaneity is vital. I wrote *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* in Arabic first and then I re-wrote it in Italian, I didn’t translate it – in fact I betrayed it.⁶ The new book is also two books that were born at the same moment. I have a very professional methodology when I write – professional in the sense that before I write a novel I do a lot

of research. For example for *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* I lived in Piazza Vittorio for six years; I observed, I studied, and I did my doctoral thesis on that cultural context. The new novel is set in another neighborhood in Rome where there is an Arab community, and it is the result of my doctoral thesis. Instead of publishing an essay I'm publishing a novel. So if you ask me about a certain character I can tell you everything. This is my methodology, the way I work. After I've done research, I define and develop the characters. For example for the character of the Neapolitan concierge, Benedetta Esposito, I went and talked to many concierges.

CE So you do fieldwork.

AL Yes. When I have all this material, I define the plot. It's here that a sort of cinematographic component comes in. What is this novel about? There's a plot, around the plot I build the characters. These characters are then described, how old they are, their vices, their virtues. I paste these things on my closet and look at them every day. They have to be present. Then I do the index, how the novel is divided – a bit like the construction of a house, how many rooms there will be, in other words how many chapters, and when this is clear I start writing. I close myself in. I wrote this new novel in Italian. When I finished I said now I'm going to write it in Arabic.

CE The opposite, then, of *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* that was first written in Arabic and then re-written in Italian.

AL Yes. I took a filesheet, I divided it in two columns, the Arabic text on one side, the Italian on the other. Then I started re-writing it, and there I have a trace. For example, let's say my characters are at a bar having a coffee: I re-write – in Arabic I write they are at the bar having a coffee then at some point I lose myself in the text. If a phrase comes to me I add it. While I re-write I see that there are things I want to add in the Italian text, I switch the keyboard of my computer from Arabic to Italian and I go to the Italian text. Then I go back to the Arabic text and continue to work. These two texts, these two languages, look at each other. When I have reached the end, I separate them, you go your way, you go the other – and give them different titles. I changed a few of the characters' names, in Arabic they have one name, in Italian another ...

CE Why?

AL I'm not a translator, and not being a translator I can do what I want. For example, I have two characters, one who has a big nose and the other has a scar on his forehead. In Arabic one has a big nose, the other is bald.

CE Just like that, to make a change?

AL It came to me like that. At that moment I saw him as bald. If you look at the translation you won't find anything. There is no translation, I don't do translation.

CE Forgive me if I insist on this question of French but since you “translate” between two languages, why not a French version, why not three languages?

AL I might do it in Berber. Because I am Berber. In the future I hope to do it in Berber. In French they are doing it and it has been done.

CE It seems to me that there is a bit of resistance though, or not?

AL On my part? No. That has nothing to do with it. Time is short. If I do it in French I would just be showing off my muscles and I don't want to do that, that doesn't interest me. The first language my novel was translated into was French. My novel came out in 2003 in Arabic, I re-write it in Italian and it comes out in 2006, it gets translated from the Italian into French, then into English, German, always from the Italian. When it came out in France an Algerian publisher, Barzakh, went to Actes Sud and bought the translation rights. They published it in Algeria, they gave me the *Premio per i librai* [booksellers' prize]. There was a heated debate about it because the book had come out in Arabic. They said in the end the booksellers are Francophone. They had me on TV and I told them that I have no problem. They asked me what it means to be an Italophone writer. I explained that I find my way, my originality in these two groups. Even my style of writing in Arabic is now Italianized. I fecundate Arabic and I fecundate Italian. I think this is my path if I want to do something interesting.

CE I read that you see similarities between Algiers and Rome, that walking in Piazza Vittorio reminds you of the markets in Algiers.

AL Absolutely.

CE In *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* your main character goes to the Mamertino prison in Rome where Jugurtha is buried. From a historical point of view, there have been strong influences and deep relations between Italy and North Africa, ties that have existed for a long time. There is a rather complex debate around the idea of a Mediterranean entity, debates about it being a common space or a space of conflict. What is it for you? Is there such a thing as a Mediterranean ethos?

AL Yes. It is particularly evident when one travels a lot. When I went to London what I really missed was extra virgin olive oil. They would give me this butter – breakfast, lunch and dinner – that was horrible. I'll tell you an anecdote. In 2002 my mother came to visit me for the first time. It was her first trip abroad. When she arrived she was very angry with herself because every year she harvests olives, she is an expert in oil. She was angry that she had not brought oil with her. My brother and I told her we have oil here, but it's not like ours she insisted. Then she tasted it and agreed that it is as good as the one in Algeria. From that day on she has never spoken of oil. Food and the climate are strong ties in the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean mentality. For better and for worse – it is not all good. In Naples, in Algiers, there is a lack of legality and the constant attempt to cheat others. There is diffidence in institutions; the state is an enemy, so in this sense I think there is an identitarian context that is common.

CE You studied philosophy in Algeria right?

AL Yes.

CE Is there a relationship between literature and philosophy, for you?

AL Yes, absolutely, for me this is important. The choices I made were not arbitrary. My great good fortune is that of having had an objective from the very beginning. Around the age of 13, 14, I knew I wanted to be a writer. To achieve this goal I gave myself other objectives,

one of which was to build a solid base of thought. I thought philosophy would be ideal. After having studied philosophy, after reflecting on the big issues of humanity, life, etcetera, I slowly came to anthropology, and also journalism, but always with the idea of becoming a good novelist.

CE And between literature and politics?

AL I tend not to mix the two. I think that writers who use their characters to express a political position are often mediocre. This is a limitation of Arabic literature. Unfortunately in the Arab world there is no democratic space where writers can write their thoughts freely, so many writers use literature to escape and the end product is impoverished. When it is translated it doesn't hold up. In a way it is like when one translates a political speech. You translate a political speech by Berlusconi into French or English and it has no value. Or a speech by Sarkozy – because often it is linked to a context, the French one in this case, and has limited importance. When I have to express my opinions I write an article – against the Bossi-Fini law, for example – but when I write literature I try to not mix these levels. I can't say that in my novels there is nothing about politics but I proceed with much caution ...

CE And irony, right?

AL Yes. And another thing; I always try to use an interrogative form, to not proclaim certainties.

CE I wanted to ask you about a couple of details in your novel. I like the construction around the howl and I wonder where it comes from and what it means. Reading between the lines it seems to be an expression of happiness, of exile, but also reminiscent of the *zaghariid*, it seems to be tied to many things.⁷

AL It is all of these things.

CE Is there a specific reason for this?

AL The howl is a metaphor of Rome, of the wolf. And as you rightly said it is a cry of joy, of pain and of the condition of exile and solitude. It is a mysterious howl because it also belongs to the night. It's all of this.

CE The novel ends with an invocation to Shahrayar and the story of *A Thousand and One Nights*. Why this ending? Why this image and this very typical, almost standard Arabic reference?

AL Because to narrate is a way to survive – the field of psychology says this too. This is why women are more mature I think. Men are more prone to keeping things in, so the comparison with Amedeo and Sherazade is justified; by narrating their story they are both able to survive.

CE And to give meaning to life?

AL To give meaning to life and then to try to reflect on the things that happened and not keep them in. So they save themselves thanks to narration and storytelling.

CE Is this also your story?

AL Certainly that is part of it. It's not by chance that Algeria appears in the book.

CE But the importance of narrating, storytelling ...

AL Of putting things in order. Yes. But not only. In the next novel my literary approach is more clear and it is deeper because there is irony, black humor. There is a lot of self-irony. When a world that suffocates us is so irrational – if there is nothing rational – there is no way to face it rationally. But we have irony and the possibility of sacralizing. It is a world that is full of certainties that are ...

CE Transient, ephemeral.

AL Yes, so we come with irony and find difficulty when it comes to identity. Who is Italian? Someone who has an Italian passport? In Brazil and Argentina there are people who have an Italian passport and who don't speak Italian and who have perhaps never lived in Italy. Are they Italian? 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. Because these certainly aren't certainties.

CE That is one of the biggest advantages of literature, to be able to contrast what we see in the media. The categories of “orient” and “occident”, the clash of civilizations, are fictions, don't you think?

AL Yes. Because when you talk about clash of civilizations – let's try not to be hypocritical – a clash of civilizations means the western world on one side and the Muslim world on the other. This so-called clash is based on two falsehoods because on the one hand the West is one block and on the other the Muslim world is one block. The Muslim world? In Saudi Arabia women can't drive but in Tunisia there is a family code law that prohibits polygamy, repudiation, and so on. And the West – take Holland for example, where they believe in euthanasia, gay marriage and countries like Spain where the Catholic Church is on the same page as Saudi Arabia when it comes to the family code; take the Pope and the head of Saudi Arabia and what do you find? You find: one, let's put the women aside, they can't be priests. Two, they can't have an abortion, or homosexual relations. They are on the same page. It's useless to face the clash of civilizations rationally. Civilizations don't clash, ignorant people clash.

CE You know Edward Said's work, right? He responded to Huntington's theory with an article entitled the “Clash of Ignorance”, which reminds me of what you're saying.

AL Yes, I've read it. When I wrote *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* I said to myself everyone is talking about a clash of civilizations, I too am going to create a clash of civilizations, but over an elevator. I can't use this title in Arabic. And remember I come from a cinematic influence, I like these long titles a lot. There is another title, by a playwright from the 1970s, about revolutions. At that time there was a lot of talk about revolutions, students wanted to revolt, workers wanted to revolt, everyone wanted to have a revolution. He wrote a play called “the revolution is here and I haven't gotten dressed yet”. I find this brilliant, it's ironic. It is here and I haven't gotten dressed yet.

CE Have you ever thought of making films?

AL Yes, I'd love to. I consider myself a failed cinéaste.

CE There's still time.

AL But I think I've found my element in the novel even though I try to come close to cinema here and there.

CE I haven't seen the film based on your book.

AL Unfortunately it hasn't been widely distributed.

CE What was your reaction to it?

AL Overall, positive. Also because there are very few films in Italy. It's different from the book. They changed and added some of the characters. The story takes a bit of a different shape. While my novel is humorous, the film is dramatic. I think that it is wrong to dramatize themes of immigration. Others have done it, people don't care. It is now a condition of society – even in Algeria and the Arab world we imitate the worst – consumerism – and we are also becoming an egotistical society. So if you tell the “story of an immigrant”, he arrived, they treated him badly, then he cried ... no one cares. This is pretty much the reaction. So it is counterproductive. But if you use irony, you shake things up, move things around. I think this is more productive.

CE How do you maintain your optimism?

AL I'm not optimistic.

CE Then your sense of tolerance. I can't imagine that your transition here was without its difficulties.

AL Of course. Let me explain. When I decided to study philosophy, even though I already had literature in mind, I had the presumption to think that I would understand the world rationally. When I started studying I realized it wasn't like that. As the years went on I realized that there are many things that I would become insane over if I try to understand them rationally. Let's take the case of Berlusconi. Can we understand this rationally? One, does it seem rational or logical that a head of government is the richest man in the country? Two, that he owns half of the mass media and still controls the other half? That he has the biggest publishing house, has newspapers, magazines, television? And not only that. When there is a scandal, in any other country the head of state resigns. He sleeps with women, does he then compensate them with jewels, villas, cars? No, instead he puts them in parliament. Is this logical? It goes beyond rationality. This is Berlusconi but look at other people – I've heard people on the bus saying “lucky him, at this age he can do all these things”. It's not possible. I have to use irony. When people talk about Oriana Fallaci ... I like her. She makes me laugh. Often I confuse her with Sabrina Guzzanti⁸ because of the things she says. There is no rationality. I make fun of her. My irony is born from a strong sense of pessimism – pessimism towards reason. Rationally I know that they can't say certain things. So only irony is left. I like Roberto Calderoli.⁹

CE You like Calderoli? I take it this is ironic.

AL He makes me laugh. He came here [to the Press Association] once. I was happy to hear that he was coming and I sat in the front row like an adolescent with a pop-star. When it came time for questions, I asked him a question. You have to know that he had proclaimed that whoever has a pig should take it to wherever a Muslim wants to build a mosque so that the space will become impure for him. I said I will lend you my pig. This is funny. Water cleans, right? If Calderoli's pig comes along, one can clean the space with water ... but he was so convinced of his idea. He and his friends from the Northern League are convinced that Muslims are all stupid, all they need is a pig. I was so fascinated by this that I asked "can you tell me why you use this pig, why you bother this animal?" He answered I do this to defend my identity. So I said if an identity needs a pig in order to be defended something is wrong. He smiled at me, he looks like cat. I had a good laugh; defending one's identity with a pig, it's fantastic. This is the discourse. In Algeria it's the same. When you reach such levels of irrationality and absurdity, what's left?

CE I wonder if you have this same feeling towards similar positions from which you fled. Here in Italy you are able to maintain a certain ironic distance but I imagine that in Algeria it must have been different and perhaps more difficult to see or use irony?

AL Obviously as the years have passed I have matured but the more time passes, the more convinced I am. A few months ago I went back to Algeria. In Algiers there is a new Chinese neighborhood. There are clashes between those who lived there before and the Chinese. I went to see the reactions of the Algerians: "these people eat cat and dog meat, they don't respect our traditions". I was laughing, I've heard this before, I said to myself. This is why I said earlier that it is the negative things that get imitated. I'm sure that the things that I write today on Italy will be relevant in ten years. I am sure about this.

CE Do you still publish articles in Algeria?

AL No, in these last years I've decided to dedicate myself to writing literature.

CE Can you talk about your next novel?

AL *Divorzio all'isламica a Viale Marconi*.

CE A word play on *Divorzio all'Italiana* [the film, *Divorce Italian Style*].

AL Yes. It is set on Viale Marconi, very close to the Viale Trastevere station, where there is an Arab-Muslim community and many Egyptians. The novel is set in 2005, so after the bombings in Madrid and London, in that alarmist climate where they said it was simply a question of time, of days. It was assumed that there would be a bombing. There are two protagonists, an Egyptian woman who wears the headscarf and who says that when she walks around people stare at her; she asks herself whether she is naked. She becomes, for me, an important observer. In the novel she comments on her culture of origin, she speaks of circumcision, divorce, of the fact that in Islam religious rites are the same for men and women. It's not as if women pray ten times a day and men five. But the *rights* are different. She starts realizing this because she is in a new context. Then

there is a young man who is of Sicilian origin who is spied on by the Italian secret service because they think he is Tunisian, since he speaks Arabic perfectly. There are two stories. The novel begins with the Italian secret service receiving a report that there is a plot to bomb Viale Marconi. In order to understand what's going on, they begin spying on this Tunisian. So in he comes and starts telling his story from inside. At one point the two stories meet.

CE So place plays an important role for you. In *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* there's Piazza Vittorio, here it's Viale Marconi.

AL Yes, very important. A place becomes a real protagonist. When I said that my immigrant writer friends don't have conceptuality, I meant it in the sense that I have a project and it's that of creating continuity, starting with places like Piazza Vittorio, Viale Marconi. Maybe I'll go to Paris, maybe Berlin, maybe New York, ties with place, with a neighborhood, are important.

CE Lastly, can you tell me about your doctoral research?

AL Yes, it was about the first generation of Muslim Arab immigrants in Italy. The idea was very simple: there are immigrants who come from countries in which they were part of the majority, be it religious, cultural or other. When they arrive in a different country, like Italy, they become part of the minority, so they go from majority to minority. While the mass media, politicians, the Northern League for example, see them as a threat and potential terrorists, I studied them, did field work, and discovered that in this condition of minority, extraordinary solutions emerge. There are new questions. When you belong to the majority you don't need to ask yourself many questions, everything is given. When you move, you have to re-define your priorities, your needs, re-formulate your questions and find new solutions. I found some very interesting solutions. If you Google my name and the weekly magazine *L'internazionale* you'll find six articles I wrote that were based on these studies.

CE How did you decide to do a doctorate?

AL I wanted to write something that makes sense ... I don't believe in writers like Bukowski who drink to write. Perhaps a poet can do this ...

CE Rimbaud ...

AL Or the Beat Generation. But instead of publishing my doctoral thesis as an essay, I published a novel. Before writing I have to do research, I have to study, talk to people, ask, interview. This is how I write.

Notes

1. *Le cimici e il pirata* [Bedbugs and the Pirate] (Rome: Arlem, 1999); *Scontro di Civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* (Rome: E/O, 2006); and *Divorzio all'islamica a Viale Marconi* (Rome: E/O, 2010). An Arabic edition of *Divorzio all'islamica* was published in Beirut several months before the Italian edition, under the title *Al-Qahira as-saghira* [Little Cairo].
2. International Organization for Migration, available (<http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/activities/pid/835>) (accessed 2 December 2010).

3. Calixthe Beyala (b. 1961) is a well-known, prize-winning, prolific author who writes in French and who was at the center of a plagiarism scandal in France in 1996.
4. Carlo Emilio Gadda (1893–1973) was a renowned Italian writer most celebrated for his groundbreaking novel *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de Via Merulana* (1957), which emphasizes linguistic play and multiple Italian dialects.
5. Lakhous is referring to *Stone of Patience* by Atiq Rahimi, originally written in French under the title *Syngué Sabour: Pierre de Patience* (Paris: POL, 2008).
6. In the original “Non l’ho tradotto, l’ho tradito”, a reference to the aphorism *traduttore traditore* that plays on the homonymy, in Italian, between the words translator and traitor.
7. *Zagharid* is the Arabic word for the cries of elation and/or pain of Arab women. The word appears several times in Lakhous’s novel.
8. Sabrina Guzzanti is a comic actress and film director best known for daring political satire.
9. Roberto Calderoli is a member of the Italian senate and a leader of the right-wing Northern League political party.

Notes on contributor

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