

Clash of Civilizations in Rome. Interview with Amara Lakhous

Marina Melchionda (October 20, 2008)



Amara Lakhous is in the U.S. to present his new novel "Clash of Civilizations in an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio"

Your novel takes place "in an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio". Does that "piazza" have, autobiographically speaking, a particular meaning for you?

The choice of Piazza Vittorio is not casual. There is nothing exotic or "literary marketing" about it. I spent my first six years of immigration right there in this piazza. I rediscovered the atmosphere that was typical of the neighborhoods in my birth city, Algiers. In this sense, Piazza Vittorio brought me luck: at first it helped me to overcome the usual issues with adjustment, and then it offered a stage to tell the story of today's Italy and also of tomorrow's. I often say that in Piazza Vittorio I see the country's future. In fact, my novel is gathering success even in other Italian cities where immigrants



have become more numerous and visible.

You know that our theme for this month is “La Piazza.” What does this word evoke for you? In other words, what do you instinctively imagine when you hear “piazza”?

The piazza is an extraordinary place of meeting and exchange between two different people. We always need the other to define our own identity. For example, I am male only because there are females, I am a Muslim because there are Jews, Christians, Buddhists, etc. Differences should be a resource and not a threat. In the piazza we can better see our own selves and submit our own certainties for discussion. It is a fertile space to cultivate doubts.

The word “piazza” often symbolizes a place where people gather, meet, and spend time together. But sometimes it is just intended as a transition point. How are these views included in your work?

I have always been struck by train stations. They are piazzas of transition. I remember that in the '90s Somalis would meet in the Roma Termini train station. The piazza is synonymous with circulation and movement where we always seem to seek a better life. My father who lived through immigration in France in the '50s always said to me: “Trees have roots to remain stationary, but men have legs to travel and discover the world.” The piazza in my novel is the real protagonist.

Each of your characters, mostly immigrants, has a different perception of the “piazza.” Is it a consequence of the way they have managed or not managed to integrate in Italy or, more specifically, in Rome?

The piazza is not an isolated place. There are gatherings and relationships that develop. For example, in Piazza Vittorio, there are markets, bars, stores, etc. It is a very profound human experience where there should be a reciprocal acceptance of diversity. Obviously, the more means of understanding we have - such as language - the more this can be possible. While fear and indifference can become two obstacles. Pluralism in the widest sense of the word is a positive value.

In Western culture, the “piazza” has been seen mostly as a place of cultural interchange. Piazza Vittorio instead appears to be a place where people just share the same space with no interest in getting to know each other's experiences and backgrounds. It does look like “a clash of civilizations” where Italians, moreover, seem to harbor prejudices towards their own compatriots. Do you think that the behavior displayed in Piazza Vittorio accurately represents the general attitude of Italian citizens? Also, in your opinion, is the situation portrayed particular to Italy or is it more wide spread?

My book is a survival manual in the world of immigration. The discovery of the other is not always a pleasant path. Whoever is not comfortable with him or herself cannot get along well with others. This is a well-researched fact in all psychology studies. In Italy, the immigrant represents a cultural challenge for Italians who have experienced immigration in the last few decades. Prejudices become stereotypes, by which it is easy to be taken hostage. We all have prejudices. We must have the curiosity and the courage to verify whether our information about the other is true or false. The bottom line is that my novel is an Italian micro-story that has examples in other parts of the world.

What expectations do you have about the publication of your book in the USA?

I am so happy that my book will be translated and published in the USA. For me it is a very important challenge. The fact that I have American or Anglo-Saxon readers fascinates me a lot. I am curious to hear their comments, which will certainly enrich my writing.

For what kind of audience is the book intended?

I hope that my book is open to everyone. Each one of us reads a book in his/her own way, beginning with his/her own sensibilities and personal experience. For this reason, literature is an extraordinary adventure that can better our lives.



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