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Abstract :

The particularity of navigating a life on the soil of a new territory has inevitably made its way to world literature, enriching it with new theories, themes and literary devices. Amara Lakhous' Divorce Islamic Style, as a representative work of immigrant literature, offers a miniature picture of the struggles and the challenges that immigrant minorities generally face. In the prism of the theory of ultraminor literature, the paper explores the major concerns of immigrants as Amara Lakhous renders them in the novel. The paper approaches the text thematically, exploring Lakhous' envisioning of the future of such minorities in a polyglot Italy. Eventually, Lakhous reinforces the beauty of a cultural assemblage that feeds on co-existence and embracing otherness. Lakhous thoroughly exposes the fact that such a cultural plurality is essentially the norm in world history of nations, negating the existence of one superior, major race that makes a nation.

Keywords: Arab Minorities, Amara Lakhous, Divorce Islamic Style, Ultraminor literature, Writing G-local.

ملخص

إن خصوصية الإبحار في الحياة على أرض جديدة قد شقت طريقها إلى الأدب العالمي بطريقة حتمية، وأثرته بنظريات وموضوعات وأدوات أدبية جديدة. تقدم رواية "طلاق على الطريقة الإسلامية" لعمارة لخصوص، باعتبارها عملاً تمثيلاً لأدب المهاجرين، صورة مصغرة عن الصراعات والتحديات التي تواجهها الأقليات المهاجرة عموماً. ومن منظور نظرية أدب الترامينور، تستكشف الورقة البحثية المشاكل الجوهرية للمهاجرين كما يقدمها عمارة لخصوص في الرواية. وتقارب الورقة النص من الناحية الموضوعية، مستكشفة تصور لخصوص لمستقبل هذه الأقليات في إيطاليا بوصفها وعاء ثقافياً متنوعاً. في نهاية المطاف، يعزز لخصوص جمال التجمع الثقافي الذي يتغذى على التعايش واحتضان الآخر. ويكشف بدقة حقيقة أن مثل هذا التعدد الثقافي هو القاعدة الأساسية في تاريخ الأمم، نافياً وجود عرق واحد متفوق وكبير يصنع أمة.

كلمات مفتاحية: الأقليات العربية، عمارة لخصوص رواية طلاق على النمط الإسلامي، أدب الترامينور، كتابات

العالمي-المحلي

1. Introduction:

Navigating a life on the soil of a new country generally tests the immigrants' ability to cope with the requirements and the cultural dictations of the new community. This alone poses an array of challenges that are, most of the time, so hard to come conceive and surpass. Authors, who have been through this experience, have always opted for different tools and literary devices to voice their fears and concerns about their present and future conditions. The Algerian born Amara Lakhous, as an instance, has chosen a very witty way to question some of the hegemonic cultures and ideologies; he employs humor as a literary device to mitigate the severity of immigrants' challenges. Such a device becomes a site of liberation from all social, national, political and cultural constraints that have long been associated with immigrants. Lakhous' choice of Flaino's saying as an epigraph to his novel in which he says, "as for my irony, or, if we prefer, satire, I think it frees me from everything that irritates me, oppresses me, offends me, makes me feel uneasy in society," (2012) further illustrates Lakhous' literary identity.

Divorce Islamic Style is a dialogic narrative that entails two narrative voices; an Italian man, Christian/ Issa, and an Egyptian woman, Safia/Sofia. The narrative delves deeply into the themes of struggle and female empowerment, exemplified by the character of Safia. Through Safia, Lakhous uncovers the domestic life of Arab Muslims and their daily conflicts. On the other hand, Christian Issa's narrative represents the ideologies of Europeans and their attempts to spread more control among minorities. Issa's politically oriented discourse coalesces with Safia's personal accounts, making the plot a polyphonic interplay filled with humor and unsure, deferred truths. The research problem of this paper lies in the Arab minorities struggle on the Italian lands, at least, at two levels: structural and ideological to be able to create a space proper to their different experience and distinct culture. The paper then posits a number of questions, which are:

1. How do immigrant men struggle structurally and ideologically?
2. What about women?
3. What is the significance of community and minority in the writing g-local?

The paper aims to shed light on the challenges that face Arab minorities that live on the Italian territory from the viewpoint of a European and an Arab. Moreover, it explains the power of translation in making the local globally

heard. Eventually, the paper explores Lakhous' envisioning of the future of such minorities in a polyglot Italy.

2. Review of the Related Literature:

Immigrants have ceaselessly shaped and reshaped the growth of nations. The geographical positions of some countries especially has always been more prone to socio-economic and cultural shifts. Italy, as one of such countries, has ever since attracted thousands of immigrants from Europe and northern Africa. In other words, Italy is a salad pot known for its multi-ethnic inhabitants (Ortan et. al., 2021, p. 1). However, after its unification, Italy opted for whitening its citizens through copying Northern European countries and making it less southern (Ortan et. al., 2021, p. 2). Modern Italy is far more complex in terms of its diverse cultures that can only be addressed in plural, questioning their future.

One of the first critics who advocate Lakhous' sense of transnationalism is Frederica Mazzara. The latter (2012) discerns that the works of Lakhous transgress the bounded Italian national culture and assumes that there is a possibility to talk about "a Mediterranean alternative" in a cultural and literary horizon in his works. In "Crimes of Diction: Language and National Belonging in the Fiction of Amara Lakhous", Valeria McGuire (2015) argues that Lakhous' novels, namely *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator at Piazza Vittoria* and *Divorce Islamic Style*, entail a structure that decenters the role of the author and this makes both novels highly polyphonic. In other words, Lakhous adopts multiple narrators within the same plot whose narratives clash and blend, deferring the existence of a single author.

In "Linguistic Encounters Now and Then: Amara Lakhous and Tahar Lamri engage in the Debate on (Dis) United Italy," Lorenzo and Polina (2012) investigate the integration of Italian dialect in two literary written by two major Italophone authors. in addition, Bougherira H. and Bougherira M. (2024), in "An Image of Arab Minorities: The Myth of the City of Multiplicity in Amara Lakhous' *Divorce Islamic Style* (2012)," contend that *Divorce Islamic Style* is replete with instances of discrimination, reflecting current patterns of categorization and generalization associated with immigrants, in general and specifically the Arab Muslim community living in Italy. Lakhous grapples with a very elastic conceptualization of identity that undermines the essence of prejudice, bringing about a beyond-stereotyping philosophy.

In *Divorce Islamic Style*, Lakhous adopts one type of humor called hyperbole to render his conceptualization of the immigrant issues. In the novel, while a Muslim family debates its end into a divorce in an Islamic way, the prejudiced powers give it a political dimension and make it rather a terrorist plan. Such an exaggeration unravels a bunch of racial tensions between Islam and the West (Gerrand, 2009). The story from beginning to end is a lie but what lies in between is ironically so telling of how Italians treat and mistreat immigrant minorities. Hence, Lakhous does not only evoke or question such prejudices, but offers an alternative conceptualization of what identity is whereby the sense of race dissolves.

This paper enriches the already-existing body of knowledge written on Lakhous and *Divorce Islamic Style* with a fresh perspective of the Ultraminor that no paper has grappled with before.

3. Theoretical Framework and Approach:

In the prism of the theory of Ultraminor literature, the paper explores the major concerns of immigrants as Amara Lakhous renders them in his novel, *Divorce Islamic Style*. The paper approaches the text thematically, shedding light on the main ideas related to the framework of the Ultraminor. To begin with, the Ultraminor, by definition, is a school of thought that studies certain literary cases of minorities. Ultra, in this case, represents smaller spaces than the minor ones. That is to say, the evolution of this frame of reference owes origin to the failure of minor literature to give a more accurate and precise representation of minor cultural spaces. The Ultraminor henceforth looks beyond “minor literature and culture as well” (Moberg and Damrosch, 2023, p. 133). This theory is still new and theorists are increasingly enriching it.

According to Moberg and Damrosch (2023), in their “Introduction: Defining the Ultraminor”, the excessive resort to comparative approaches to the literary texts could shed light on the existence of a richer body of literary texts that do not necessarily belong to the canonical masterpieces (p. 133). Worth noting, the growth of the Ultraminor is indebted to the 1970’s minor literature as developed by Deleuze and Guattari. This concept goes hand in hand with studies of minority literature as compared to the center, like in postcolonial studies or any other genre where the dichotomy between periphery and center is made obvious. On the contrary, the Ultraminor is meant to study and explore other experiences of otherness and more relationships with major cultures in more

accurate ways. Andrea Batchner (2023) further explains, “The relations of the Ultraminor no longer address the next scalar level, but can move between different scales” (p. 134). That is to say, the relationship among the major, the minor and the Ultraminor, as concepts, is relational; it is prone to change not only within the same state, but within the same state over time. Whenever a state changes, it either grows into an empire or the reverse, its literary productions and their significance change accordingly.

Community as the center of Ultraminor literature subverts the European concentration on individuality. The age of enlightenment has long favored and put above anything else the individual’s perceptions, desires, and will. Even in literature, modern writers have constantly conveyed implicit and explicit messages of individual powers and freedoms. Immigrant literature, on the other hand, does not really idealize the individual as much as the community. In a context of minority, the individual is not the locus of power. Nevertheless, immigrant literature tends to stress the fact that generally human beings are inevitably interconnected and thus reinforces it. That is why immigrant literature never accentuate the role of the individual and rather opts for more collective enunciations.

The identification of the Ultraminor community better goes beyond the demographical aspect of population. In the case of smaller states, like Italy, the Scandinavian and South American Isles, an array of other factors can be taken into account to identify majority and minority groups, such as level of trade and land area just to name a few (Moberg and Damrosch, 2023, p. 134). Franco Moretti (2023) notes, “size is seldom just a size” (p. 134). In other words, the size of population automatically influences ‘the structure’. The latter changes in relation to the size of population; if it grows or declines. The smaller Ultraminor spaces are, the more filled they are with handicaps and systemic lack of capacity either in time or in space. In other words, an avalanche of hurdles and limitations control the lives of immigrants such as housing, health care, cultural barriers and hostility. When they live in groups, they become subject to more obstacles of organization, sleeping patterns, cleanliness, shower times, privacy and so on and so forth. That is why one of the major factors that define the Ultraminor is space. Ultraminor spaces are basically small capitals, outright islands and ethnic enclaves.

Unlike minor literature, Ultraminor literature does not seek to deterritorialize a certain language for the sake of voicing the unvoiced to write

back or subvert grand-narratives. Ultraminor literature aims at giving birth to or supporting the growth of a linguistically small community based in a given territory” (Moberg and Damrosch, 2023, p.134). The Ultraminor celebrates some less-used and less-translated languages and supports the circulation of one literary work from one language to the other.

Critics could highlight the theory’s absorption in the old world order of center and periphery or simply major and minor. In a highly multicultural world, the theory has come to reinforce a traditional sense of division and subordination that the postmodern world no longer celebrates. One of the critics, Diana Roig-Sanz (2022), has come up with a new coinage “the global minor” which stands for, “A transit zone in which “peripheral” literatures interact and cross-cultural contacts are set in motion. Indeed, the “minor” may involve many border-transgressing themes, but the translation of “minorities” has mainly been studied from a national point of view, and less so from trans-regional and global perspectives” (p. 648). This actually demonstrates the value that translation may add to a literary work. By traveling from one linguistic context to the other, the literary text increases its chances of recognition and literary merit. Roig-Sanz adds, the “global minor” is neither global nor purely local. It is based on relations that may be more horizontal than vertical, in comparison to the center-periphery model. (Roig-Sanz, 2022, p. 648). This is to explain the structure of the g-local; once the text is out of its local borders, it is global and once it is global, it synchronizes with the center that hypothetically sheds its self-proclaimed supremacy.

The importance of translation lies in the fact that it open doors of other communities of readers and thus allows the text to circulate and gain fame and significance. A literary work, written in the Italian language, for instance, confines to the speakers of Italian language, which is not considered as one of the most spoken languages in the world. Once this same work gets translated to one of the world’s major languages, the work will automatically voice the experience to more people and the more it speaks to other experiences of the same sort, the more value it gains. The value of a literary work is so dependent on language; numerous literary works have seen light when they got translated to one or more world languages.

4. *Ultraminor Community, Space and Language in Divorce Islamic Style*

According to the elaborated concepts of Ultraminor literature, what makes *Divorce Islamic Style* a work of Ultraminor is then its focus on a community. Despite the fact that Lakhous opts for two different narrators to unravel the plot, the focus is not on the individual characters; it is rather on the community they both live in. The novel portrays a community of Arab Muslims, namely Egyptians, who live on the Italian territory. This community of Egyptian Muslims has successfully transformed Viale Macroni into a “little Cairo” where they maintain the same order of things. First, they have opted for the same social orders where men are superior to women. They also have transported their customs, traditions, fears and hopes to the new territory like when they play oriental music in public coffee shops and set Arab TV channels like al-Djazeera in the background, not caring about non-Arab clients. More importantly, they uphold to the same religious practices especially on Fridays; they close shops, go to the mosque in groups...etc. Lakhous’ portrayal of this community’s transfer of the Arabic Islamic culture does not mean that this community is unable to adapt to the requirement of the new culture, but stresses the fact that even the smallest of areas is hybrid and hosts a plurality of cultures. Lakhous’ focus on the struggle is entrenched in his choice of a realist mode of literary expression as the message he wants to convey goes beyond the struggle itself.

The Italian narrator Christian Issa who fakes being an immigrant becomes like a camera eye that exposes the life of immigrants especially in the apartment where they live together. A majority of Egyptians and a minority of Senegalese, Moroccans and a Bangladeshi inhabit one single apartment in Little Cairo; the apartment of Muslim tenants. According to Christian Issa, the male narrator, all immigrants go for dormitories of 12 up to 20 people instead of single rooms as they all generally suffer from poverty. They deal with very materialistic landowners who consider every immigrant as a project of a new trip. In the apartment in Little Cairo, Christian Issa, like all immigrants there, fails to cope with the utter absence of privacy, paralleled with an urgent need to change the sleeping patterns. In his own terms, “the apartment is like an emergency room” (Lakhous, 2012, p. 65). The emergency room with highly established hierarchies and unwritten rules is basically under the control of the minority of Egyptians who ironically become a majority that screws other minorities. In other words, Egyptians form a minority when compared to Italians, however, when compared to minorities; they are a majority that dictates their norms and conventions powerfully. They impose on other inhabitants even

toiletty times as they need ablution at precise times. Moreover, the music played in the room is that of Oum Kelthoum day and night. Additionally, the infrastructures are fundamentally and only buses and the whole neighborhood has one supermarket. Size in the Ultraminor entails “structural handicaps and a systemic lack of capacity and resources connected both to space and to time” as Moberg and Damrosch note (2023, p. 134). They (2023) add, “Ultraminor literatures and cultures develop all kinds of survival strategies to mitigate these inherent shortcomings (p. 135). Immigrants exhibit extraordinary resilience as they all succeed to cope with all the hardships that they encounter.

What immigrants suffer from is not only limited to structural handicaps but also segregation and stereotyping. The latter, according to Lippman, succinctly observes that the limitation of human intelligence in front of the powers of preconceptions always contribute to the persistence of some mental pictures, no matter how deformed they might be (1988, p. 90). In other words, the human perceptual capacities are not purely impressionistic, nor they are sovereign in their functions; a social group enduringly represent itself in some way in someone's mind just because a certain preconception succeeded at paralyzing the natural process of perception (1988, p. 90). In this context, Re (2010) argues, “Italy, perhaps more than other nations, appears capable of stabilizing its precarious self-image only through fear, loathing, and rejection or subjection of an imagined, inferior, less civilized other” (p.3). This actually means that even the racial prejudice is strategic to save the nation's self-image as if Italians need immigrants for self-identification. In Little Cairo and elsewhere, Europeans perceive Arabs as terrorists, especially after the bombing of twin towers in America. The whole of plot in *Divorce Islamic Style* is based on the accusation of an Arab Muslim family of a terrorist plan for no specific reasons apart from being Arab Muslims.

To elaborate more on the above-mentioned idea, those who claim to be native Italians originally come from different parts of the globe. According to historians, nowadays' Italians have belonged to different nationalities back in history. In “Italians and the Invention of Race: The Poetics and Politics of Difference in the Struggle over Libya, 1890-1913,” Luce Re (2010) discerns,

Few in fact are aware of the considerable role that various forms of racism have played in the history and even in the formation of Italy as a nation and, indeed, in the creation of the “Italian identity.” Proverbially weak and fragmentary, divided, and, to this day, perennially seen as

loose and unstable, Italian identity seems to “come together” for Italians as a collective imaginary formation. (p. 3)

The avalanche of races, that have actually formed Italian identity, started to be one community only when the external threats rose. Before the war on Libya, for instance, the different races that make up nowadays Italy have been hostile to each other; the threat has thus been internal. Lakhous’ recognition of the ongoing history of fragmentation of Italian society and culture, which has a clear impact on the contemporary debates on the new Italian multiculturalism, majorly manifested in different forms of “clashes” between Italians and immigrants in his novels, are complemented by the everlastingness of internal divisions that signal the continuity of old indigenous multiculturalism (Lorenzo and Polina, 2012, p. 119). Lakhous’ use of such internal and external conflicts, highlighting the racial history of Italy reinforces the growth of identity as a flexible entity and calls for celebrating otherness and plurality. Lakhous’ conception of such an interconnected, rapidly evolving notion of identity finds expression in Guattari and Deleuze concept of rhizome. A rhizome is an open network structure composed of various assemblages; it allows readers “to discover what other points our entrance connects to, what crossroads and galleries one passes through to link two points, what the map of the rhizome is and how the map is modified if one enters by another point” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 3).

In addition to the aforementioned struggles, immigrants usually fall in the trap of faking a perfect life in front of their relatives at home. Instead of sending loads of love and nostalgia, they communicate lies about “paradise on earth” (Lakhous 54). Safia comments, “my dear immigrant, I advise you strongly not to talk about the unpleasant or negative aspects of immigration. Like? ...unemployment, off-the-books employment, high rent, racism, fear of losing your residency permit, absence of family etc. etc.” (Lakhous, 2012, p. 54). Safia further demystifies the myth of Italy being a paradise on earth highlighting not only the immigrants’ hardships, but also the Italians’ dissatisfaction with their living conditions. In a conversation with an Italian friend who speculates about her future in Italy, Safia comes to the realization that Italy is home of tourists; passengers who come to spend money and gamble. Accordingly, Italy is not the best destination for immigrants who are fetching a better life out of their native soils.

Worth noting, Italy itself represents the g-local as it encompasses both the local Italians who have lived there for so long and the global, represented by all the immigrants who come from different parts of the globe and settle. Moreover, the mixture of Arabic dialects and Italian dialects and the plurality of dialects in both languages is pointer to the fact that fragmentation is part and parcel of every human/cultural experience. In this same vein, Cergol notes (2014), "The presence of one or more dialects is of paramount importance for the area and should therefore be maintained and developed as an important part of the intangible cultural heritage" (p. 8). The world then should not be nurturing otherness and difference; it should rather cherish the polyphony of voices of world cultures. Christian/ Issa observes, "The variety is impressive, like the faces of the people I pass. 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" (Lakhous, 2010, p. 14). Cultural plurality fosters a rich and multifaceted tapestry that highlights the value of societal diversity.

5. *Female Immigrants: Struggles and Empowerment*

The female spaces, in such small communities, is even smaller, yet empowering. Female spaces, in *Divorce Islamic Style*, are basically Safia's home and the beauty Salon that are practically minor space in shape, but so high in influence. The domestic life, for instance, is a site of female resistance and empowerment. Safia, who comes from a highly patriarchal society, married to a fanatic patriarch who dictates on her even what to wear, refuses to be submissive anymore, and acts upon her refusal. She initially and superficially accepts her husband's patriarchal notions with a high sense of consciousness, moving slowly but surely towards freedom. Her passive resistance, if it can be characterized as so, finds expression in her refusal to fulfill her husband's desire for a second baby which means to her more commitments and chains. She also tries to put an end to her husband's plan to marry her again after a third divorce, in very implicit ways. Safia's attitude at home matches with a larger movement of Islamic feminism that

Has generated a language that many young women are able to draw upon while challenging patriarchal norms - culturally entrenched within the family and society - by arguing that they have nothing to do with Islam and everything to do with tradition. Their insistence on following

what is 'Islamic' rather than familial or cultural can potentially enable them to recover long obfuscated rights. (Ambar, 2015, p. 10)

As an immigrant woman, Safia does not belittle herself, fighting small wars of the daily life. She rather aims big and envisions a brighter future not for her only, but for all women like her. Safia's journey to Italy is metaphorical journey to new spaces of self-actualization and empowerment.

The beauty salon is another site of resistance and empowerment. Safia's idea of opening a beauty salon without the knowledge of her husband is the biggest leap in her path of resistance. Yet, the beauty salon is not meant for resistance only. Safia's overriding aim is twofold: she wants money of her own but not to achieve financial independence; she rather wants to save her sister's dignity whose beauty has been destroyed by the Egyptian patriarchal systems. The latter unfortunately

Implants in the mind of the girl child a dreadful image of herself as an immature being who is unable to respect her body and control her sexual desires and behavior as stipulated by her religion, mind and conscience and is therefore forced to do so by having her reproductive organs removed, and being subjected to pain. By this, we are, individually and collectively, implanting in our daughters negative, in fact erroneous, values. (Al-Awa, p. 11)

One of the victims of such a procedure is Safia's sister, Zeinab, whose life has been under threat because of an infected scissors "the tool of the job- or, rather, the weapon of the crime" (Lakhous, 2012, p. 124). The circumcision has compelled Zeinab to sadly redefine herself as "a fifty percent woman" (p. 124). To save Zeinab's dignity and instill confidence in her body again, Safia amasses money to pay for a cosmetic surgery. In her own terms, "A wonderful dream that would put an end to the nightmare of the toothless witch. The operation is very expensive. For my part, I'm doing all I can to help her, by saving some money. So I continue to cut hair secretly in Samira's apartment (Lakhous, 2012, p. 128). In so doing, Safia fixes the souls of so many victims and gives hope to the desperate ones. The operation ends not only the psychological impact of such a job but also closes the cycle of violence as it raises female consciousness about the importance to voice their fears and concerns and to reclaim their bodies with strength and confidence. From such a small space and from the position of an immigrant, Safia could voice the silenced and empower a large community of women who have been victims of patriarchy.

6. Conclusion

According to the thematic reading of the novel in the light of the aforementioned theory, the immigrant identities and spaces, once out of motherlands, prove to be prone to a constant transformation and intrusion. *Divorce Islamic Style* sheds light on two different kinds of fears related to the immigrants' experiences. The European narrator represents fear of foreign cultures brought about by the ongoing waves of immigration, while Arab Muslim immigrants are still fighting internal threats like traditions, customs and Muslims. Lakhous envisions the future of both communities, Arabs and non-Arab, celebrating Italy as a city of multiplicity. His views on immigrant experiences find expression in the beauty of a cultural assemblage that feeds on co-existence and embracing otherness; antagonism to minor/other cultures will lead the world solely to more violence and chaos instead of more peace and harmony. Lakhous thoroughly exposes the fact that such a cultural plurality is essentially the norm in the world history of nations, negating the existence of one superior, major race that makes a nation. Such a perception of the world is very cosmopolitan and holistic, matching with the postmodern world's cultural orientations.

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