

Amara Lakhous: A Writer of Renewal

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Abstract:

This paper, which adopts a prominent narratological perspective, aims at exploring the distinct discursive and formal techniques that define the Lakhoussian text. This exploration is conducted through a combination of paratextual and thematic analysis of two significant works by the author: "Choc des civilisations pour un ascenseur Piazza Vittorio" and "Querelle pour un cochon italianissime à San Salvario."

Keywords: Algerian Literature, Amara Lakhous, Narratology, Formal Renewal, Thematic Renewal.

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Introduction:

Amara Lakhous, an Arabic- and Italian-speaking Algerian writer, occupies a unique position within two distinct spheres of literature, namely what some scholars call: Algerian literature world and what others prefer to call: African literature of Italian expression. The latter consists of two different generations, namely a first generation of writers whose works were published between 1989 and 2000, and the second generation, whose writings span from 2000 to the present.

1- A historical background

The initial generation of African writers in Italy comprises authors who emerged during the wave of immigration¹ that Italy experienced from the 1980s until the 1990s, which transformed the country from being a land of emigrants to a land of immigrants. Noteworthy writers such as Pap Khouma, Saidou Moussa Ba, Nassera Chohra, and M. Bouchan, among others, played a significant role in introducing autobiographical literature that exclusively depicted the arrival of the first African immigrants in Italy. These narratives shed light on the challenges and hardships faced in finding employment, experiences of racism, and identity struggles. Employing personal

¹ Daniel Comberiat, « La première génération des écrivains africains d'Italie (1989-200) », in : *Etudes littéraires africaines*, n°30, 2010, p. 77. <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1027348ar>, seen on: 14/11/2016.

Dr. Chadli Djaouida

Amara Lakhous: A Writer of Renewal

accounts rich in metaphors related to climates and colors, these writers often navigated the Italian language with limited proficiency and faced precarious circumstances.

The challenges confronted by these authors in their encounters with a host language that they had not yet fully mastered resulted in the emergence of a distinctive phenomenon known as the author/co-author partnership. In such collaborations, the African writer assumed responsibility for the creative and historical aspects of the work, while the second member, often an Italian native, took charge of the linguistic and narrative dimensions of the creative process².

This cooperation was at the origin of a set of stories located at first halfway between autobiography and fiction and which would later become bildungsromane.

Through these bildungsromane, African writers will gradually put an end to the different stereotypes that made Italy a land of emigration and sunshine. Racism, cold and loneliness are often at the rendezvous to describe this land of welcome both loved and hated³.

As for the writers of the second generation such as Amara Lakhous or Amor Dekhis, and according to critics contribute to the renewal of Italian literature⁴ through the formal and thematic renewal that they bring in and through their texts. The era of autobiographical testimony thus seems to be over, giving way to a new era that of science fiction novels, the thriller and historical novels. Stories that far from taking the daily life and the origins of their authors as⁵ a pretext for writing feature hybrid protagonists (half-African, half-Italian) or Italian characters facing the problems of the world.

Amara Lakhous belongs to the second generation of African writers in Italy. He is a quadrilingual Algerian author since he speaks Berber, Arabic, French, and Italian. Moreover, he writes novels in Arabic and Italian. Born in Algeria in the 1970s, this journalist moved to Italy in 1995 where he undertook anthropology studies to specialize in the study of the immigrant environment. He is the author of several works such as:

In Arabic:

<i>The bug and the pirate</i>	البق و القرصان 1999
<i>How to make me breastfeed by the wolf without getting bitten</i>	كيف ترضع من الذئبة دون ان تعضك 2003
<i>The little cairo</i>	القاهرة الصغيرة 2010
<i>The bird of the night</i>	طير الليل 2020

²Daniel Comberiat, « La première génération des écrivains africains d'Italie (1989-200) », in : *Etudes littéraires africaines*, n°30, 2010, p. 83. <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1027348ar>, seen on: 14/11/2016.

³*Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁵Nadjet Ghaouti in: El Djazair News, Interview in weekly section in French: «Algérie news des livres», of Thursday, mars 09th 2006.

- <i>Choc des civilisations pour un ascenseur Piazza Vittorio</i> , traduit en 2008.	- <i>Clash of civilizations for an elevator in Piazza Vittorio</i> , translated in 2008.
- <i>Divorce à la musulmane à Viale Marconi</i> , traduit en 2012.	- <i>Divorce to the Muslim Viale Marconi</i> , translated in 2012.
- <i>Querelle autour d'un petit cochon italianissime à San Salvatio</i> , traduit en 2014.	- <i>Quarrel over a small Italian pig in San Salvatio</i> , translated in 2014.
- <i>L'Affaire de la pucelle de la rue Ormea</i> , traduit en 2017	- <i>The case of the virgin of Ormea street</i> , translated in 2017

This work originated from the translated versions of the last two novels. The initial book *Choc des civilisations pour un ascenseur Piazza Vittorio*, which was the outcome of a dual writing process. Originally written and published in Arabic in 2003, under the title: *Comment me faire allaiter par la louve sans me faire mordre*, it was subsequently reworked (but not translated) into Italian for publication in 2006, and later translated into French and published in 2008.

The second novel of this work entitled: *Querelle autour d'un petit cochon italianissime à San Salvatio* was also written in Italian before being translated into French by the same translator of the first text namely Elise Gruau to be published in 2014.

1- Literary Renewal

The formal and thematic renewal is manifested in the novels of this author through the text and the paratext of these narratives.

2-1-The Paratext

For Gérard Genette⁶, the paratext is that border zone⁷ that which consists of the author's name, the title, a dedication, a preface, illustrations, intertitles, notes, etc., constituting the threshold one must cross to enter or leave the text. This zone often completes the text and may even offer it a first meaning.

In the present study, we focused on the title and front cover.

2-1-1 The title

Critics⁸ argue that the title serves as our initial encounter with everyday products, symbolizing their significance. In literature, the title functions as a paratextual element that sets works apart from one another and becomes crucial, especially when we are unfamiliar with the author. It is

⁶Gérard Genette, *Seuils*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, coll. Points Essais, 2002, p. 08.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Vincent Jouve and Gérard Genette.

Dr. Chadli Djaouida

Amara Lakhous: A Writer of Renewal

typically condensed into a few words or even a single word, making it easily comprehensible and memorable.

If the general rule is that the title is brief and allusive, the reader must identify and describe his text to interest and seduce his reader. However, the titles of our author are mainly characterized by:

- Length;
- Their grammatical structure;
- Spatial anchoring.

Indeed, these titles most often contain a large number of words (08 for the first and 09 for the second), the latter are organized in nominal sentences that recall the titles of the written press. Moreover, they seem to obey one of the commands of the good journalistic advertiser⁹ according to which, one must not hesitate to make long titles (more than six words) and to accompany them with images that guarantee their decoding¹⁰. Another characteristic element of Amara Lakhous' titles is the spatial indication they contain each time. Indeed, the novels of our author include the name of a real space, that of the plot. By inscribing them in a specific geographical space, the author seems to want to inscribe them also in a well-defined literary sphere.

2-1-2 the front cover

The novels of our author are also characterized by the illustration (meaning e/o editions and [barzakh]) editions that accompany the titles. Thus, on the front cover are represented all the characters of the plot. In addition, the portrait of each of them is followed by his name, his first name and his origin (case of the 1st novel), his first name and his nickname, his origin or his function (case of the second novel). Suddenly and without being obliged to advance in the text, Chiara Carrer's drawings¹¹ present the protagonists of the work, summarize it and situate it in a specific literary genre.

These illustrations provide hints that both texts involve police investigations. In the case of the first novel, the outlines of the Gladiator's body depicted in chalk evoke the techniques employed by police inspectors in deciphering crime scene clues.

For the second novel, it is the indication enclosed in quotation marks "inspector" and which accompanies the name of the bearded character (Sandor Petriscu). It should also be noted that the two illustrations are less expressive when it comes to two characters namely Amedeo and Enzo Lagana who prove to be the heroes of each novel.

⁹Claude Furet, *Le Titre*, Paris, Victoires Editions, coll. Métier journaliste, 2006, p.9.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹¹Italian illustrator.

Dr. Chadli Djaouida

Amara Lakhous: A Writer of Renewal

Thus, the titles and illustrations seem to summarize and characterize the work of Amara Lakhous through an alchemy of the verb and the image that seems, in our opinion, to respond to a contemporary need for information in a world governed by the law of media and social networks, which implies the need for a new approach to the literary product.

2-2 Text

The substance of the Lakhoussian text, much like its form, reflects a certain sense of innovation. It can be examined from two interrelated perspectives: the chosen genre and the themes explored within it. These two axes work in tandem, complementing each other to provide a comprehensive reading experience.

2-2-1 Type of text

As we have been given to quote in the first part of this work devoted to the history of Italian-speaking African literature, the writings of the precursors were accounts of predominantly autobiographical testimonies. Novels that made their author and his personal experiences the main source of the plot. However, contemporary writers seem to want to free themselves from this form of writing by trying to explore new perspectives, such as the detective novel.

Indeed, the novels of our author manifest themselves more as a puzzle novel or an ironic thriller¹² than as a novel of training. Instead of starting from oneself to describe oneself and describe the universe that surrounds it, the author starts from oneself but this time to describe the Other and his world. Thus Amara Lakhous offers us an image of Italian society seen from the inside by immigrants and natives exploring their daily lives and the stereotypes that govern their lives.

Clash of Civilizations for example tells the story of a cosmopolitan building located in Piazza Vittorio, in which a murder is committed whose victim is a young Italian called the Gladiator. The police investigation assumes that the murderer is Amedeo the only tenant that investigators have not been able to question because of his mysterious absence. As a result, the tenants begin to deliver each, on his side, his truth about the case and about Amedeo who turns out to be and to the surprise of everyone an immigrant from elsewhere.

For *Querelle around an Italian pig*, this is also an investigation conducted by both a police officer and a journalist who both seek to unravel the mystery of a crime whose victims were four Albanians and three Romanians killed in a neighborhood of San Salvario.

¹²Daniel Comberiat, « La première génération des écrivains africains d'Italie (1989-200) », in : *Etudes littéraires africaines*, n°30, 2010, p. 91. <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1027348ar>, accessed: 14/11/2016.

2-2-2 Topics covered

Regarding the thematic renewal we can say that Amara Lakhous and like the writers of the second generation, addresses new themes that are related to the news of the world and Italy such as the phenomenon of immigration, the closure of mosques or the entry of Romania into the European Union. Thus for *Clash of Civilizations*, and even if he chooses to address the theme of otherness, the latter will be expressed not in relation to the immigrant but in relation to the natives who also find themselves strangers in their own country, ex (the Neapolitans in Rome).

This novel therefore addresses the issue of the integration and cohabitation of cultures that belong to different and therefore foreign spaces. Benedetta the Neapolitan janitor is as foreign to Rome as Amir Allah the Bangladeshi or Maria Gonzalez the Peruvian. Italy, which for centuries was considered a country of emigrants, has been a country of immigrants and exodus since 1980. The internal emigration of people from the South to the industrialized North meant that Neapolitans (or South Africans) for example were considered in the same way as Moroccans and the population of the North ended up building racist clichés stigmatizing them as illiterate delinquents.

These racist stereotypes were also conveyed by the media. This press that takes in its race to the audience is distracted from its mission to find the truth. A. Lakhous in the second novel takes the example of a young reporter who fabricates the truth about the murder of Albanians and Romans. A truth that matches the stereotypes of the country in order to meet the expectations of its editor and that of readers.

The novel also addresses the phenomenon of Islamophobia through the “religious incident” committed by a little pig of Italian origin. Suddenly a quarrel broke out in the neighborhood between Muslims and Christians. Some shout at the sacrilege and claim the small animal to slaughter it according to the Muslim ritual and others who wanted to save it by transforming it into a symbol of Italy and its identity threatened by Muslim immigrants.

Conclusion

Finally, we can say that Amara Lakhous is a promising author, who, like her heroes, embodies the role of the mediator who focuses on the front of the Italian and Algerian literary scene on common forms and themes, thus allowing readers from both continents to discover each other and to dialogue because cohabitation depends above all on constructive and constructive exchanges.

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