

Mohamed Baya

The Muslim Diaspora Giggles Back: A Touch of Humour in Notre-Dame and the Vatican's Shadow

Abstract: While the earlier literary production of the Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian Muslim diaspora writing in French and Italian is characterized by its autobiographical overtones, some literary texts written in the twenty-first century have engaged in more experimental enterprises. *Kiffe Kiffe demain* (2004), originally written in French by French-born Algerian diasporan Faïza Guène, and *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* (2010), published in Italian by Algerian-born Amara Lakhous, are two fictions that have achieved international success. This article argues that the tragic and the humorous are interwoven in the two texts by investigating Guène and Lakhous's depiction of Muslimness as both a source of torment and exhilarating humour.

Keywords: Diaspora; Muslimness; Humour; Faïza Guène; Amara Lakhous.

MOHAMED BAYA

University of Western Ontario, Canada
mbaya@uwo.ca

DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2023.45.06

Introduction

Recognized as the world's fastest growing religion, Islam is predicted to become the world's largest before the end of the century. The literary production of Muslim authors living in diaspora offers particular insight into the living conditions and daily issues facing Muslims around the world. In this light, the main aim of this essay is to identify the markers of Muslimness that receive the greatest attention and to show how Muslimness is constructed through the combination of a variety of tones in the literary fictions of Muslim diasporans operating in France and Italy. Against this background, Faïza Guène and Amara Lakhous appear as two significant literary figures in reason of the way in which they amalgamate sombreness and amusement in their literary works.

Faïza Guène was born in France in 1985. Her novel *Kiffe Kiffe demain* [Just Like Tomorrow/Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow],¹ written when she was 19, takes the form of a rather amusing diary that records the inner monologue of Doria, a fifteen-year-old girl living with her Moroccan mother in the Greater Paris *banlieue*. In the hopes

of finally having a son, the father has abandoned them and returned to Morocco to marry another woman. Throughout the novel, Doria and her mother Yasmina struggle to make ends meet. However, the predominantly Muslim neighbourhood is also a theatre of distractions. The novel was published in 2004, in the agitated context that followed the 2002 elections that saw the leader of the French far right, Jean-Marie Le Pen, reach the final round of the presidential election. It was also published the same year as the adoption of the “loi sur les signes religieux dans les écoles publiques,” a law that prohibits students from wearing ostentatious religious signs at school.

Amara Lakhous, born in Algeria in 1970, is the author of *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi*² [Divorce Islamic Style], which is his fourth book. The novel is set in the alarmist climate that followed the 2005 London and Madrid bombings and revolves around two characters: Issa, a spy on a mission to uncover an allegedly imminent Rome bombing in the superdiverse neighbourhood of Viale Marconi, and Safia, whose divorce from Felice offers insight into the twists and turns of the local Muslim community they are part of. *Divorce Islamic Style* was published in 2010, released in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and the year following the October 2009 terrorist attack in Milan.

Scattered Muslims Writing in French and Italian

Three migratory currents have contributed to the creation of a Muslim minority in the contemporary period in Europe. According to Jocelyne Cesari (2006):

The first spans the period from the end of World War II to the beginning of the 1970s, and corresponds to the arrival en masse of workers from the Third World and Eastern Europe, in response to the reconstruction of the European economy and the need for manual labor in the postwar period ... The oil crisis of 1974 signaled the end of this period of reconstruction and European economic prosperity. The process of Muslim immigration, however, continued, entering a second phase in which families formerly split apart by migration were reunited ... The third phase ... begins with the waves of refugees and asylum-seekers in the 1980s.³

Furthermore, in their contribution to the study of Islam in France, Laurence and Vaisse indicate that “Though France’s Muslims represent 123 different nationalities, nearly three-quarters are from countries of the Maghreb: Algeria, Morocco, or Tunisia.”⁴ Laurence and Vaisse further question the political motivations behind the statistical disputes, stating:

The highest approximations (from 6 million to as high as 8 million) have been propagated both by the extreme-right National Front, in order to alarm “traditional” French citizens over what it perceives as excessive immigration and the corresponding threat to French identity, and by Muslim associations with a political interest in inflating the number of Muslims that they claim to represent.⁵

In relation to Islam in Italy, Nielsen and Otterbeck have highlighted the

following statistics: “Estimates from 2014 put the population of Muslims between 1.5 and 2.2 million. The major reason for the increase is the political crises in different countries in both Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa.”⁶ As for the geographical dispersion of the Muslims in Italy, they add:

Taking the data for recorded foreign residents as a guide, the concentrations of Muslim population are to be found particularly in Rome and Milan, followed by Turin, Palermo and Naples. The province of Emilia Romagna also has a large Muslim population, but spread more evenly among its urban centres, especially Bologna and Modena. Outside Palermo, several Sicilian towns have smaller but notable Muslim populations.⁷

However, the Caritas e Migrante’s report indicates that Moroccans, Tunisians and Algerians account respectively for 28.6%, 6.5%, and 1.3% respectively of the Muslim population residing in Italy as of January 1st, 2020.⁸

Scholars researching Islam in Western Europe have observed that Maghrebis constitute a substantial segment of the Muslim population in France and Italy. As a result, the publication of literary works by Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian diasporas in French and Italian has attracted considerable scholarly attention.

The term *Beur* refers to individuals of North African descent who are born and raised in France. The 1983 *Marche pour l’égalité et contre la racisme* which was termed *La marche des Beurs* by the French media⁹ is recognized as the founding act of the *Beur* movement. In that same year

Mehdi Charef published *Le Thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed*, which is widely acclaimed as the first *Beur* novel. According to Hargreaves, *Le Thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* “may with hindsight be plausibly regarded as having laid down the template for what has since become labelled as *banlieue* writing.”¹⁰ Since then, an increasing number of writers, filmmakers, and commentators have turned their attention to the immediate peripheries and suburbs of the City of Light. However, Hargreaves argues that “[i]n the eyes of many publishers and reviewers, *banlieue* literature is hardly literature at all, for such texts are often treated more as personal testimony or as sociological documents rather than as creative works.”¹¹

Additionally, it is worth noting that numerous critics contend that the emergence of the *letteratura della migrazione* in Italy can be read partly as a response to two events: the killing of Jerry Maslo, a South African political refugee and agricultural worker, in Villa Literno near Napoli in August 1989, and the enactment of the Martelli Law in 1990, which holds importance as “the first complete corpus of laws dealing with the presence within Italy of people originating from countries outside the European community.”¹² While shedding light on the challenges faced by migrant and Muslim populations residing on Italian soil, the texts produced by first-generation Maghrebi writers focus on the everyday struggles of Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian migrants scattered across the Italian peninsula. In this regard, Armando Gnisci proposes a distinction between the two phases of literature of migration in Italy: the autobiographical texts of the “fase esotica” [exotic phase] are followed by fictions belonging to the “fase carsica” [karstic

phase].¹³ However, defining this literary corpus over the past three decades has proven to be highly problematic. As a result, a wide variety of labels have been employed to classify the authors and their texts.

On Humorous Deployment

When examining the methods employed by Faïza Guène and Amara Lakhous to create humour in their texts, it becomes apparent that both writers incorporate elements of the grotesque and carnivalesque to varying degrees. Acclaimed for their amusing qualities, the two texts are interestingly interspersed with the presence of caricature, irony and satire. According to Bakhtin, “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract, it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.”¹⁴ The exploration of the grotesque in relation to Muslimness implies particular attention be paid to forms of debasement and demotion. Elaborating on Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, Carolyn Shields further adds that in carnival the first aspect of life that is suspended is the hierarchical structures that determine our “proper” place – including the acceptable way of talking, dressing, laughing, and celebrating. Everything, he claims, that is associated with socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality – including fear, awe, holiness, and good manners – is suspended.¹⁵

If Guène and Lakhous suspend and challenge various hierarchies, their decision to overload certain characteristics indicates their attachment to caricature. As Freud writes: “Caricature, as is well known, brings about degradation by emphasizing

in the general impression given by the exalted object a single trait which is comic in itself but was bound to be overlooked so long as it was only perceivable in the general picture. By isolating this, a comic effect can be attained which extends in our memory over the whole object.”¹⁶

Interestingly, the caricatural distortions lead to the exploration of irony in the two texts. The classification of the various functions of irony by Linda Hutcheon on a “tonal and emotive *continuum*” is particularly relevant, ranging from the “reinforcing” to the “assailing” and “aggregative” functions.¹⁷ In her view, “As a response to the extensive literature ... that sees irony as a straightforward semantic inversion ... and thus as a static rhetorical tool to be used, irony is, instead, a communicative process.”¹⁸ Therefore, examining the different functions of irony holds the potential to reveal the communicative strategies deployed by Guène and Lakhous. Among the mechanisms of denunciation operating in the two texts, satire plays a significant part:

Arguably all irony can have a corrective function, but since satire is, by most definitions, ameliorative in intent, it is satire in particular that frequently turns to irony as a means of ridiculing—and implicitly correcting—the vices and follies of humankind. There is, however, a very wide tonal range possible within this corrective function, from the playfully teasing to the scornful and disdainful.¹⁹

Accordingly, the satirical edge present in Guène and Lakhous’s texts allows for multiple interpretations and hypotheses to be explored.

Faïza Guène and *Kiffe Kiffe demain*

Dominic Thomas holds the view that “[a]t times, an element of pathos pervades the narrative, particularly when the subject of poverty arises.”²⁰ According to Jenny Barchfield, “Poverty, inequality, racism – generally speaking, these are not the subjects of comedy. But in her debut novel “*Kiffe Kiffe demain*,” 19-year-old Faïza Guène manages to transform these sour ingredients into a lighthearted bonbon of a book.”²¹ Hence, while *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* has been acclaimed for its cheerfulness, the text does include scenes and sequences that uncover profoundly tragic experiences. This is evident in Guène’s insertion into the storyline of a series of challenges encountered by several Muslim women and men residing in the “Cité du Paradis” estate.

Written in the first person, Doria’s diary carries reflections on the ups and downs of events that shape her present situation. Central to Doria’s belief system is the *mektoub*, through which she interprets her father’s departure as a divine decision:

What a shitty destiny. Fate is all trial and misery and you can’t do anything about it. Basically no matter what you do you’ll always get screwed over. My mom says my dad walked out on us because it was written that way. Around here, we call it *mektoub*. It’s like a film script and we’re the actors. Trouble is, our scriptwriter’s got no talent. And he’s never heard of happily ever after.²²

Following this line of interpretation, Doria feels abandoned twice: by her Father and by God. Doria’s perception of

God is characterized by a lack of empathy, and she responds to God’s imposition of unfair hardships upon a mother and her daughter by questioning predetermination. Additionally, Doria’s hint at God’s major depressive disorder, along with an implicit comparison with other deities, further challenges the notion of God’s sovereignty.

For Doria and her mother Yasmina, observing fasting during the month of Ramadan brings a different set of challenges. The school principal reacts suspiciously when Doria skips lunch meals at the school cafeteria, possibly due to an unusual signature on a request form.²³

Meanwhile, Yasmina’s fasting puts her employment at greater risk:

Not very long ago Mom started working. She cleans rooms at the Formula I Motel in Bagnolet while she’s waiting to find something else, soon I hope. Sometimes, when she gets home late at night, she cries. She says it’s from feeling so tired. She struggles even harder during Ramadan, because when it’s time to break the fast, around 5:30 P.M., she’s still at work. So if she wants to eat, she has to hide some dates in her smock. She even sewed an inside pocket so she can be sly about it, because if her boss saw her he’d be totally pissed.²⁴

In an atmosphere of fear, Yasmina develops a camouflage technique in response to the pressure associated with the observance of Ramadan in a workplace that does not accommodate one of the five pillars of the Islamic faith.

Doria also attaches major attention to a series of marriages that involve Muslim

inhabitants of the housing project. While celebrating the wedding of Aziz, the owner of the local grocery store, to a Moroccan woman, “the whole neighbourhood” joins in. However, Doria points out that “it’s not even for sure that he’s inviting us. He’s given us so much credit we’ve never paid back. And no one ever invites us anywhere.”²⁵ The opportunities for communal bonding are consistently denied to Doria and Yasmina. Their non-participation in festive events highlights the community’s responsibility in marginalizing some of its group members. The absence of Doria and Yasmina underscores the role played by the Cité du Paradis’ community, excluding a vulnerable single-parent family from a joyful rite of passage.

Moreover, Lila’s marriage to her daughter’s father is not portrayed as having generated the same level of enthusiasm as Aziz’s: “Sarah’s dad’s family, they’re from Brittany since... I don’t know... eighteen generations, while Lila’s people, they’re more the traditional Algerian family worried about preserving customs and religion ... her wedding day is still a nightmare of a bad memory. Atmosphere like death, hardly any guests on her side.”²⁶ Lila’s initial wedding is fraught with hostility due to interreligious tensions. Doria emphasizes the bride’s isolation in this context, the disapproval of interfaith marriage, and the lack of substantial support from Lila’s conservative family. To further complicate the already strained relationship, additional tension is intentionally orchestrated by the groom’s father: “and, as if by chance, lots of pork in the meal her father-in-law cooked. And who knew if he put it in the wedding cake too. Just to screw with her. He was always dying of laughter from his

own tasteless jokes about religion. At every family meal – at least the ones she was invited to – at 7:45 out came the atheist joke. And Lila already felt out of place.”²⁷ It is evident that Lila disapproves of Sarah’s grandfather’s attempts at humour which revolve around sensitive religious topics. She takes offence not just at his mockery of Islamic dietary laws but also at the repetitive nature of his attacks, conveyed through humourless insinuations along religious lines.

Lila’s religious background emerges as a central reason for her sense of isolation, and her second marriage with Hamoudi is also met with disapproval:

They both want a traditional wedding. It’s weird, I wasn’t expecting that from them. But at least Lila’s parents will be pleased ... Hamoudi’s mom, she’s shouting from the top of all the towers in the neighbourhood that her youngest son’s getting married. According to Rachida (always a reliable source), lots of people are viewing the marriage badly because Lila’s a divorcée and she already has a child by a full-blooded, born and bred French guy.²⁸

In this instance, despite opting for a conventional wedding, Lila and Hamoudi find themselves devoid of support and validation from their community. Although both families approve of Lila and Hamoudi’s marital union, the neighbourhood contributes its share of gossip, suggesting that Lila continues to bear the stigma of her first marriage’s failure. The social stigma of single motherhood is exacerbated by the neighbours’ belief that the presence of a mixed-race child is an ill omen.

If Lila is deemed an outcast, the anonymous letter sent to a “girl who lived around here a few years back”²⁹ implies that La Cité du Paradis is also home to an ultra-conservative group of individuals who claim to act on behalf of God:

The whole neighborhood knows that **** hangs around with young men and that she is forgetting the right path. God says that you are responsible for the path of your children. You must be strict with her so that she fears her family and the religion of Islam... you are as much to blame as she is... She can return to the family and to our customs if you apply harsh measures... A girl can be put on the right path by her father. You must believe in the power God entrusts you with to be a good family.³⁰

The poison pen letter can be interpreted as a manifestation of paternal anxiety, highlighting the presence of close surveillance in the name of Islamic respectability. Functioning as a warning that censures the daughter’s behaviour, it serves to remind the father of his presumed familial duties. Consequently, the father assumes a position of supreme authority, bearing the responsibility to rectify the harm caused by the daughter to the family’s reputation, regardless of her intentions.

Another exponent of radical views can be found in the person of Youssef, whose transformation during his incarceration leads Doria to write about Aunt Zohra’s son that:

he’s starting to rant in this really extreme way, even worse than his dad.

With that comparison, I’m thinking it must be bad. He must have met some weird people in the slammer. Youssef was always easygoing before and way more open than most guys his age... These days, he talks about grave sins and divine punishments. Before, he didn’t really give a shit about all that. He even bought bacon-flavored chips on the sly just to find out what they tasted like. I think it’s shady, this kind of supersudden change. Someone must have taken advantage of him being vulnerable in prison and inserted in some big fat disks into his brain.³¹

The humorous anecdote on Youssef’s laxity towards Islamic dietary laws highlights the advanced stage of his metamorphosis and the turn to a radical Islam operated during his incarceration. The anecdote on Youssef’s transformed worldview also serves to question the role of prisons in the process of radicalization.

In his elaboration on the particular appeal of this novel written by a “teenager,” Dominic Thomas argues that an “increased attention ... has been granted to urban populations and to those populations residing at the margins of globalization.”³² He adds:

[O]ther factors – beyond the literary and linguistic qualities of the works themselves – have surely contributed to the interest generated by Guène’s work: a concerted effort to avoid the kind of *miserabilisme* that has defined so much Beur and banlieue writing; a commitment to accessibility and to the democratization of reading by consciously reaching out to new

audiences; an assumption of responsibility concerning the choice of themes and populations represented; and finally an alternative perspective on the cultural and social circumstances of the banlieue.³³

Following this line of thought, when considering *mektoub*, Ramadan, marriages and relationships with neighbours of the Cité du Paradis estate, it appears that Muslimness is depicted through a rather dark lens. However, in line with Thomas' argument that "it is this playfulness, irony, and judicious use of humor that allows Guène to tackle the multifaceted social issues that confront the banlieue," and that "[h]umor permeates her descriptions of the people she comes in contact with,"³⁴ Doria's relationship with her father offers another level of interpretation.

According to Doria, her father "wanted a son. For his pride, his reputation, the family honor, and I'm sure lots of other stupid reasons."³⁵ In return for the series of absurd motivations used to justify her father's decision, Doria scrutinizes his behaviour throughout the novel. Paternal abandonment is a constant target of mockery, focusing essentially on the ways in which the father deviates from the precepts of the Islamic faith. The deviation at the centre of Doria's concerns is fatherhood, and she does not display any sympathy for her father, his new wife, and their yet-to-be-born son:

It's been over six months. That peasant woman he married is probably pregnant by now. And I know exactly how it will all go down: Seven days after the birth they'll hold the baptism

ceremony and invite the whole village. A band of old sheiks carting their camel-hide drums will come over just for the big event. It's going to cost him a real fortune – all his pension from the Renault factory. And then they'll slit the throat of a giant sheep to give the baby its first name. It'll be Mohammed. Ten to one.³⁶

Doria's disparaging remarks about the social and economic status of her father's new wife are coupled with a carnivalesque depiction of an incongruous baptism ceremony. The musical band, characterized by the musicians' grotesque bodies of decaying patriarchs, is also derided. Doria deflates the sacredness of the baptismal ritual by turning it into a mere trading transaction and a feast of fools. She ridicules her father's involvement in a ceremony that carries traces of masquerade and bankruptcy. The grandiosity of the event, as made clear by the oversized sacrificial animal, is deflated by the predictability of the father's decisions. While the father is mocked for his rigid adherence to clichéd customs in matters of infant baptism, the use of irony allows Doria to unsettle the power dynamics with her father.

On numerous occasions, Doria alludes to her father as "the Beard," employing a caricatural representation to subtly expose his conservative tendencies as divergent from societal norms. As he prioritizes his new family, she reacts by magnifying ironically a distinctive bodily feature to unveil his moral flaws.

Regarding after-death beliefs in *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*, Doria and Yasmina share the same idea about the father's final destination: "I caught the end of a conversation

about my dad between Mom and Aunt Zohra. Mom was telling her he wouldn't go to heaven because of what he'd done to his daughter. The way I see it, he won't be going because of what he's done to Mom. Heaven's bouncer just won't let him in. He'll send him packing, straight out."³⁷ Both mother and daughter agree on the divine punishment incurred by the inflictor of family abandonment. Surprisingly, instead of discussing hellish punishment, Doria offers a humorous depiction of Heaven. A comic effect is produced by the implicit parallel she draws between Heaven and other nightlife and entertainment venues. Doria finds relief and enjoyment in envisioning her father's celestial misfortune, exemplified by his unwelcoming encounter with the gatekeeper turned security guard of Heaven and his comical gesture at the entrance gate.

Also, a major concern for Doria revolves around her father's alcohol consumption. After drafting a list of requirements for a potential substitute for her father, she writes:

I never again want to have to wait outside Constantinois, the bar in the town square, so some man can finish knocking it back and I can take him home because he doesn't remember the way when he's drunk. Or prostituting my pride at the Sidi Mohamed Market buying cases of beer during Ramadan and lugging the empty bottles down to the recycling bins afterward. When the bottles smashed inside the bins, it made so much noise that everybody in our building knew how many bottles Dad had downed. With all the glass that was recycled

thanks to him, he could have earned a merit of honor medal or become a mascot for the Green Party.³⁸

Doria's sense of shame arises from her father's drinking habits, and she resents his episodes of public drunkenness. However, a comic effect arises from the incongruous combination of Ramadan and unashamed displays of alcohol consumption. Since immoderate drinking contradicts Doria's principles, her father becomes the target of her mockery. She operates a first mock crowning by ironically awarding a decoration that serves to ridicule his achievement. He is mockingly crowned a second time when he is granted a promotion. Nevertheless, the mention of his upcoming work uniform punctures the seriousness of his accomplishments and transforms the father figure into a source of comic amusement.

It also happens that Doria compares her father's detachment from religion with the acts of devotion displayed by random Muslim individuals as is the case when she uses public transports: "Then I went and sat next to an old African man holding these wooden prayer beads in his hand. He was turning the beads slowly through his fingers. Reminded me of my dad in his rare moments of piety, even if he was nothing like a good Muslim. You don't pray after demolishing a pack of Kronenbourg 1664. There's no point."³⁹ Doria suggests that her father was not entirely foreign to acts of devotion. However, regardless of how frequently he used to perform religious rituals, Doria believes her father has failed as a Muslim. She challenges his neglect of ethical duties and responsibilities by putting forward a contrast between the scarcity of his acts of worship and his highly

frequent episodes of alcohol abuse. Doria's judgment is unequivocal, and one could argue that by highlighting an example of paternal misconduct, the figure of the Muslim father is humorously derided once again. Yet, by pointing out the enormous quantity of beer he consistently consumes before praying, Doria not only evokes the image of an inebriated and blasphemous worshipper but also the idea of a drunkard with gargantuan thirst.

Thus, the exploration of Doria's relationship with her father indicates that Guène's severe rendering of Muslimness in the suburbs of Paris, as evidenced by the tragic dimension of *mektoub*, Ramadan, marriages and neighbours, is counterbalanced by the attention given to baptism, heaven, and alcohol consumption as sources of comic effect. The intertwining of the tragic and the humorous is also a defining feature of *Divorce Islamic Style*.

Amara Lakhous and *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi*

Charles Burdett has noted that "*Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* ... addresses ... how feelings of suspicion and distrust are threaded into perceptions of Italy's Muslims population."⁴⁰ However, Rayyan Al-Shawaf's review of *Divorce Islamic Style* provides a series of considerations on the distinctiveness of Lakhous's novel. He states:

A minor but entertaining tale, *Divorce Islamic Style* will help diversify novelistic treatment of fraught and contentious Islam-related issues. Of course, the thriller genre has long relied on Islam and Muslims as fodder for its

stories – but generally in the form of caricatures. This novel is part of a different trend. Itself literary fiction, albeit middlebrow, *Divorce Islamic Style* joins an increasing number of novels and films that shun sombre pontification in favour of satire and farce when tackling Islam and the West.⁴¹

Al-Shawaf acknowledges Lakhous's departure from pompous and dogmatic literary approaches to the Muslim question. However, Lakhous's reliance on amusing stylistic devices to address religious matters stands in contrast to the emotionally charged episodes that shed light on the challenging living conditions of the Muslim population residing in the cosmopolitan Viale Marconi neighbourhood in Rome.

The novel alternates the first-person narratives of Issa and Safia, thereby focusing on the vicissitudes of everyday life for several Muslim characters. According to Burdett, "they are both characters who are in the midst of a transitional phase of their lives; they have both developed a critical awareness of the limitations of their respective communities."⁴² Safia's discontent centres around the decay of her spiritually mismatched marriage:

A few days before the wedding the architect asked me to wear the veil. "What did you say? I didn't hear you. Could you repeat that, please?" "My love, you have to put on the veil." "Is this a joke? Of course, and here I almost fell for it! You're a real Egyptian, what an actor. Hahaha." "No, my love, I'm speaking seriously. This is a condition." Put on the veil? Maybe I hadn't

understood. Were we going to live in Italy or Iran? Is the veil compulsory in Rome? Felice was not joking at all. A real low blow. A blow below the belt.⁴³

At first, the abruptness of the husband's imposition of head covering is met with hilarity by his incredulous wife. For Safia, what is striking in this scene of pre-wedding misunderstanding is the time constraint put on the bride-to-be, and the overwhelming intrusion of toxic injunction of obedience while contemplating marriage. Trapped with limited manoeuvring space, Safia recognizes the gravity of the situation and reacts with a series of sarcastic attacks aimed at deflating the legitimacy of her husband's authority over her clothing choices. On one hand, she avoids addressing her husband by his Egyptian name. She distances herself from him by using a derogatory nickname that pokes fun at the discrepancy between his degree in architecture, his self-aggrandizing lie about his work as a chef in a big restaurant, and his current employment as a pizza maker.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the absurd juxtaposition of the head covering practice to an unusual geographical context is a mockery of his intellectual abilities that ridicules the faulty reasoning used to justify coercive veiling.

The vulnerability of Safia's position within her mismatched marriage is further complicated by the demotion that accompanies the dissolution of her marital union:

Social death is crueler than physical death. Where can a woman without a husband, and without her virginity, go? Nowhere. If she's widowed the situation is different, because it's not

her fault. It's a question of *maktüb*. In the case of divorce, on the other hand, you don't disturb Signor *Maktüb*. There's no use looking for a scapegoat. The divorced woman is the only offender. The perfect offender. It's hard to explain to people here that for us when a woman marries she changes guardians: she moves from her father's jurisdiction to her husband's. It's like a shop that changes owners.⁴⁵

Drawing on a didactic style, Safia imparts to the reader the hypocritical stance adopted within her community towards divorced women. She uncovers the contemptuous and unfair treatment they receive. Brought forward as a deadly sentence, Safia explains that divorce is the sole and sinfully loaded responsibility of the wife. She condemns the unjust absence of consequences for divorced Muslim husbands and the turning of divorced Muslim wives into scapegoated targets who carry the social stigma associated with the dissolution of marriage. Still, Safia uses this discussion on divorce as an opportunity to reflect upon the dominance she suffers and launches an attack on the patriarchal nature of her predicament.

Safia ridicules Muslims who conveniently invoke the proverbial fatalism of *maktüb*. Personified through the traits of a stoic man, destiny does not deal with futile matters such as divorce. In fact, Safia uncovers a man-made and self-serving hierarchy in which women are totally reified. In her view, women are commodified through marriage, and whether their approval is sought or not, ultimately, they become the lawful properties of either their fathers or their husbands.

Regarding the peculiarity of the two central characters in the novel, Burdett elaborates on the notion that:

[i]t is Safia who is the more complex literary creation. Through her characterization Lakhous represents the figure of a believing and practising Muslim who struggles both with the challenges of living in two cultures and with the necessity of reconciling the tenets of her faith with the emotional complications with which her life is fraught.⁴⁶

Aligned with this argument, it is noteworthy that Safia consistently shares her views on religious matters throughout the novel. She points to the absence of “a woman’s interpretation of the Koran,”⁴⁷ which she considers emblematic of gender inequality and the subordination of women. She remarks: “Not one. It’s a male monopoly. Women are excluded from so many things. For example, there’s no verse, or *hadith*, that prohibits a woman from being an imam. In spite of that, I’ve never once in my life seen a woman leading prayers.”⁴⁸ However, *Divorce Islamic Style* introduces a range of female characters, among whom Signora Haram holds a prominent position due to her distinctive role within the local Muslim community. Regarding the spectrum of religious observance in the neighbourhood, her visit to Safia, carrying unwelcome news, becomes a point of particular interest:

“*Assalamu aleikum*, sister.” “*Aleikum salam*.” What a surprise. With no warning, Aisha, alias Signora Haram, has come to see me. She’s the wife of

the butcher Rami, who pretends to be an imam and is crazy about prohibitions. Paola, that’s her real name, is an Italian who converted to Islam ten years ago. She’s more or less my age and wears the *niqab*, oh Lord, that complete veil which covers the entire body except the eyes. Her great ambition is to someday bring us the fashion item of the century: the burka on Viale Marconi and environs! Let’s hope she never succeeds.⁴⁹

Displaying a notable disregard for the norms of hospitality, Signora Haram acts as an ill-mannered messenger, intruding upon the privacy of Safia’s home. Safia responds to this abrupt intrusion by unmasking the self-proclaimed imam, while also shedding light on the various stages of metamorphosis through which Paola has evolved into a conservative convert. As Safia rejects Paola’s religious zealotry, she similarly condemns the masquerade orchestrated by the intrusive and power-hungry clerical couple. Their extremist leanings reveal that the Viale Marconi neighbourhood harbours ultra-conservative Muslim individuals and couples.

The presence of competing modes of religiosity underscores the presence of intra-religious tensions and rivalries. This is exemplified by Signora Haram’s assertion that Safia’s hairdressing activity is unlawful, alongside Signor Haram’s issuance of a fatwa against Safia’s use of a coloured veil, which he claims “causes confusion and temptation.”⁵⁰ Yet, Safia’s portrayal of the extremist couple introduces a layer of nuance through medical terminology: “I have doubts about her mental health. She’s like a programmed robot. I think her husband

the butcher, playing the imam, has decisively infected her with fanaticism.”⁵¹ Signora Haram’s radical conduct is symptomatic of an ailment that reduces her to an automaton. Converted into a mere piece of machinery, she is downgraded and stripped of her humanity. By highlighting the ventriloquist operation carried out by her husband, Safia undermines Signora Haram’s claims to religious authority, all the while articulating her own scepticism towards self-proclaimed religious leaders. And by mocking the puppetry manipulation, it is not only the decay of Signora Haram’s mental health but the similarities between fanaticism and mental sickness that are satirically targeted.

Of particular interest is Burdett’s assertion that:

the interest of the book lies ... in what Issa and Safia reveal about the microcosmic world to which they – temporarily in Issa’s case – belong. This situational irony underscores the work’s thematic irony: while the narrative framework and the action of the story encourage us to believe that we will gain an insight into the workings of fundamentalist terrorist organization what we discover is an everyday world.⁵²

Undoubtedly, the insertion into the storyline of considerations relating to the veil, fate, divorce, gender inequality and fanaticism indicates that the lives of the Muslims in the Viale Marconi neighbourhood are loaded with a sombre weightiness. However, Lakhous’s recourse to irony allows for the exploration of further interpretive hypotheses, as is the case, for example, with characters such as Signor Haram and Felice.

Signora Haram’s gloomy visit to Safia sharply contrasts with the humorous initial encounter between Issa and Signor Haram at the Little Cairo call centre:

Suddenly a guy with a thick black beard comes in. He’s wearing a loose white shirt, and scent. He booms out an *Assalamu aleikum* that reaches the ears of every single person in Little Cairo. Shit, what a voice! He could be a muezzin with no need for a loudspeaker. He’s kind of savage-looking, incredible – he’s like an actor stepping out of a film set in the time of the Prophet Mohammed. While he stops to chat with Akram, the guy with the big nose turns to me and says in a whisper, “God help us!” “Who’s that?” “Rami, the butcher. Everyone calls him Signor Haram, but behind his back.” “Why is he called that?” The guy doesn’t answer. He seems afraid. Of whom? And why? What’s going on? Problems related to Egyptian solidarity.⁵³

Issa’s attention is caught by Signor Haram’s physical appearance and incongruous accoutrement. Just as his wife assertively intrudes into Safia’s privacy, Signor Haram invades the premises and spoils the relatively peaceful atmosphere of the call centre. Rather than generating an affectionate response from the regulars of the place, the irruption of an anachronistically dressed character instils fear. As awkward as the attire may look for Issa, its resemblances to the clothing of the Messenger of God serves to legitimize Signor Haram’s claim to exercise authority. Yet, the solemnity of the apparition is broken by the ironic

supplication uttered instantaneously upon Signor Haram's arrival, along with the ironic analogy with the mafia-style code of silence surrounding the origins of his nickname. Furthermore, in a conversation with Issa, Felice launches a hearty attack on Signor Haram by deriding his manipulative practices and self-importance:

Signor Haram doesn't have any troubles with his residency permit. Lucky him! He became a citizen because he's married to an Italian. So he has plenty of time to spend on his bullshit. He seems to have a taste for terrorizing poor Muslim immigrants, especially Egyptians, with extremist judgements ... Someone like him, with his extraordinary expertise, should live not in Rome but in some Afghan village taken over by the Taliban. His greatest ambition is to become imam of the big mosque in Rome, even though he hasn't studied at Al Azhar, which is the usual requirement. Who knows, sooner or later he'll end up on Bruno Vespa's talk show. And you won't want to miss it!⁵⁴

While his political standing affords him better living conditions compared to many Muslim residents of Viale Marconi who grapple with immigration-related challenges, Signor Haram appears to derive particular enjoyment from tormenting his coreligionists. His behaviour, which could be characterized as psychopathic, manifests in the imposition of disproportionately severe penalties primarily aimed at members of his own community. Felice mocks Signor Haram's self-aggrandizement by ironically inflating the intellectual

competence of this pathologically egocentric leader. If Felice appears to sing the praise of Signor Haram by encouraging him to join a military organization in Afghanistan, he is actually performing an ironic expulsion of the abusive imam from Viale Marconi. Felice's figurative undressing of Signor Haram continues with the unveiling of the imam's longing for extraordinary achievements. His fantasies of grand future accomplishments contrast with the modesty that Felice expects from a religious role model. Signor Haram finds himself on the receiving end of Felice's satirical critique aimed at the impostors who undermine the cohesion of the local Muslim community. Additionally, by putting forward the invitation at a late-night television talk show, Felice ridicules the imam's pursuit of fame and public attention, as well as the complicity of the Italian media.

Whereas Signor Haram is the target of Felice's derision and scorn, in an ironic reversal, Felice becomes his wife's object of ridicule after irrevocably repudiating her for a third and final time:

We'll look for a *mubàllil*." "A *mubàllil*? Are you joking?" "No, I'm serious." My ex-husband isn't joking at all. Scenes come to mind from the play in which the comic Adel Imam plays the role of the *mubàllil*. Irony of fate! My ex-husband explains to me that the *mubàllil* is in conformity with Islam. This world derives from *halal* and means literally: "make something legal."⁵⁵

Throughout the novel Safia clarifies theological jargon and doctrinal etymologies, and this attitude can be interpreted as an attempt to familiarize the reader

with terms that bear the seal of religious authority and signal the seriousness of Felice's enterprise. Yet, the solemnity of the ritual is immediately punctured by Safia's reference to a humorous Egyptian film. Unimpressed by Felice's contorted plan to restore their marriage within legal bounds, she remarks:

I pretend not to understand, I want to see how far his delusion will go. I start with a question: "If I understand you, I have to marry a Muslim only on paper? Is that right?" "No, I'm an observant Muslim. I don't want to make fun of my religion." "What do you mean?" "The marriage has to be consummated." I can't believe my own ears. He's talking about a real marriage. In other words, I have to marry a man, obviously a Muslim, and go to bed with him. Clear?⁵⁶

Safia questions Felice's sanity, attributing the lack of coherence in his proposal to his mental state. Only a psychological disorder could rationalize such absurd measures. In Felice's peculiar interpretation of reality, he abusively turns Safia into a tool of execution. Disregarding her feelings about the sexual ritual that would breach her sexual exclusivity, he attempts to coerce her into behaviour that would reinstate his role as her husband. Ironically, the rituals he intends to impose upon her are as coercive as the ones he decries in Signor Haram. In other words, the plan he enforces upon her resembles a forced conversion: "He considers me goods to sell and buy back. I try to maintain my self-control. I want to hear his ridiculous speech to the end. My ex-husband notes

an important consideration about the figure of the *mubàllil*. Through the *mubàllil* God punishes the husband who has uttered the divorce formula three times."⁵⁷ In Felice's scheme for remarriage, Safia is reduced to a commodity. Her disparaging remarks about Felice's verbose and unsuccessful attempt to persuade her underscore the pathological dimension of his reasoning. The masochistic dimension of Felice's willful submission to divine castigation, driven by the redemptive power of the temporary marriage, fails to convince her. Irritated by Felice's ideation of such an absurd marriage restoration process, she maintains that only a mental disorder can be at the root of her ex-husband's tortuous, self-torturing, and laughable plan.

Chosen by Felice to play the part of the *mubàllil*, Issa also finds amusement in the situation: "It doesn't happen every day that someone, an observant Muslim, besides, asks you to marry his wife and go to bed with her. It seems more like something for swingers. Could there be Islamic swinging or swinging Islamic style? Enough, don't be ridiculous."⁵⁸ Issa pokes fun at the incongruity of the proposal and establishes a parallel between Felice's plan and the sexual activities that characterize open relationships. This also indicates that the marital laws and sexual practices of the Felice-Safia dyad present unprecedented classificatory challenges to him. Still, as Issa is unaware of being manipulated by his higher-ranking superior, Captain Judas, Safia is similarly unaware of Issa's true identity as an infiltrated spy. Felice remains oblivious to Safia's disinterest in remarriage, yet he proceeds with his plan without realizing that, regardless of his religiously motivated intention, in fact he

unknowingly is the comic architect of his own cuckoldry.

The examination of Signor Haram and Felice's characters suggests that Lakhous's grim illustration of Muslimness in the immigrant neighbourhoods of Rome, as exemplified by the sourness attached to the veil, fate, divorce, gender inequality and fanaticism is counterweighted by the attention directed towards the figure of the self-proclaimed religious leader, the *muhàllil*, and marital laws as sources of humorous effect.

Conclusion

As discussed in this essay, the exploration of various markers of Muslimness in *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* and *Divorce Islamic Style* demonstrates that gravity and levity are interwoven in the two texts. Guène and Lakhous's texts converge in depicting the Muslims in a condition of torment when considering *mektoub*, Ramadan, marriages and neighbour relations in *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*, or the veil, fate, divorce, gender inequality and fanaticism in *Divorce Islamic Style*. Yet, the texts also present a dynamic interplay of divergent and convergent viewpoints and worldviews, demonstrating that Muslimness can also be the source of uplifting humour. On one hand, Guène's examination of carnivalesque baptism, comic gestures, mock crowning and inebriated prayer brings comic touches to the text. On the other, Lakhous's portrayal of a mischievous religious leader, an incongruous *muhàllil* and singular marital laws adds comic thrust to the narrative.

Therefore, in light of the humorous signals that offer access to multiple layers of meaning, neglecting the role of levity

restricts the potential range of interpretive hypotheses. Similar to dismissing the daughter-father relationship as generator of comic effect in *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*, neglecting the influence of religious figures and marital laws in engendering comical moments in *Divorce Islamic Style* also obstructs the access to a range of meanings. Following this line of reasoning, a perspective exclusively fixated on the gravity portrayed in the two texts could be interpreted as a form of limitation, while the intentional omission of lighter instances might be interpreted as an attempt to suppress and silence the diverse range of expressions within the text.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the humorous deployment in both *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* and *Divorce Islamic Style* serves a multifaceted function. It not only acquaints readers and audiences to various dimensions of the Muslim diaspora depicted in the texts but also actively engages in social commentary, all the while unveiling a spirit of self-criticism.

As an indicator of the authors' strategy of resistance, the interlacing of the tragic and the comic offers a glimpse into the significance of the grotesque and the carnivalesque in Faïza Guène and Amara Lakhous's texts. Moreover, it signals the authors' engagement in self-critical questioning through the presence of ironic utterances, satire and the recourse to self-deprecation. As observed in this paper, Guène and Lakhous wield their creative license by interweaving the weighty and the amusing in two literary fictions that offer a strategic space from which opposition to religious extremism can be launched and a reformist impulse can be propelled.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Al-Shawaf, Rayyan, "Divorce Islamic Style, by Amara Lakhous", Review, in *The Globe and Mail*, 2012, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/divorce-islamic-style-by-amara-lakhous/article4186816/>. Last accessed: 7 August 2023.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Barchfield, Jenny, "Making the Most of It; An impressive debut by a 19-year-old novelist who takes an upbeat view of immigrant life outside Paris." Review of *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*, by Faïza Guène. *Newsweek International*, 4th October 2004.
- Burdett, Charles, *Italy, Islam and the Islamic World. Representations and Reflections, from 9/11 to the Arab Uprisings*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2016.
- Caritas Migrantes, *XXIX Rapporto Immigrazione 2020: Conoscere per comprendere*, Todi, Tau Editrice, 2020 https://www.caritas.it/caritasitaliana/allegati/9090/RICM_2020_Finale.pdf. Last accessed: 7 August 2023.
- Cesari, Jocelyne, *When Islam and Democracy Meet*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1963.
- Gnisci, Armando, *Creolizzare l'Europa: letteratura e migrazione*, Rome, Metelmi, 2003.
- Guène, Faïza, *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*. Translated by Sarah Adams, New York, Harcourt, 2006.
- Hargreaves, Alec G., "Banlieue Blues", in Anna-Louise Milne (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Paris*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 212-227.
- Hutcheon, Linda, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, New York, Routledge, 1995.
- Lakhous, Amara, *Divorce Islamic Style*. Translated by Ann Goldstein, New York, Europa Editions, 2012.
- Laurence, Jonathan, and Justin Vaïsse, *Integrating Islam. Political and Religious Challenges in Contemporary France*, Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2006.
- Le Breton, Mireille, "Mohamed Razane ou la mort de la littérature 'Beur'", in Najib Redouane (ed.) *Où en est la littérature 'beur'?*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2012, pp. 251-267.
- Nielsen, Jorgen, and Jonas Otterbeck, *Muslims in Western Europe*, 4th ed. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016.
- Parati, Graziella, "The Legal Side of Culture: Notes on Immigration, Laws, and Literature in Contemporary Italy", in *Annali d'Italianistica*, no. 16, 1998, pp. 297-313.
- Shields, Carolyn, *Bakhtin Primer*, New York, Peter Lang, 2007.
- Thomas, Dominic, "New Writings for New Times: Faïza Guène, Banlieue Writing, and The Post-Beur Generation", in *Expressions Maghrébines*, no. 7, 2008, pp. 33-52.

NOTES

1. Faïza Guène, *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*. Translated by Sarah Adams, New York, Harcourt, 2006. The English title is *Just Like Tomorrow* in the British translation and *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* in the American version.
2. Amara Lakhous, *Divorce Islamic Style*. Translated by Ann Goldstein, New York, Europa Editions, 2012.
3. Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 13-15.
4. Jonathan Laurence and Justin Vaïsse, *Integrating Islam. Political and Religious Challenges in Contemporary France*, Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2006, p. 17.
5. *Ibidem*, p. 17-18.
6. Jorgen Nielsen and Jonas Otterbeck, *Muslims in Western Europe*, 4th ed. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, p. 105.
7. *Ibidem*, p. 106.
8. Caritas Migrantes, *XXIX Rapporto Immigrazione 2020: Conoscere per comprendere*, Todi, Tau Editrice, 2020, p. 199.

9. Mireille Le Breton, "Mohamed Razane ou la mort de la littérature 'Beur'", in Najib Redouane (ed.) *Où en est la littérature 'beur'?*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2012, p. 251.
10. Alec G. Hargreaves, "Banlieue Blues", in Anna-Louise Milne (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Paris*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 217.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 222.
12. Graziella Parati, "The Legal Side of Culture: Notes on Immigration, Laws, and Literature in Contemporary Italy", in *Annali d'Italianistica*, no. 16, 1998, p. 298.
13. Armando Gnisci, *Creolizzare l'Europa: letteratura e migrazione*, Rome, Metelmi, 2003, p. 93.
14. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984, pp. 19-20.
15. Carolyn Shields, *Bakhtin Primer*, New York, Peter Lang, 2007, p. 101.
16. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1963, p. 201.
17. Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, New York, Routledge, 1995, pp. 48-55.
18. *Ibidem*, p. 56.
19. *Ibidem*, p. 50.
20. Dominic Thomas, "New Writings for New Times: Faïza Guène, Banlieue Writing, and The Post-Beur Generation", in *Expressions Maghrébines*, no. 7, 2008, p. 47.
21. Jenny Barchfield, "Making the Most of It" in *Newsweek International*, 4th October 2004.
22. Faïza Guène, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
23. *Ibidem*, p. 4-5.
24. *Ibidem*, p. 5.
25. *Ibidem*, p. 102.
26. *Ibidem*, p. 119.
27. *Ibidem*, pp. 119-120.
28. *Ibidem*, pp. 175-176.
29. *Ibidem*, p. 156.
30. *Ibidem*, pp. 157-158.
31. *Ibidem*, pp. 162-164.
32. Dominic Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
33. *Ibidem*, p. 42.
34. *Ibidem*, p. 47.
35. Faïza Guène, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
36. *Ibidem*, pp. 2-3.
37. *Ibidem*, p. 27.
38. *Ibidem*, p. 111.
39. *Ibidem*, pp. 147-148.
40. Charles Burdett, *Italy, Islam and the Islamic World. Representations and Reflections, from 9/11 to the Arab Uprisings*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2016, p. 136.
41. Rayyan Al-Shawaf, "Divorce Islamic Style, by Amara Lakhous", Review, in *The Globe and Mail*, 2012, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/divorce-islamic-style-by-amaralakhous/article4186816/>. Last accessed 7 August 2023.
42. *Ibidem*, p. 142.
43. Amara Lakhous, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-41.
44. *Ibidem*, p. 38.
45. *Ibidem*, p. 59-60.
46. Charles Burdett, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-143.
47. Amara Lakhous, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
48. *Ibidem*, p. 61.
49. *Ibidem*, p. 106.
50. *Ibidem*, p. 107.
51. *Ibidem*, p. 108.

52. Charles Burdett, *op cit.*, p. 149.
53. Amara Lakhous, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-114.
54. *Ibidem*, pp. 116-117.
55. *Ibidem*, p. 170.
56. *Ibidem*, pp. 170-171.
57. *Ibidem*, p. 171.
58. *Ibidem*, pp. 175-176.