

AN ARABO-(IT)ALIENATION: WORK AND MIGRATION IN *IMMIGRATO* AND *DIVORZIO ALL'ISLAMICA A VIALE MARCONI*

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In Salah Methnani and Mario Fortunato's *Immigrato* (1990) and Amara Lakhous's *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* (2010) the representation of work through the experience of migration is a key concern.¹ The episodes of unemployment, the periods of unsuccessful job hunting, and the depictions of inhospitable workplaces are marked throughout by tension and terror. Nevertheless, the depiction of labour in the two texts yields critical knowledge about the experience of North African migration to Italy, and the severity with which the world of work is depicted suggests that labour can function as a site of resistance. 'Letteratura della migrazione', a critical tradition to which both texts have been connected, is characterized, in the words of Graziella Parati, 'by the desire of the individual to emerge from the mass of undefined and marginalized immigrants, and in so doing to create multifaceted alternative portrayals to the essentialized and homogeneous definition of the "immigrant" created by prejudice and racism in Italy'.² Building on Parati's characterization, this note argues that the deployment of aesthetic and stylistic devices such as irony and parody in *Immigrato* and *Divorzio all'islamica* opens up a range of alternative interpretive hypotheses for these novels.

Published in 1990 and written by Salah Methnani in collaboration with Mario Fortunato, *Immigrato* recounts the experiences of twenty-seven-year-old Salah, a graduate student in foreign languages, who embarks on a journey through Italy from South to North. It is divided into chapters named after the towns and cities which Salah visits on his journey: from Tunis to Milan, and then back to Kairouan. The text explores Salah's descent into degradation and his discovery of the underworld in which immigrants are caught in drug trafficking, sexual exploitation, inter-ethnic hostility, and the constant fear of deportation. As such, *Immigrato* offers one of the first literary responses to issues related to migration from the perspective of an Arab and North African migrant arriving in Italy in the 1990s.

Published in 2010, *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* is Amara Lakhous's fourth book. The novel follows Christian on his mission to uncover a supposedly

¹ Mario Fortunato and Salah Methnani, *Immigrato* (Milan: Bompiani, 2006); Amara Lakhous, *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2010).

² Graziella Parati, *Mediterranean Crossroads: Migration Literature in Italy* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), p. 17.

imminent bombing in viale Marconi in Rome. Christian is of Sicilian origin and works as a translator, having studied Arabic at the University of Palermo. His assignment consists of impersonating a Muslim Tunisian immigrant in order to infiltrate a purported terrorist cell in the Marconi neighbourhood, home to an immigrant community made up largely of North Africans. Most of the narrative revolves around a call centre in Marconi street called 'Little Cairo'. The two central characters, Christian (alias Issa) and Safia (alias Sofia), are surrounded by a number of Arab immigrants from Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt, alongside non-Arabs from Albania, Senegal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The novel is a juxtaposition of two diaries: one written by Christian/Issa, and the other one by Safia/Sofia. Both shed light on migrant and diasporic experiences in the Italian capital city.

The transformation of the central characters is of particular interest in both texts. Whereas *Immigrato* focuses on Salah's multiple encounters with both native Italians and foreign migrant communities throughout Italy, Christian/Issa's and Safia/Sofia's narratives are set against the background of a much more insulated territory that includes a street, a local market, a few apartments, and a local library. While Salah's odyssey is marked by transience, viale Marconi provides a much more stable setting. Salah's, Safia's, and Christian's migration experiences follow very different patterns, and it is apparent that if *Immigrato* tells of the failure of mimicry as a coping strategy, *Divorzio all'islamica* points to the predominant role and benefits of camouflage in the integration and adjustment of individual migrants. For instance, Christian the translator becomes Issa the Tunisian 'aiuto pizzaiolo' (p. 119). And, once in Rome, Safia starts a secret business working as a 'parrucchiera clandestina' (p. 57), an occupation which is frowned upon by the most orthodox members of the local Muslim community as well as her husband Said, now called Felice, a qualified architect from Cairo University who now works as a cook at a local restaurant. It appears, therefore, that the notion of metamorphosis is at the core of the two texts. Following this line of thought, three key fields of work carry a particular significance for the way that both novels depict labour in the diaspora, namely farming, prostitution, and the catering industry.

The central character of *Immigrato* belongs to the lower end of the Tunisian middle class: his parents are divorced, his father is a surveyor, and his sister works in a supermarket. Salah lives alone with his mother and has only meagre savings when he decides to leave Tunisia in search of better career prospects and freedom. He is a native speaker of Arabic, a polyglot who has studied English and Russian and also speaks French. He reaches Italy—having a only limited knowledge of Italian, which he first gained as a child while watching Italian TV programmes—where he meets Ketti from Bari. However, instead of providing an opportunity to elevate his social status, Salah's knowledge of Italian is a significant handicap, and, in an ironic reversal, it is only by using a lower register of broken Italian that he gains access to hostels and soup kitchens for immigrants.

Upon arrival in Sicily, Salah ironically describes the work of another migrant in Palermo as 'schiavitù part-time' (p. 32), and later self-disparagingly refers to himself as a 'domatore di leoni' (p. 114) while working as a street vendor in Milan. The early

episode in which Salah finds employment in a Sicilian pigsty illustrates not only his perseverance and determination but also the scarcity of work opportunities. In ironizing his filthy working conditions, Salah's self-deprecation can be interpreted as a technique that deflates the severity of the scene: 'Mi viene da vomitare. Penso: "Sono un musulmano. Non posso mangiare la carne del maiale, ma posso pulire la sua merda"' (p. 33). Additionally, the cleaning of the Sicilian pigsty bears parodic resemblance to the cleaning of King Augeas' filthy stables by Hercules. As such, the reading of the pigsty episode through the lens of parody allows for the unlocking of unexplored interpretations. If, on the one hand, Salah is capable of showing signs of resilience in spite of his degrading work, on the other hand, his use of irony can be read as a defence mechanism that he is able to deploy at the very beginning of his descent into the Italian illegal labour market.

Alongside numerous depictions of men and women of the Maghrebi diaspora who struggle with poverty and high unemployment, *Immigrato* also displays a wider variety of sex and gendered norms and practices than *Divorzio all'islamica*. In *Immigrato*, Maghrebi men engage in practices until then unknown to most of them, such as street peddling, drug trafficking, and prostitution, with the diaspora essentially constituting a site of sexual experimentation. Although Maghrebi women appear to have gained financial independence in the diaspora, all the Arab women that Salah meets have entered the paid labour force exclusively through sex work. In Rome, Salah recognizes a prostitute from Tunis who is now 'solo vestita un po' meglio' (p. 54). In Naples, he bumps into twenty-five-year-old Tunisian-born Salwa and her Italian boyfriend, an HIV-positive drug addict. By working as a prostitute, Salwa is able to provide him with the money he needs for his drugs. She also has a son 'che vive alla Caritas con dei parenti' (p. 44).

Later in the novel, Salah comes across an Italian transvestite and three North African sex workers standing by a petrol station near the Fortezza da Basso in Florence. He fails to buy sex from two prostitutes because he is not part of their regular clientele. In fact, the prostitute Sihem only works with non-Arabs, and Salah can't afford Saida's prices. Nonetheless, Sihem and Saida befriend Salah, whose attention is caught by the trajectories that led the two young women into prostitution. Both Sihem and Saida are Tunisian and at the time of their conversation with Salah they have been living in Italy for three years. Sihem is twenty-two years old, and after a short-lived marriage she left Tunisia to join her sister, also a sex worker in Florence. Salah indicates that Sihem's sister returned home after marrying a wealthy Tunisian man. Saida is twenty-eight years old and has a son who lives with his father in Naples. Salah also points out that she sends money regularly 'come una qualsiasi donna che lavora' (p. 81).

Interestingly, it appears from Salah's conversation at the gas station that Sihem and Saida do not consider themselves trafficked victims coerced into prostitution. The conversation underlines the state of aimlessness in which some migrant female sex workers are locked, as is the case with Sihem, who does not have 'particolari progetti' (p. 81). The encounter with the Maghrebi prostitutes also underscores the mechanical and repetitive nature of sex work which turns workers into automata, as can be seen in the Tunisian diaspora with Saida who 'Viene qui sul viale ogni sera, verso le nove, con

puntualità' (p. 81). Yet the manner in which Arab female prostitution is presented is not as sinister as the male one: in fact, Salwa is 'abbastanza felice' (p. 44) in Naples, while Saida 'abita in un bell'albergo del centro' (p. 81); as for Sihem in Florence, 'vivere così non le dispiace, per ora' (p. 81).

In an atmosphere of pervasive recreational drug use, Salah's conversation with Sihem and Saida is also interspersed with the presence of laughter, thereby nuancing the darkness of Salah's stay in Florence. However, beyond their apparent well-being, the North African prostitutes are also objects of derision when they gather at the gas station, as grotesque concubines in a parodic echo of the oriental harem, and struggle to earn a living out of their sexual services. But if the North African women appear less tormented than their male counterparts, Sihem's past experience of domestic violence and Saida's family breakdown need to be taken into consideration, as they contribute to the darkening of the Italian sex labour market visited by Salah.

As he arrives in Sicily, Salah writes:

Il proprietario di un'imbarcazione [...] mi parla della Sicilia e dei problemi del lavoro. Dice: 'Noi non siamo razzisti. Il fatto è che voi siete tutti clandestini, e quindi non potete lavorare in regola. Per questo, siete sfruttati.' [...] Me ne vado in giro, provando a domandare lavoro come lavapiatti o cameriere in un paio di pizzerie: niente da fare. Capisco che aveva ragione l'anziano proprietario del peschereccio: qui, se non hai qualcuno che ti raccomanda, nessuno ti assume. Neppure per un giorno.

(*Immigrato*, pp. 20–21)

It is worth insisting here on the sense of gravity and pessimism with which Fortunato and Methnani elaborate on the issue of migrants' search for employment. In contrast, *Divorzio all'islamica* avoids the question of employment through the lens of farming or sex work. Instead, Lakhous focuses on the urban hospitality industry with a particular emphasis on the food and beverage sector. In this regard, Christian/Issa's verbal exchange on his first day as an 'aiuto pizzaiolo' with the pizzeria owner, 'un sessantenne di nome Damiano' (p. 97), is of particular interest:

'Come vedi io non sono razzista. Non faccio discriminazioni fra musulmani e cristiani, fra quelli che hanno il permesso di soggiorno e i clandestini. Per me sono tutti uguali. Capito?'

'Sì.'

'Senti, ho già dimenticato il tuo nome. È difficile da ricordare. Dobbiamo chiamarti in un altro modo, cosa preferisci: Cristiano o tunisino?'

Scelgo ovviamente il secondo. Un immigrato musulmano che si fa chiamare Cristiano è una pura provocazione. [...]

Comincio a lavorare da subito, dopo aver accettato le condizioni del padrone: due settimane di prova e dimenticare il contratto, ovvero lavorare in nero dall'apertura alla chiusura. [...]

In cucina faccio conoscenza con i tre cuochi: due bengalesi e un peruviano. Insieme a Felice c'è un aiuto pizzaiolo egiziano di nome Farid. I camerieri, invece, sono tutti italiani. I clienti non hanno nessun contatto con il personale immigrato. È una coincidenza?

(Divorzio, pp. 98–99)

Through the humorous undertone of the conversation, Cristian/Issa reveals Damiano's obvious employment fraud and his clear ignorance in matters of religion. He also uncovers the demographics of the workplace, suggesting, on one hand, that the pizzeria reflects the diversity of the Roman neighbourhood, and on the other, that there is a fairly rigid hierarchy in operation in the pizzeria that appears to be set along ethnic lines. Moreover, whereas farms, marketplaces, and street corners are characterized by pity and fear in *Immigrato*, but also by irony and parody, Lakhous depicts pizzerias as sites loaded with tension, but nonetheless able to offer a degree of agency for immigrants. Indeed, the depiction of the pizzeria located 'a due passi da piazza della Radio' (p. 96) offers Lakhous an opportunity to comment on the dissonance between certain forms of employment and religious observance. In this context, the discussion between Christian/Issa and the character of Signor Haram, a rather conservative imam (whose name in Arabic literally means 'unlawful' or 'forbidden'), is particularly insightful. 'E che lavoro fai?', Signor Haram asks. Christian/Issa answers:

'Il lavapiatti.'

'Dove?'

'In un ristorante italiano.'

'Allora il mio discorso di prima vale anche per te, fratello.'

Che bellezza! Mi dedica cinque minuti abbondanti per spiegarmi che il mio lavoro di lavapiatti è *haram*. Il motivo? È sempre lo stesso. Toccare il maiale e gli alcolici è un atto impuro. Di conseguenza i soldi che guadagno, pulendo anche i cessi, valgono quanto i quattrini rubati o guadagnati spacciando.

[...] Invece di fare al meglio il suo lavoro di macellaio si dedica a diffondere sentenze religiose aberranti. Uno come lui, con competenze così straordinarie, dovrebbe vivere non a Roma, ma in qualche villaggio afghano nelle mani dei talebani!

(Divorzio, pp. 116–17)

Through this conversation between Christian/Issa and Signor Haram, Lakhous stages an episode of resistance to forms of religious pressure in the diaspora, thereby critiquing the authoritarian interference of diasporic religious leaders which often results in a further reduction of employment prospects. Christian/Issa playfully 'turns to irony as a means of ridiculing—and implicitly correcting—the vices and follies' of Signor Haram.³ The assailing function of irony simultaneously engages and amuses the reader, as Lakhous experiments with the caricature of a self-proclaimed authority figure.

If the journey into the Italian labour market completed by Salah and Christian/Issa reveals the role played by migrants in the illegal economy of farming, prostitution, and the catering industry, at the same time, these explorations converge in positioning migrants firmly outside of civic society. From the perspectives offered by the two novels, migrants, diasporans, and newcomers are not involved in the way

³ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony* (New York: Routledge 1995), p. 50.

they are governed, and their consent is not sought. They also fail to organize themselves as a group, and for that matter, they lack a political voice and constitute a subaltern group.

Although *Immigrato* and *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* diverge in their depictions of Italy at work, Methnani and Fortunato's dark portrait and Lakhous's lighter illustration converge in implicitly denouncing the production conditions of capitalist economies and the alienation that engenders mechanisms of exclusion. The two texts can be interpreted, therefore, as belonging to a wider call for the emancipation of oppressed, marginalized, and displaced populations, and as sites from which the contemporary Italian world of work can be questioned. Furthermore, in the light of numerous instances of levity, enabled through the deployment of irony and parody, the two texts bring nuance to the field of migrant and diasporic literature in Italy, so often presented as a sombre and uniform counter-discourse.