“Why Italian? Why not Italian?” Jhumpa Lahiri, Amara Lakhous, Ali Mumin Ahad, Maristella Lorch and their unique journeys through Italian language

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"Why Italian? Why not Italian?"
Jhumpa Lahiri, Amara Lakhous, Ali Mumin Ahad, Maristella Lorch and their unique journeys through Italian language.

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“Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts of the City College of the City of New York.”
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To Mario

and to all those who migrate,

‘physically’ or ‘linguistically’

My case. An Italian in New York City.

As a CUNY student and writer from Italy, residing in New York City, I am frequently asked to use a language that is not my native tongue. Most of my English was learned while living in the United States for the past four years and a half, yet heavily influenced by my Italian mother tongue. Whether it's right or bad I cannot necessarily say, however as much as I try to "sound" American, I cannot fool my American audience. My "Italian-ism" emerges continuously within my long twisted sentences, sometimes accompanied by my awkward choice of words. Let's not even mention such things as the use of “articles” "passive" and "active" sentences, or use of a subject, etc. when writing in English.

While living in New York City, and having enrolled in City College majoring in English Literature, I have found myself face to face with this linguistic challenge, consisting in my ability to use different languages (English, Italian, and Spanish), as a form to navigate through my everyday needs. English at school and through mainstream society, Italian with friends and the rest of the Italian community, and Spanish at work, sometimes school, and often within my predominantly Latino community in West Harlem. Ever since I moved to New York in 2012, I have experienced this "trilingualism" daily, which has become more fluent and natural, and in return affected the way I speak and write, sometimes to a "confusion" and "fusion" among these trilingual languages. In particular among languages like Italian and Spanish that carry very similar vocabulary and grammatical rules, and as a result, also influences my ways of communicating in English.

Why did I choose English as my major and as the language of choice for my writing? Besides having a deep love for American Literature and culture, I look at
English as the lens for "universality", a universality and international access which includes great writers and readers that are not only "American" or "British", but also "minorities" which are often misrepresented or not represented at all by the mainstream. Unfortunately, my native language, which is spoken by a much smaller population from the rest of the world, needs to be translated to become "international". From one side, I consider English more than Italian as the most effective candidate to explore further the various avenues of literature and further my writing. From the other side, I am aware of the fact that I will never dominate English entirely and perhaps it won't be the visceral language of my writing (and my life). Fascinated by languages and authors that experiment and write in different languages, who migrate from the “safe” place of their maternal tongue to the harsh and full of obstacles of the new one they learn as adults, I decided to dedicated my thesis to them.

In particular, in my dissertation, I will explore the reasons why some writers from different countries, culture, and career as writers, decide to adopt my maternal language in their writing. Italian is spoken only by Italians, about 60 million people, and is at the twentieth position in the chart of the language most spoken in the world. However, for some writers, Italian has something "special."

**Introduction: why Italian and why not Italian?**

My thesis has been inspired by the publication "In Altre Parole" (Guanda, 2015) in 2015 by the multi-prized American author Jhumpa Lahiri. She wrote a book in Italian, a language she admitted she "felt in love" when, later in her career, was already an established writer. A year later, Lahiri published "In Other World," (Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), the translation by Ann Goldstein of the previous Italian
book. I was surprised and intrigued by the fact that a Pulitzer writer such as Lahiri decided to switch in her fiction from the "universal" English to my maternal language, - spoken only by Italians in Italy, - while writing fiction.

I started asking myself which characteristics Italian has for being considered by Lahiri "unique" among languages. While thinking about Lahiri’s choice, I also recalled some writers that I had the fortune to study, to meet (or talk to) while in Italy, during my MA in Comparative Literature at La Sapienza, University of Rome, around six years ago. As a graduate student in Post-Colonial Italian Literature, I knew many Somali authors, and focussed, in my thesis, on Ali Mumin Ahad, a Somali historian, and writer. Ahad, besides historical works, wrote a novel about the Italian colonization in Somalia. The novel, "Memorie del Fiume ed altri racconti del Benadir," is still "unpublished." I thought about Ahad’s choice of writing in Italian, not as a consequence of "falling in love" with the language, as Lahiri did. Ahad has political reasons to write in Italian: in using the colonizer's language, he wishes to build a cultural bridge between Somalia and Italy, two countries that share a historical background starting in 1905, when the Italian government officially established its Somali colonies.

A third inspirational author who I first met in Italy during a workshop on "Migrant Writers" at La Sapienza University, organized by my professor of Comparative Literature Armando Gnisci, is Amara Lakhous. Born in Algeria, Lakhous migrated to Italy during the Algerian civil war in the 90s. After publishing "Le Cimici e Il Pirata" (1999, Arlem) his first novel half Arabic and half Italian, he decided to become a bilingual writer and started publishing books in Italian. Despite the fact that he learned Italian only in his early twenties after he moved to Rome, he chose it as his creative language. As Algerian who went to French school when he was a child, he decided do not write in the tongue of the former colony, but in Italian, the language he learned for "necessity" after moving to a new country.

I moved to New York City in 2012 and Lakhous, coincidently, moved as well here with his wife Stephanie Love in 2014. Because of our old friendship, and my interest in his literature, I had many conversations with the author on language and novels. In the same period, he was also translating and publishing all of his books in
English with the house publisher in New York, Europa Editions, opening his works to English readers. In one of the last conference Lakhous gave at Fordham University, in the Bronx (March 7th, 2017), he declared that his dream is becoming a "quadrilingual" writer: Arabic, Italian, English, and Berber. Already established as Arabic and Italian writer, he also wrote his first short story in English. "On the Quest to Write in a Third Language. Amara Lakhous dreams of Green Cheese and being reborn into New York City," (May 2016: Literary Hub). The project with the Berber is something that Lakhous is planning for the future, but he already envisions his mission as a promoter of Berber, a non-written language spoken by in many Algerian regions and by his own family. Looking closer to Lakhous’ biography, it almost seems that his migration from Algeria to Italy and then to New York goes along with his "linguistic migration" from a language to another. While in Italy he learned and wrote in Italian, in New York he is now experimenting with English. Writing in English is for Lakhous a kind of a "third rebirth," as he calls it in his short story, after the first birth in Arabic and the second birth in Italian.

There is a fourth writer who I decided to include in my thesis, Maristella Lorch. Besides of being a 97 years old and still active writer, Maristella is an exceptional Italian, born in 1919 in the North of Italy, specifically in a region called South Tyrol, where people is mostly bilingual (Italian and Tyrolese, a German dialect). After having experienced World War II in Rome (where she graduated in Classical Studies), and married an American soldier, Maristella moved to New York City, where, in a few years, she started a long career at Columbia University as professor of Italian Literature, specialized in Medieval and Renaissance. She taught and wrote mostly in English during her more than a half-century career as a professor, even though the topic of her teaching and research was always Italian. She wasn’t only a teacher, but also a creator of institutions such as the Italian Academy of Advance Study at Columbia.

Many years after her retirement in 1990, she decided to write for the first time a novel, divided into three books. Her trilogy, mostly autobiographic, "Beyond Gibraltar," narrates the story of her family starting from her mother, at the end of XIX century in Trentino, Italy, and arriving at Maristella’s present. The retired
Maristella spends every Christmas - symbol of the reunion of her family - in Napanoeh, Upstate New York, with grandchildren and the rest of the large and multi-lingual family spread all around the world. In fact, as a metaphor of Maristella’s multilingualism, of her three daughters, live scattered from Europe to Asia and America: Paris, Ankara and New York City. Volume I and II are already published, while the third is unpublished and still fragmented.

Last year, I had a fortune of working together with her for a few months and witnessing her “multi-linguism” in writing and speaking. Maristella talked to me in Italian all the time, since she felt comfortable in speaking to me in our shared language. However, every time she dictated to me something, she switched automatically to English. I used to be her "writing assistant" for "blogs" about episodes of her long and adventurous life, or about literature either in Italian or English, or about historical or current political facts she read on a daily basis on the New York Times. I also tried to investigate, mostly interviewing her, the reasons why she chose English as the language for her creative writing, while she usually speaks Italian with her family. After more than half a century teaching and working in English at Columbia University, Maristella seems naturally preferring English for her academic and creative work. English is her official writing language. In a way, Maristella Lorch is the counterpart of the other authors I previously introduced.

I was lucky enough to be able to reach most of the writers I mentioned in my thesis, either personally or by email, or in some case, going to their conferences or book presentations. I interviewed them about their works, about their linguistic choices. "Why Italian?" It was the simple question I raised to them. "Why do you decide to write in Italian, a language spoken only in Italy and that needs to be translated to become international?" In the case of Maristella Lorch, I asked her instead “Why not Italian?” Every time they had different answers - cultural, political or more practical. I listened to their reasons and mostly agreed with them. Sometimes I slightly didn’t.

In this thesis, I will try to answer the question "Why Italian?" keeping in consideration the reasons authors give to the readers. However, I’ll put their ideas in dialogs with Pascal Casanova’s work, “The World of Letters” (Harvard University,
How Casanova describes it, the "world of letters" is the real world writers deal with. The "world of letters" is made by market, readership, editors, publishers, translators and "literal capital" which difference from a national literature to another and from a language to another. In other words, some literature and languages are more prestigious of others within the "fierce" world of letters.

Toward the end of my thesis, I will also consider some aspects of the Italian history - precisely the colonization period- and the way it has been delivered officially in Italy and also toward the outer world. For the last point, I will consider Ali Mumin Ahad's works, especially his unpublished novel "Memorie del fiume ed altri racconti del Benadir," in which the author re-writes an untold story of the Italian colonization in Somalia. I went to Italian schools in Rome and witnessed a lack of reflection of the students (but also professors) on the Italian historical experience of the colonization. When I asked classmates of mine, graduate students in Italian Literature at La Sapienza University, which countries Italy did colonize or about the geographical location of Somalia, I often got wrong answers. "Where is Somalia?" asked me many of them. After World War II, Italy lost its colonies, along with the war. Both the fall of Fascism and the instauration of a Republic happened fast, and the new Democratic government of Italy did not take responsibility for the future of those far colonies in the Sub-Saharan Africa. None of those colonies speak Italian as official language nowadays, while so many countries keep having Spanish, Portuguese, French, etc. as their official language as a heritage of the colonization. It doesn't mean that Italy's conquest and colonization were less cruel than the Spanish or French one. It was just forgotten or, better said, denied, while countries such a Somalia are still paying the consequences of the Italian, and other nations' colonialism. The fact that Italy didn't want to take in its historical responsibilities toward its former colonies contributed to creating a false myth of Italian as "brava gente," which did not respect the historical reality of facts. All of it also influenced Italian language and the way it is taken into consideration "internationally."

Today, Spanish is a language that carries an immense colonial heritage. About twenty countries speak it, especially of South and Central America. Those
countries have been talking and corrupting Castilian for centuries. Almost the same we can say about French. According to the “French Diplomat,” French ranks the “sixth most widely spoken language after Mandarin Chinese (which counts about a billion speakers), English, Hindi, Spanish and Arabic. Italian is spoken "only" by Italians, about 61 million of people. It ranks at the twentieth place in the chart of the most spoken languages in the world.

“Why Italian?” Anticipating in part the conclusion of my thesis, I state that Italian has been historically considered the language of “culture” more than others, for different reasons. First, and I will refer to Casanova’s work, supporting the idea of Italian as "language of culture" is the "huge literary capital" of the language (starting from Dante, the Renaissance, and its strong connection to Latin and Classical Culture). Second, the “musicality” and other aesthetical elements that make Italian attractive for writers. The third factor that contributes in creating Italian as the language of culture is also the denial of the colonization experience which affected Italy and its language in the past. As “language of culture” more than “language of colonization,” Italian represents for writers a safer place to be. Because of the removal of the colonization experience, Italy, and Italian language have been misrepresented in their relationship with other western languages.

Italy and its language need to reexamine the colonization as historical experience, accepting it and including it in the Italian history. Linguistically, it means to give more space to writers such as Ali Mumin Ahad, starting from the publication of his unpublished novel, “Memorie del Fiume e altri racconti del Benadir.” Ahad and his generation speak Italian since it was the official language in Somalia until 1971. Recognizing it, Italians will reject no more any aspects of the Italian history and language. History and language are two parts that live together, intertwined.

Through the lens of the “World of Letters” of Pascal Casanova

I decided to look at my writers through the lens of Pascal Casanova’s theory of the “world of letters” (The World Republic of Letters, 1999). She opened to me a
new perspective on the reasons why authors may choose Italian as their creative language. Casanova emphasizes how writers don’t just write novels and books that enjoy writing, but they have to deal with many other factors. Among them, some critics who judge their works, a very competitive market, the taste of readers, the support of editors and publishers, and ultimately the fashion and the new literary tendencies of their time. A particular work is recognized as “literary” for multiple reasons, but mostly if it fits in the literary world as a “whole”: with its rules, requirements, and expectations.

“A literary work can be deciphered only by the whole of the composition, for its rediscovered coherence stands revealed only about the entire literary universe of which it is a part. The singularity of individual literary works, therefore, becomes manifest only against the background of the overall structure in which they take their place. Each work that is declared to be literary is a minute part of the immense "combination" constituted by the literary world as a whole." (Casanova, 3)

This “literary world” where the authors inscribe themselves is not an abstract or theoretical world, but it is a real one. It’s a very competitive and aggressive world, where it is challenging to be accepted, where writers “fight” one against the other to be recognized. It’s a violent world, but many don’t give importance it, in the name of the “literary belief.” (Casanova, 10) Dark mechanisms move the literary domination, but we don’t see them because we look only to the “poetic” aspects of literature.

"Each member of the Republic struggle to achieve recognition as a writer." (Casanova, 4)

Along with the writers, also languages struggle for dominance one against the other. As Casanova says: “Rival languages compete for dominance.” (Casanova, 4) Casanova critiques the way the literary world has always been seen by most of the critics and refuses the distinction between “internal criticism” and “external criticism.” If the first is mostly focused on the texts and the meaning within in, the second on the other side, considers primarily the historical conditions where the
text is produced, but not the “quality” of the text itself. (Casanova, 5) According to Casanova, the only thing that instead matters, it’s the “worldwide reality.”

"World literary space as a history and a geography - a space constituted by writers, who make and embody literary history - has never been properly traced or described. [...] It, therefore, becomes necessary situate writers and their works in this immense territory, which may be thought of a sort of spatialized history." (Casanova, 5)

The literary world envisioned by Casanova is “interdisciplinary”: all disciplines, from history to culture and linguistic come together to shape it. In other words, it rejects “boundaries” but embraces a global approach. A crucial point in Casanova theory of “the world of letters” is that this literary world doesn’t correspond with the political world since the last changes much faster than the other one. There are two maps: a “political” and an “intellectual” which are independent one to another. As an example, Casanova refers to Venice and Florence in the sixteenth century. Florence was at that time the capital of the “intellectual world” with Tuscan as the strongest dialect in the Italic peninsula. Florence was the center of “literature” despite the fact that Venezia was the “economic” power.

Also, Casanova defines Italy as the first recognized literary power during the Renaissance. Politically, the Italic peninsula was facing one of the darkest periods ever: French and Spanish were fighting one against the other on the Italian soil. If economically and politically Italy was at the lowest point, its literary and artistic production was prolific. According to Casanova, it was because of Italian’s Latin heritage. After Italy, it was Paris the next “literary Mondial capital.” Citing Braudel, Casanova refers to the United States as an economic leader in the early 90s (Casanova, 11) but not as the “literary and artistic leader of the world.” Things have changed today after Braudel’s consideration of the United States as leader of “economics” but not of “letters.” In 2017, after twenty-five years the literary world looks different. “Literary capitals” are continuously challenged, among many factors, also by authors who migrates from a language to another. In the case of Lahiri, she moves from a “literary capital” (United States) to another (Italy, Europe).
While wondering if the United States or Europe have today a most important rule in the “World of Letters,” I agree with Casanova that it is not a “peaceful domains,” but a battlefield where many factors come into play.

"Its history is one incessant struggle and competition over the very nature of literature itself - an endless succession of literary manifestos, movements, assaults, and revolutions. These rivalries are what have created world literature." (Casanova, 12)

In this chaos of “world of letters,” the only “unit of measurement” to create order and rules are the Classics. Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, etc. are the everlasting “models” to whom writers look at. Casanova emphasizes the similarities between “literary” world and “economic” world. She depicts in a way the “world of letters” as a market where “literary values” circulate and are traded. Beneath the structure of the literary world, Casanova inscribes a “spiritual economy.” The world “spiritual economy” sounds like an oxymoron, since the ‘soul’ and the ‘business’ are usually not related one to another. Casanova is not accusing the authors of being part of the one he calls the “obscure mechanism” (Casanova, 10) of the literary world. He just says that writers cannot be aware of some aspects of the complex “world of letters.” It opens to the doubt of how authors, when making some choices, for instance of writing in a language rather than another may not always be “conscious” in depth of the reasons they do it.

**Amara Lakhous and Jhumpa Lahiri.**

“Le Cimici e Il Pirata” e “In Other Words”: two bilingual novels, “born-translated.”

On my desk, there are two bilingual books: "Le Cimici e Il Pirata" (Arlem, 1999) by Amara Lakhous and "In Other Words" (Alfred A. Knopf, 2016) by Jhumpa Lahiri. Lakhous’ work is written half in Italian and half in Arabic, while in Lahiri’s each Italian page is followed by the English translation. For both authors, the target language is Italian, although both of them come from a very different origin of languages. Algerian and Berber, Lakhous and English, Lahiri.
A prominent characteristic the two novels have in common is the inclusion of an "original" and a "translation," the latter written not by the author but by a professional translator. In Lakhous' case, the Italian translator Francesco Leggio wrote the Italian version of the Arabic manuscript. In the case of Lahiri, Ann Goldstein translated “In Altre Parole,” (Guenda, 2015), the novel written in Italian by Lahiri into the English version “In Other Words.” As a result, both books are bilingual, but in a different way. Lahiri conceived a sort of "mirrored translation," in which each Italian page is followed, sentence-by-sentence, by its correspondent in English. On the other hand, Lakhous divided the novel into two sections: the Italian translation and then the original in Arabic. This division is made more evident by the fact that the Arabic reader needs to turn the book upside down to follow the right-to-the-left reading of the Arabic alphabet, as well as the Italian reader when reading from left-to-right the Latin alphabet.

The authors' different approach to the translation has been affected by the fact that Lahiri and Lakhous were in a different period of their lives and careers. "Le Cimici e Il Pirata" is the first work of the early twenties Lakhous, who escaped Algeria during the civil war in the 90ies, ending up in Italy, without speaking at that time the language. He carried with him the Arabic manuscript of "Le Cimici e Il Pirata," along with the hope of publishing it in the new country. Lahiri wrote “In Other Words” later in her career, after being established as writer. As a result, Lakhous’ motivations of learning Italian were divergent, at least initially: the young Lakhous had to learn it to survive in an entirely new country, while Lahiri discovered a strong passion and desire of writing in this language.

Focus on: “Le Cimici e il Pirata” by Lakhous

Lakhous in 1995, at age twenty-five, already graduated in Philosophy at the University of Algiers, escaped his country, quitting his job at the radio station. Like many other intellectuals and writers, he received death threats for their criticism against the Algerian government. In the introduction to the new Edition of "Le
Cimici e il Pirata," renamed "Un Pirata piccolo piccolo" (Edizioni E/0, 2011), Lakhous explains after more than a decade, the special place his novel has.

"Italo Calvino said that the debut novel of an author contains the entire "program" of a writer, all of what will come later, the creative genesis of his literary project. Later in my career as a writer, I'll have two more milestones: "Clash for an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio" and "Divorce in Islamic Style at Viale Marconi." (Fordham, March 2017)

If in "Le Cimici e il Pirata" Lakhous is "consultant for his official translator Francesco Leggio, in the following two works he had a different approach. He becomes an active "translator" of his own works. Lakhous participates actively in the process of translation of his novels starting from "Scontro di Civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio" (E/O, 2008). The author discovers his own way of "translating" which isn’t a mere translation from Arabic to Italian, but a "creative re-writing" of the original in something new. The Translation opens Lakhous to a new and unpredictable writing process. As we said, Lahiri’s case is entirely different. Her decision to write in Italian is a U-Turn in her career as an established writer, who won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000 for her debut novel, "Interpreter of Maladies." Her "need" of learning and writing in Italian was strong as the need of a lover. In "In Other Words" she, in fact, talks about an "innamoramento," "falling in love."

"I don’t have a real need to know this language. I don’t live in Italy; I don’t have Italian friends. I have only the desire. Ultimately a desire is nothing but a crazy need. As in many passionate relationships, my infatuation will become a devotion, an obsession. I’m in love, but what I love remains indifferent. The language will never need me." (Lahiri’s event at McNally Jackson Independent Bookstore, March 2017)

Unlike the Lakhous' contingent need of "surviving" for decoding and managing a new language of a new country, Lahiri learns Italian driven by "love," by a "crazy need," mysterious and profound need of belonging to a language to which she is not in any way culturally related. She doesn't need Italian to survive (at least financially, politically and in general practically), but she needs Italian to satisfy a
deep and authentic desire, which is ultimately never reciprocal since the language "doesn't need her." In fact, she is living in America where it would be sufficient only to know English. A year after Lahiri published "In Altre Parole" (Guanda, 2015) in Italian, she decided to entrust it to the well-known translator Ann Goldstein to rewrite the novel into English. Lahiri openly said that she didn't want to translate the book herself from Italian to English because she feared that English, her mother tongue, would have somehow affected the translation. That delicate task was designated to Ann Goldstein, whom will later also be the official translator of Lakhous when he starts publishing with Europa Editions.

While Goldstein's translation appears to be pretty much loyal and literal with respect to the Italian version, I wasn't able to judge the fidelity of Francesco Leggio translation of Lakhous’ first novel from Arabic to Italian – not having any Arabic skills.

Looking at the foreign words of the Arabic and Italian versions of “Le Cimici e Il Pirata,” I found something interesting. I noticed that the Arabic novel contains many more French words than the Italian one. French words perhaps are common in Algeria as a consequence of the historical relationship this country had with France. The "Algerian" dialect contains many French words as a heritage of the colonial past. French was the official language in Algeria until its Independence in 1962, a language Lakhous has known since he was a child.

In the Italian translation, French words have often been replaced by Arabic words. Some Arabic words sometimes become part of the Italian text without being marked by Italicus as it’s usually done for foreign words. For instance, the word "haggia" (feminine for Pilgrim), referred to the protagonist’s aunt, is completely integrated into the Italian text. Perhaps the author intentionally filled the Italian text with Arabic words to open up Italian readers to the Arabic culture, especially Algerian. The fact that some Arabic words are not written in italics shows that the process of inclusion of Arabic words into the Italian text is natural for the author and translator. Besides French, the Italian version also contains English words. I
also noticed that English words are not located identically in the Italian and Arabic versions of the novel, but their locations are arbitrary. Overall, I perceived that the translator (with the author's agreement who was a consultant during the translating process) took some freedom in dealing with foreign words in the Italian version to probably adjust the Arabic version to the taste of Italians.

Agreeing with Calvino's idea of the first novel as the whole program for a writer, we already see in "Le Cimici e Il Pirata" the peculiar characteristic of the Lakhous' "multilingualism" of Lakhous' texts, which will be an enduring aspect of his writing in his subsequent novels. It follows a list of some Lakhous and Francesco Leggio "word-choices," both in the Arabic and Italian version. Looking at them, we notice some qualities that will also recognize in the others following works of Lakhous. Lakhous' texts are never monolingual. There is a numerous presence of different languages in his first novel, which enlightens his globalization drive of breaking down national borders.

ARABIC NOVEL:
Words written in French:

La grande poste (14)
Ou va l’Algerie (3)
Monsier (6)
hors doeuvres (5)
bien sur
merci (7)
je suis toujours a votre service
bonne appetit
d’accord (2)
7sur7
l’envoye’ especial
bouillon de culture (3)
porno
videoteque
regime (2)
pirates (4)
courage(6)
CBR
Chaine
La serviette
Lespirates(2)
Les fromages
On n’est pas sorti de l’auberge
Dentiste
Une liste noir
Bordel(5)
Les bordeles(4)
Toute de suite
La purée(3)
Chef
Déluge
Sauve qui peut
Les bars
Les discotèques (2)
Me toucher pas a mon garzon
Horizons
Alfa Golf Renault 205 Peugeot
Mustachu
Ne reveiller pas le chien qui dort
Palmolive (2)
Venus (3)
M6(2)

English words:

Streap tease
Sos
Ticket
Match

ITALIAN VERSION:

French words:

bordel bordels 10
Je suis toujours a votre service
Ou va l’Algerie 3
grande poste 31
el moustachu 2
Ne reveiller pas le chien que dort
Ne touche’mas a mi gazon
Sauve qui peut
Apres moi deluge
Merde 3
Courage 3
De Luca

Arabs words:

Haji (pellegrino)
Azra’il (angelo della morte)
Istisqà (preghiera di auspicio per la pioggia)
Halal (religiosamente lecito)
Trabando (malavita algerina)
Sceikh/ (imam)
Rai
Sia’bi (musica popolare precedente rai)
Sa’ada (ristorante)
Scebb (ragazzo)
Míziàn! 3
Haggia (non in corsivo) 2 or more
Si 5
In sha’a Allah 3
Fatwà (parere legale religioso) 3
Casba
Allahu akbor 17
Mùnkor Nakir (angeli)
Huri (creatura femminile paradiso)

Latin:
Mea culpa

English:
Horizons
Business
Top-secret
SOS 3

Because of its topic, the novel "Le Cimici e Il Pirata," was considered controversial in the Algeria of 1990s and the author never found a publisher in his country. Therefore, carrying the manuscript with him while crossing the frontier, was for Amara a high risk. The main character, Hassinu, is a forty-two old unmarried man, who works at the post office. A middle-aged bachelor in Algeria is considered an "outsider," and people look at him suspiciously, as if homosexual, poor (he cannot afford efforts wedding), or even worse, impotent. Through Hassinu, the author criticizes the oppressive Algerian society of the 1990s. "Hassinu may be considered the father of the young Arabs who found today the courage of starting
the Revolution in Tunisia and Egypt. He can be considered the father, despite the fact that the reality changed today over a few years ago," writes Lakhous in his introduction to the new edition of the book. He also emphasizes the role the social networks played for those young Arabs (Tunisian, Algerian, Yemeni, Egyptian, etc.) in spreading new liberal ideas, such as freedom of expression. They saw that it was denied to them, but European young people had it instead.
Lahiri: from "Year's Eve" to “In Other Words.”

Jhumpa Lahiri in "In Other Words" explores her love for Italian languages, and investigates its reasons. She first admits of being in love with Italian and feeling all these high emotions and desires that a lover has for his or her object of love.

"When you're in love, you want to live forever. You want the emotion, the excitement you feel to last. Reading in Italian arouses a similar longing in me. I don't want to die because my death would mean the end of my discovery of the language. Because every day there will be a new word to learn. Thus true love can represent eternity." (Lahiri 45)

Lahiri's love relationship with Italian is characterized by a "separation," since, she confesses that it takes place in exile. After spending some time in Rome, she went back to U.S. where she only speaks English. On the other side, Lahiri considers her "exile" and especially her "linguistic exile" as her usual way of being a writer.

"In a sense, I'm used to a kind of linguistic exile. My mother tongue, Bengali, is foreign in America. When you live in a country where your own language is considered foreign, you can feel a continuous sense of estrangement. You speak a secret, unknown language, lacking any correspondence to the environment. An absence that creates a distance within you." (18)

Lahiri published in 2007 a short story, "Year's End" (New Yorker, December 2007) that illuminates the same complicated relationship between languages and identities which emerges in "In Other Words." "Year's End" describes the story of Kaushik, a guy with Bengali background, who was born in States, lived in Bombay for many years and came back then in America when a teenager. Kaushik accepts with difficulties his father remarriage after his mother died. His father's new wife is apparently the opposite of what his mother was. Citra is a very traditional Bengali woman who doesn’t even speak proper English, while his mother used to. Besides comparing Citra continuously to his mother, Kaushik rejects her altogether with the Bengali culture. There is a particular scene in “Year’s End,” in which it is powerfully explained Kaushik's inner conflict. The first time Kaushik meets his father's new wife, despite the fact that she addresses him in Bengali, he replies to her in English.
“I would like for you to call me Mamoni,” she said in Bengali. Her voice was a lower pitch than my mother’s, with a faint huskiness that was oddly calming. “Do you have any objection to that?” She asked this kindly, smiling, wary or my reaction, and I shook my head, not smiling back. “Please,” she said, this time in English, motioning to the chair. I turned to my father and asked, “Aren’t we all eating?” “We already have,” Chitra said, switching back to Bengali. “You have driven from so far. More is coming.” (New Yorker 115)

Also, following morning, when they meet in the kitchen for breakfast, Chitra speaks to Kaushik in Bengali, but he replies one more time in English.

“She talked to me in Bengali, I to her in English, as had been the case the night before. I thought that my slack Americanized pronunciation would be lost on her, but she seemed to follow what I said.” (118)

The linguistic battle that Kaushik is fighting against Bengali involves broad issues, such as culture and identity. Kaushik, besides speaking in English (and specifically with an intentionally “slack Americanized pronunciation”) also rejects the “traditional” tea for breakfast, but decides to go to Dunkin’ Donuts and have coffee and donuts there. Only on one occasion, Kaushik says something in Bengali to Chitra. It happens when they are eating traditional food, and he, remembering his mother teachings, gives appreciations to Chitra’s homemade food.

“Very tasty,” I said instead in Bengali, referring to the food, something my mother had taught me to say when eating in the homes of other people. (The New Yorker, 116)

Kaushik having moved to the U.S. when he was fifteen years old after living many years in Bombay, feels an empathy with Chitra’s young daughters, Rupa and Piu. In the beginning, he refused the nickname Dada, “older brother” in Bengali and asked them to called him with his name. However, Kaushik takes his stepsisters with him to Dunkin’s Donuts for breakfast and gives them “linguistic” advice confessing them how was difficult at the beginning to dominate English, the stranger language. They are shy to ask donuts to the cashier, and he encourages them do not worry.
“The more you use English in these situations, the better it will be. It’s already good.” (New Yorker, 120)

The girls feel uncomfortable in speaking English and fear that other kids will laugh at them in school.

“Look, I know how you feel. A few kids might laugh in the beginning, but it doesn’t matter. They laughed at me, too. I came here from Bombay when I was sixteen and had to figure things out all over again. I was born here, but it was still hard, leaving and then coming back again.” (New Yorker, 120)

At the end of the story, he sees them again after a while (he had left his father’s house when he found out that his stepsisters disobeyed him opening a shoebox, sacred memory of his mother). Now his stepsisters speak a good English, with no Bengali accent anymore. Despite it, Kaushik feels a distance between him and them.

“They spoke only to each other, and though their accents had turned American, my stepsisters, the closest thing I would ever have to siblings, seemed more impenetrable to me now than they had when they arrived.” (New Yorker, 127)

Besides the linguistic "closeness" among stepsisters and stepbrother, they are still far from each other. English, which is supposed to be a language that unites, in reality, make them feel even more "impenetrable." They understood better each other when the stepsisters, speaking a broken English with Bengali accent, were asking him support during their difficult process of integration in the new American culture. Kaushik and his stepsisters went through the same cultural and linguistic difficulties. Transplanted from culture to another by their parents, they felt at first a frustration and inadequacy toward English, the new language, but then they replaced their Bengali with the new foreigner language. The stepsisters speak English within the family, and to each other, the same way does Kaushik with his father. "Year's End" seems to represent metaphorically also Lahiri’s inner conflict between her mother language, Bengali, and English. She expresses it very well in "In Other World" when she says that her first encounter with English was "harsh and unpleasant." (Lahiri, 147)
Before going to an American school at age four, she used to speak Bengali with her parents. In “In Other Words” she describes English like a "stepmother" while Bengali like a "mother." In the short story, "Year's Eve" the stepmother is a real person, the character called Citra, the Bengali woman that remarried his father. As a child, she felt ashamed of speaking Bengali and felt at the same time bad for that shame. Bengali (her "mother" language) and English (her "stepmother" language) represented for Lahiri an irreconcilable conflict within her. Italian is the "flight" from her deep inner struggle.

"I think that studying Italian is a flight from the long clash in my life between English and Bengali. A rejection of both the mother and the stepmother. An independent path." (Lahiri, 153)

The metaphor of a "flight," Italian becomes an escape the previous conflictive situation between her two languages. Italian, which is not mentioned in Lahiri’s short story published in The New Yorker in 2007, is the language which came in help to attenuate Lahiri / Kaushik conflict among the "mother tongue" and the "stepmother tongue." The “flight” is a metaphor with many literary echoes, from the Greek mythology to James Joyce, to Dante, only to cite some of them. In Joyce’s “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,” the main character Stephen Dedalus envisions himself flying with wings of wax outside his prison, Ireland. He feels entrapped in his country with its religious, language and nationality. It’s not a coincidence that the last name of Stephen, Dedalus, recalls the Greek Dedalus who built wings of wax from him and his son Icarus to escape from the labyrinth of the Minotaur. Icarus would fall since, without listing to his father, gets too close to the sun.

Lahiri’s metaphor of the “flight” also reminds me of the “Folle Volo,” the “insane” flight of Ulysses in Dante, “Divina Commedia.” While traveling in the underworld, specifically at Canto XXVI, in the round Hell called Malebolge where the fraudulent are stuck, Dante meets Ulysses who tells him about his “insane flight” beyond the Hercules’ columns which represented the end of the known world.
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Ulysses died together with his companions since he disobeys to the divine ban on going beyond the columns.

Considerate la vostra semenza:
Fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
Ma per seguir virtude e canoscenza.”
Li miei compagni fec’io sì aguti,
Con questa orazion picciola, al cammino
Che a pena poscia li avrei ritenuti
E volta nostra poppa nel mattino,
Dei remi facemmo ali al folle vole
Sempre acquistando dal lato mancio.
(Vv.79-87, Canto XXVI)

Does the Ulysses’ “folle volo” have something in common with Lahiri’s flight? Both of them are insane, “folly.” Both of them fall. Ulysses cannot achieve the “knowledge” of the unknown beyond the Hercules’ columns. Lahiri cannot attain the “knowledge” of Italian like a native, but she has to accept the “imperfection.” Where does Lahiri’s “Italian flight” take her? She doesn’t land safely in the Italian language, because she admits, in a different part of her book, that she cannot be entirely an Italian writer. There will always be a distance between her and Italian, since she learned it late in life, and will never completely dominate it. On the other side, she is aware that she doesn’t belong to English or Bengali as well.

"How it is possible to feel exiled from a language that isn’t mine? That I don’t know? Maybe because I’m a writer who doesn’t belong completely to any language." (Lahiri, 21)

From which “departure” is Lahiri wishing of flying away and where she instead wishes of landing? Does she want to fall somewhere or just keep flying? At the end of the book, Lahiri, describe one more time her relationship with Italian as a metaphor of flying.

"Writing in Italian, I feel that my feet are no longer on the ground." (Lahiri, 221)

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize at a very young age, she admits looking at the award suspiciously. Becoming a famous author, she lost her anonymity and gained a status of “established” writer. It seems that Italian becomes, at this point in her life, a new
creative road to discover, a safe exit from some uncomfortable positions. Is she facing a sort of “creative block” as many writers and artists do at a certain point of their lives?

"Italian offers me a very different path. As a writer I can demolish myself, I can reconstruct myself." (167)

"Reconstruction" means "rebuilding," to "make over" something new. Italian in this case, seems to represent a space of freedom for Lahiri. A creative space where she can experiment without pressure, without expectations. She can even fall during this process, but failure is not a problem for her.

"I'm bound to fail when I write in Italian, but, unlike my sense of failure in the past, this doesn't torment nor grieve me." (Lahiri, 167)

Lahiri is aware of her extravagant task. Nobody did it before, at least among American mainstream writers. She is mindful also of the fact that writing in Italian may signify to reduce her readers and disappoint the American ones. On the other side, she is driven by a huge need of transformation, a metamorphosis, an "impossible" radical change, since she cannot be Italian, anyway.

"I think that my new language, more limited, more immature, gives me a more extensive, more adult gaze." (Lahiri, 215)

The limitation is for Lahiri also an opportunity to grow.

"I like the effort. I prefer the limitations. I know that in some way my ignorance is useful to me. I realize that in spite of the limitations the horizon is boundless." (Lahiri 43)

"Boundless" means no bounds, no limits. Lahiri is, ultimately, free while writing in Italian. She will never be perfect; she will always be in the process of learning, of "apprentice." (Lahiri 43) Lahiri keeps repeating in different parts of her book how Italian allows her "to start from zero" (Lahiri 213)
In learning Italian I learned, again, to write. I had to adopt a different approach. At every step, the language confronted me, constrained me. At the same time, it allowed me to rebel, to go beyond.” (Lahiri, 215)

From one side Lahiri is looking for a "flight," an "escape" from her current situation. She has been dealing with a conflict between the "mother" tongue and the "stepmother" language, Bengali and English. I also see, through some statements in her book that Lahiri feels creatively stuck, suffering in a way the pressure of being a well-known American writer with her career already reputable. While writing “In Altre Parole,” she was hoping a radical change from her impasse in her writing, and Italian became as a fuel for her imagination and also gives her the freedom of reinventing herself as a writer.

In other words, through Italian, from one side she can achieve (or try to reach) a “reconciliation” between her two conflictive languages and cultures. On the other hand, she steps into a space of freedom where she is also allowed to make mistakes, to "fail" since now she expanded her identity: from being the “American writer” she becomes “new” Italian (and bilingual) writer. Her effort in learning and writing in Italian is a motif of forgiveness for her “imperfection.” As she writes in her book, writing in Italian allows her to be "imperfect."

"Why, as an adult, as a writer, am I interested in this new relationship with imperfection? I would say a stunning clarity, a more profound self-awareness. Imperfection inspires invention, imagination, creativity. It stimulates. The more I feel imperfect, the more I feel alive.” (Lahiri, 113)

Lahiri’s "flight" toward Italian was driven also by a kind of "desperation" she refers to when describing her desire of writing in a new language.

"I realize that the wish to write in a new language derives from a kind of desperation. I feel tormented..." (Lahiri 85)

Lahiri is the first in questioning her choice of putting aside English and writing in Italian. In exploring the reasons why she does it, she starts asking herself also the reasons why she writes. In the end, writing and living coincide for the author. The choice of a language is crucial because the words themselves have a power of
organizing her life, giving meaning to everything. Writing in English or Italian is not the same thing, not the same experience, not the same “identity.”

"What does a word mean? And a life? In the end, it seems to me, the same thing. Just as a word can have many dimensions, many nuances, great complexity, so, too, can a person, life. Language is the mirror, the principal metaphor. Because ultimately the meaning of a word, like that of a person, is boundless, ineffable." (Lahiri 87)

Languages are crucial for Lahiri to experience life. Working with words is a key for surviving, for being alive.

"If I didn't write, if I didn't work with words, I wouldn't feel that I'm present on earth." (Lahiri, 87)

When she says that "language is the mirror, the principal metaphor" (Lahiri, 87) makes me think that the Italian language is now the way she is searching, as an author, the ultimate meaning of her own writing and life itself. Italian becomes for her not just a language: in this moment of her life, it is the nerve of her own being as a writer and persona.

**Translation: the adventure of Lakhous, Lahiri and Ann Goldstein**

Lahiri’s last writing experience as a translator from Italian to English for the famous Italian writer Domenico Starnone is another clue which helps me to investigate better her linguistic choice and love for the Italian language. I went personally to the presentation of "Ties," ('Lacci’ in Italian) at the McNally Jackson Independent Bookstore, on March 17th, 2017, and listened to the discussion between Lahiri and Starnone, moderated by Michael Reynolds, the Editor-in-Chief of Europa Editions who published the novel. I found it revealing the way Lahiri describes the "translation." Translation is a part of the creative process, especially when the language is Italian, the one she chose as her creative tool.

"The activities of creative writing and translating are very intertwined, and the act of translation is deeply feeding my creative process. [...] The
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"Translation extraordinarily strengthens my relationship with Italian, is the most profound form of reading, and reading is the basis of all writing." (Lahiri, at McNally Jackson Independent Bookstore, March 2017)

While translating from Italian to English, she keeps learning Italian, exploring the possibilities of the language through the writing of the eighty-year-old writer Starnone, who has published an enormous amount of successful novels, short stories, and scripts in Italy.

"I cannot have a higher Italian teacher at this point, than being Starnone’s translator," Lahiri admitted during the book presentation. (Lahiri March 2017)

Lahiri talks about her relationship with the Italian language as a "Destino," a Destiny.

"I think the most effective way to summarize what Italian has come to represent for me, is precisely what Starnone was explaining about the force of desire and this idea of freedom [of the main characters of his novel, "Ties"], and the legitimation of our reckless desire, that we don't understand and seems incomprehensibly wrong." (Lahiri March 2017)

"Destiny" brought Lahiri in a way to Italy, following this desire, which she describes as "reckless." Her journey to Italy - cultural and linguistic had an end when she came back to the U.S., and it caused sadness and pain to the author.

"My move into Italian and away from the U.S. was in some sense not just linguistically. It was driven by a search for happiness. [...] The journey of Italian is the journey of writing as well. It's the same journey, the same desire to reach something, whether it is meaning, whether it is mastering the language. [...] My relationship to Italian has that force behind it, and it was so hard for me to leave Italy and come back here. I felt that something very beautiful that was growing, that was taking shape, rooting, was interrupted, cut off and triplicated. I was afraid. And it was having Starnone's book to translate that grounded me here, in a way that was essential." (Lahiri March 2017)

Translation is for Lahiri a safety net. It was a sort of reconciliation and reconnection with Italian, a language she struggled to learn, traveling to Rome to be exposed totally to it, and then she abandons when returning to America. Lahiri’s research for happiness goes along with the process of learning Italian and writing in this
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language. This process seems to have given fuel to her creativity, expanding it and also challenging her identity as an American established writer in the English language.

"I don't want to be in a safe place, in a creative sense. First, the discovery of Italian and relationship with Italian and now the translation led me to two vantage points as a writer, which is very exciting for me." (Lahiri March 2017)

Lahiri seemed to want to challenge her status of established writer in English, an "identity" which became too strict over the years. While she talks about identity, she opens it up to a myriad of possibilities.

"I learned to not worry about identity, to move away from it, to have a detachment toward a very oppressive idea and reality for most of my life. Identity is a container, and I want to stay away from containers. [...] Our identity is constantly changing, being rewritten and revised, like a powerful text of Virgil translated all the time. That's how I approach identity: a kind of translation, open-ended translation as I move through life. I feel like I need to maintain the container opened and see what's outside." (Lahiri March 2017)

Pascal Casanova considers “translators” as imperative players into the “world of letters.” Translators are not just “intermediary” among cultures, but they create literary values. Translators are the promoters of the global market of the literary world.

"Whatever one may say of the inadequacy of translation, this activity nonetheless remains one of an essential task and one of the worthiest of esteem in the universal market of world trade." (Casanova 14)

Lahiri plays a paramount role in promoting Italian in the American and English marked. She first did it as a bilingual writer who experiments in Italian, and now as an English translator of the contemporary writer Starnone in English. In Casanova’s words, Lahiri may be a “cosmopolitan intermediary” between Italian and American language and culture. Compared to Lakhous, Lahiri discovered the translation late in her career.

Lakhous, a born-translated author, and Lahiri, a late translator.
Lakhous starts as a “born-translated” author. He published “Le Cimici e Il Pirata” as a bilingual book, half Arabic and half Italian. It was his “birth certificate” as a writer. Translation accompanied Lakhous since the very beginning. Besides being “intermediary” between cultures (Italian and Arabic), he was also creating literary value, both for Italian and Arabic, promoting both culture and literature and expanding the “global market.” Lakhous, using Casanova’s definition, may also be a “cosmopolitan intermediary,” even though since he played a crucial role in the Mediterranean, we can consider him as a “Mediterranean intermediary” among Arabic and Italian.

“Amara,” means “constructors of bridges” and Lakhous defines himself as someone who builds communication among languages. And the “bridge” become the metaphor of his poetic. “My name, "Amara," means constructor of bridges. I build bridges among the language, not walls or borders. The idea of "bridge" is crucial to understand my work as a writer. My bridges aren’t one-way highways, but they go both directions. All of them communicate with each other: the Italian with the Arabic, the English with Berber, etc.” (Lakhous’ interview, April 2017)

Analyzing Lakhous’ writing process closely after his first novel, “Le Cimici e Il Pirata,” he kept writing in Arabic and Italian, in a relationship between the two languages, which was fluid and mutable. Lakhous published the Arabic novel “كيف ترضع من الذئبة دون أن تعضك” in Algeria in 2004 and then worked for two years in the Italian version. The result was “Scontro di Civiltà per un Ascensore a Pizza Vittorio” (E/O, 2006) a novel which become not a translation from the original Arabic, but an entirely new version. Lakhous changed some parts and added some new sections in two years of working on more than twenty version of the same novel. The Arabic and the Italian novels have same characters, stories, but different languages, titles, covers.

Lakhous’ writing process changed again after “Scontro di Civiltà.” For his third book, Lakhous wrote directly two versions, Arabic and Italian, simultaneously, using two different keyboards. So he published For "Divorce all’Italiana a Viale Marconi" and "القاهرة الصغيرة" (translation, Little Cairo) both in 2010.
"In 2010 I decided to do something original, and I wrote this story in two version at the same time. I was writing the draft in Italian and then, having two keyboards in two languages, I was able to change the text. At the end of the day, I considered these books like twins." (Lakhous’ conference at Fordham, March 2017)

Lakhous lived and published his first three books in Rome, and then he moved to Turin, in the North of Italy where he wrote two more novels. Torino is also the setting of ”Contesa per un maialino italianissimo a San Salvario. (2013) and ”La zingarata della verginella di Via Ormea.(2014). For the first time, Lakhous wrote those two novels directly in Italian, without the Arabic version. While following Lakhous’ “migrations” from Algiers to Italy, first to Rome and then to Turin, and then to New York City in 2014, we can also witness his linguistic “migrations”: Arabic, Italian, and now English. In the conference he did at Fordham University, in the Bronx (March 2017), he expressed his dream: to be a ”quadrilingual” writer. In May 2016 he already published a short story in English, while he was also working as a professor at some universities in the Metropolitan Area of New York City.

"In 2014 I decided to write in English because we moved to New York. The choice of language is usually connected to my life, where I’m living."
(Fordham, March 2017)

In 2009 Lakhous spent some time in Berlin but never wrote anything in German. German is the only exception for Lakhous in which a “physical” migration to another country is not followed by a “linguistic” migration and in the adoption of the new language. Lakhous, referring to his peasant origins, conceives each language as a land to cultivate. Not all the languages are the same; some may be harder to farm, other easier. The “difficulty” of a language is not related to the beauty of it. Lakhous has not preference: all languages are equal. It’s life that decides at the end. “Destiny,” even more than the author himself is crucial when it comes to choosing a language or another.

“I have to recognize, coming from a family of farmers, that languages are like lands. Some lands are hard to work, other malleable. Even though German is a beautiful language, it is very hard to work. In 2009 I was about to move to
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Germany, but I didn’t. In the end, I didn’t spend too much time in Germany to learn the language. I believe it was the Destiny, Mektûb.” (Lakhous interview, April 2016)

The world “Destiny” was also used by Lahiri when she talked about her love for Italian and the decision to start writing in that language. The Arabic word “Mektûb”, مكتب recurs in Lakhous’ work often, especially in “Divorce Islamic Style” (2012), when Sophia, one of the main character of the novel describes what it exactly is.

“In Egypt, they say, “Al maktûb aggabin, lazem tchufo l’ain!” What’s written on the forehead the eyes have to see. No one can escape maktûb, destiny. When we’re born, God writes on the forehead of each of us what we will live until death. Someone will say: this is fatalism, the game is over, there’s not free will, Muslim as usual, obedient to everything, blah blah blah. It’s not like that. Maktûb helps us accept what’s already done, like the death of a loved person, to fall into deep despair, or go mad. There exists a higher will that dominates ours. The matter is really rather complicated, but that’s natural, we’re talking metaphysics, not physics. [...] To believe in maktûb is, above all, an act of faith. Things don’t happen by chance, there’s always a reason. What’s important is to do one’s best and accept one’s responsibility. I like the concept of fair play in sport: give a hundred percent and accept the final result. This in my opinion is an example of maktûb.” (Divorce Islamic Style, 2012)

In many interviews, Lakhous has been asked why did not choose to write in French, a language he already knew since he went to French school as a kid in Algeria.

Refusing historical reasons for explaining his preference for Italian, he points out that language and colonialism are not related when it comes to writing.

"I have troubles with French colonialism, but not language." (Fordham, March 2017)

Besides the urgency of learning the language of the country where he migrated, Lakhous also admits that he wants to be “original” and for an Algerian author to write in French is not an original choice. French literature is plenty of Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian, etc. writers who adopt French as the language of their fictions. Most of the writers coming from former French colonies went to French
school and had French education. Lakhous preferred to take a road less traveled, in search of his own authentic way of being an original writer.

"My goal is to be original. If writing in French, I'm not going to insure originality." (Fordham, March 2017)

In his choice of writing in Italian, Lakhous shows an awareness of a literary word, a sort of Casanova's international Algerian-French "world of letters" where actors (writers) play a crucial role. In search of originality, Lakhous noticed that there is already a market of Algerian writers who write in French and that no Algerians write instead in Italian. A nonconformist choice within the "world of letters" may attract the curiosity of readers and editors.

In the case of Italian, it was the language that chose Lakhous before Lakhous chose it. As we said, escaping in the 90s from the Algerian civil war, Lakhous ended up in Italy for asylum, a country the writer got to know for the first time. Besides the initial "emergency" of learning Italian for surviving in an entirely different world and culture, he wanted only to be an Arabic writer. When he came back to Algeria for a vacation, after a long exile, he changed his mind.

"Since I moved to Italy, I promised to myself to accept the "physical" exile but not the "linguistic" one. On March 2004, after nine years of "exile" from Algeria, I traveled to my country. I stayed there three weeks. I was constantly feeling a feeling of dizziness. I remember repeating to my youngest sister of how everything in Algeria looked small to me: the kitchen table, the street, my home, some distances, etc. I realized how my new perspective of the world and my culture changed, becoming much more wider and complex. (Lakous’ Interview, April 2nd)

Traveling back to Algeria, Lakhous discovered that his country looked different to him. Algiers seems smaller, incredibly smaller, compared to how was before. The Italian experience changed radically the author that started feeling the need of "adding" Italian among his languages. For Lakhous, adding a "language" seems like adding a new "identity."

"As a consequence of my return to Algeria after so many years, I took the decision of "adding" the Italian as a language of my writing. I never thought of giving up Arabic. A writer friend of mine, Carmine Abate, told me once
about a metaphor which I never forgot: of ”live with addition, not by subtraction.” (Lakhous’ interview, April 2017)

The relationships among language are balanced in Lakhous.

“If Lahiri is monogamous with language, I’m polygamous.” (Lakhous’ interview April 2017)

Lakhous, comparing himself to Lahiri notices a crucial difference. When Lahiri decided to write in Italian, she renounces to English, while Lakhous considers his relationship with languages “inclusive.” Lakhous’ languages are like “wives” with equal rights, while Italian for Lahiri seems to represent an “extramarital lover.”

“Jhumpa Lahiri’s case is pretty different from mine. When I met her in May 2014 in Italy, she confided me that her relationship with English was going through a crisis, a kind of linguistic divorce. She wasn’t reading or writing in English at that time. She felt strangled and closed in a role of a well-known writer of novels dedicated to Indian or Bengali characters that try to reconcile with United State. Italian became for her an “extramarital lover.” A lover, even though over time may become the love of your life, remains a traitor, someone who damages others.” (Lakhous’ interview, April 2nd)

The concept of Multilingualism like re-birth.

Lakhous in the Fordham conference expressed his dream of being a “quadrilingual” writer (Arabic, Italian, English, and Berber), and, in a way – using Casanova’s vocabulary, he became a “cosmopolitan intermediary.” In my opinion, the “multilingualism” of Lakhous goes much beyond the “quadrilingual” and also embraces a myriad of other cultures and languages. The attention he dedicates to the language in most of his novel it is not just related to the “standard” Italian, but to many dialects and regionalism: Neapolitan, Sicilian, Piedmonts, Roman, etc. Each character of Lakhous’ novels expresses in his dialogue a particular origin, through a cultural “tag,” which is the dialect. In Italy, there is a myriad of dialects, and Lakhous in his novels gives space to them, promoting them through his characters. If a character is Roman, he will speak as a Roman, and we will recognize some “cultural tag” in his dialogues. The variety of Italian regionalism is well represented in Lakhous’ work, including also immigrants who live in Italy but are neither
integrated nor documented. Romanian, Albanese, Nigerian, etc. are some of another language, which appears in dialogues about characters. Lakhous’ writing is a real celebration of languages (and cultures), through characters that show their identities mostly speaking.

Lakhous last “migration” happened in 2014 when he moved with his wife to New York City. Another language came again into Lakhous’ life experience and also influenced his writing: English, the language of “the American Dream.” The relationship with English seems to be more complicated than with the others. From one side is the language of the “American Dream,” an original dream that fuels the imagination of the immigrant writer.

“Writing in English is related to "The American Dream." "The American Dream" is unique in the world. There are not French, Algerian, Italian dreams, but only one: the American. Each immigrant who leaves his land follows a "burning dream," a very passionate one. Writing in English is the dream I need as an immigrant, the source of my energy, my compass to find the direction and also the consolation for what I’ve left. It becomes the compensation and the justification for what you give to yourself when abandoning your country. As an immigrant, I need the American Dream.” (Interview to Lakhous, April 2017)

On the other side, Lakhous admits that because of its internationality, English is also a way to reach more readerships.

“The fact that English is a global language is surely a tempting quality, but it's not the real reason for choosing it. As a linguistic "polygamous," I have a balanced relationship with all of my languages.” (Interview to Lakhous, April 2017)

Ultimately the reasons why an author chooses a language is complex and involves many aspects: poetics, stylistic, migration, etc.

“Behind the decision of adopting a new language, there are aesthetic, political, creative reasons; it's not only about the market and the readership. That’s why I decided to also write in Berber, which is a local language.” (Interview to Lakhous, April 2017)
The editorial market may be substantial or less; it depends on the “dream” and “priority.” It depends on the compromises a writer is willing to accept with the market and the hegemonic literature.

“It all depends on the dream and priorities: do you want to write something original or do you prefer being enumerated among the best sellers? They are two entirely different things.” (Interview to Lakhous, April 2017)

It’s a matter of the fact that there is a hegemonic literature, and a market the writers have to deal with. But at the same time, writers may decide their own priorities. And a good writer is aware of the risk of the “World of Letters.”

Lakhous refers to the American and English hegemony on the today “world of letters,” despite the fact that American literature is a very young literature: a “teenager” compared to Petrarch or Dante. The high “literal capital” of the American literature seems instead to be determined by the influence of cinema. American movies – which dominate the market of the Western movie theaters – are very often translated in novels or vice versa. “Talking about "literal capital," the U.S. is a very young country, a teenager. Besides the contemporary American literature, the U.S.’s literal capital is nothing compared to the European one. Let’s think about Dante, Petrarch, and we can also going back much further in time much. There is not so much "literal capital" in the U.S., but the cinema supports the American literature. Almost all the successful books are translated into a movie. In the Italian movie theaters, seven on ten movies are Americans. It is hegemony on the editorial market.” (Interview to Lakhous, April 2017)

Lakhous defines “illogical” the fact that English literature is read and published everywhere in the world, while here in the U.S. only 3% on the bookstores have translations from not English books.

“In Italy, instead, about 50% or 60% of the books sold in the bookstores are translations from English works. Only the 3% of the book published in U.S. are translated into French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese. In my opinion is illogic that three every hundred of books in U.S. are different from English.” (Interview to Lakhous, April 2017)

Ultimately, Lakhous, aware of the fact that languages and literature are not neutral, but involves political and economic aspects, decides to escape from any “administrative” or “opportunistic” relationship with the language.
“I don’t have only administrative or opportunistic relationship with English, also because it will also be the language of my daughter.” (Interview to Lakhous, April 2017)

The fact that Lakhous also includes Berber, which is a local language, means that the reason for choosing a language goes much more beyond the readership, but looks for authenticity.

“Berber is related to my mother since it is the only language she speaks. Because of the Algerian nationalism, Berber wasn’t allowed in schools, and I didn’t have a chance of studying it when I was a kid. I’m planning to study it, perhaps in France, at the Center of Oriental Studies with a professor that I know. I need to learn how to write it, while I know already how to speak it.” (Interview to Lakhous, April 2017)

Writing in Berber, Lakhous is closing a circle in his writing and life. Berber is the “beginning”; it is his family language, the mother tongue Lakhous spoke. It’s only spoken and not recognized in Algeria as much as an "official" language as Arabic. It was introduced in the Algerian constitution only in 2016, while Morocco started promoting it already in the 80s.

"I was born into a Berber family, but in the 70s I couldn’t study Berber, because of the Algerian authority, based on "One Nation, One Language," decided that teaching Berber was illegal." (Fordham, March 2017)

Writing in Berber, Lakhous would give a contribution in promoting the language, so far mostly oral.

"A writers can play an important role in promoting a language through literature." (Fordham, March 2017)

"I want to promote a "new Algeria" as a country based in many languages, and I’m going to do it by writing." (Fordham, March 2017)

Ann Goldstein (Lakhous and Lahiri’s translator) and the editors.

I dedicated a small section of my thesis to Ann Goldstein, considered today the “star of translations” from Italian to English. She played an important role both
for Lakhous than for Lahiri. Goldstein became famous after she translated Elena Ferrante’s novels, especially because the author never showed her identity and the translator was the public referent in Ferrante’s behalf. Although Goldstein’s skills are a guarantee of quality for translations, I was initially skeptic before reading Lakhous translated into English. I feared some cultural aspect of Lakhous’ novels, delivered primarily by the dialects, would have been lost. After reading Goldstein’s translation of Lakhous, I changed my mind. Lakhous’ books in English, published by Europa Editions, are very trustworthy to the originals. The translator was able to find a right balance in translating Lakhous’ language for English readers, without losing cultural elements carried by dialects and regionalism, which are fundamental in Lakhous’ work in Italian. For instance, Goldstein’s approach to Calabria’s dialect:

“A mi casa parra cumu me piacia... I speak however I want.” (Dispute over a Very Italian Piglet, 38)

To Albanian:

“My name is Luan, and I’m forty years old. I was born in Albania, in Durrës, which in my language is pronounced Dùrs. It’s the most important city after Tirana, the capital, with a population of two hundred and twenty thousand. The sea is beautiful there. How I miss my city. As our proverbs goes, Ku eshte balta me e embel se mjalta, when the mud is sweeter than honey.” (Dispute over a Very Italian Piglet, 60)

She was able to integrate harmonically in the text words that have a very meaningful place in the Italian culture, such as “terrone:”

“And by the way, what happened to the word terrone, a southerner. And by the way, what happened to the word terrone, meaning, literally, covered with dirt? How did it disappear from daily language? Maybe it’s been replaced by “non-E.U.”? (Dispute over a Very Italian Piglet, 96)

While translating Ann Goldstein rendered the sound of immigrant speaking in another language, as for the case of Egyptian who mispronounce the “p” (“b”):

“Physically, he looks like an Italian, let’s say a southerner, a handsome, dark Mediterranean-like me! He could pass for a purebred Italian if he kept quiet, but that would be impossible, because Saber is an incurable chatterbox. His problem is that he can’t pronounce the letter “p,” and to survive linguistically
he clings, like a desperate shipwrecked sailor, to the “b”. When he says “brostitute” people think he’s Sicilian, otherwise is kind of a mess.” (Divorce Islamic Style)

Goldstein’s challenge in translating Lakhous and Lahiri diverged enormously. Rendering Lakhous’ linguist variety, Goldstein decided to maintain mostly the characters’ “cultural tag” (dialect) in the English translation, and juxtapose it with English. In translating Lahiri from Italian to English, she did have to deal with different aspects. First, while translating Lahiri, Goldstein had to maintain the high standard writing of the author, from one side. On the other hand, since the center of the book was Lahiri’s Italian version, Goldstein’s writing had to look also as much “objective” as possible. For the sake of “objectivity,” in translating Lahiri, Goldstein played not the only role of linguistic and “cosmopolitan” intermediary. She also “emotionally” supported the author, who refused to translate from Italian to English her book. In fact, Lahiri admitted do not have enough “objectivity” during the process of translating from her “acquired” and “weakest” language (Italian), to the “stronger” and “maternal” language (English).

Lahiri’s love for Italian is authentic, and it emerges clearly from her book. She feels a strong desire but also a kind of inadequacy to it. In "In Other Words," she tells the readers about episodes where she felt judged for her "foreigner" accent while, in Rome, she was speaking to Italians. She is also aware of not being able of becoming an "Italian writer" because she won’t be able to dominate the language completely. On the other side, publishing first a book, "In Altre Parole," and then the second, "In Other Words," meant that she had enough courage to expose herself to thousands of readers (Italian and American).

I believe editors played a crucial role in supporting Lahiri in her linguistic adventure. Borrowing Casanova’s words, editors are part of the category she calls "Cosmopolitan intermediaries." They have a pivotal role in creating "literary value," in the "world of letters." First Guanda ("In Altre Parole", 2015), then Knopf ("In Other Words", 2016), finally Europa Editions ("Ties", 2017), have surely considered her case as an editorial success in the international and national book market, a
cause which would arouse curiosity both in Italy and in the U.S. Supporting and publishing Lahiri’s Italian and then bilingual novel they envisioned a success, and on the other side, they influenced some literary tendencies. Lahiri’s case became famous in Italy, even among readers that were not familiar with contemporary American literature. “Why a Pulitzer American writer such as Lahiri is publishing a book in Italian?” some Italian writers probably asked. On the other hand, Lahiri’s American readers - who are mostly based in the U.S. – generally responded with interest toward the unusual linguistic choice of the author. As a result of all of that, the Italian language went under the spotlight. Through Lahiri, I believe Italian is growing in its prestige and international reputation.

Seeing in Lahiri’s love and passion for Italian an opportunity, editors, and publishers created a marketing case to make her book successful which would have attracted readers and sold copies on both sides of the Atlantic. Saying that I don’t mean to consider their choice as cynical, but completely the opposite: smart and visionary. Building bridges among two cultures - Italian and American – editors and publishers from one side create curiosity toward the Italian language in the U.S., and from the other, helped Lahiri in re-creating her image as a writer and satisfy her need of expressing her creativity in another language. If before she was only the famed American writer from whom readers expect Pulitzer-like novels, now she owns a space of freedom from where, as she says in her book, she "starts from zero." Now she is officially a bilingual writer and together with her languages, also her identity duplicates. In details, editors supported Lahiri’s passion for Italian and saw in it a future as "literary product," for different reasons which I can only suppose. For instance, Europa Editions, a house publisher, settled in New York City, which has a strict relationship with Italy, is currently publishing works of Lahiri as the translator of Domenico Starnone, a famous Italian author. Precisely, Europa Editions was founded in 2005 by two Italians, Sandro Ferri, and Sandra Ozzola Ferri, who also own the Italian press Edizioni E/O. Lahiri’s passion for Italian met perfectly Europa Editions’ vision of a successful literary product that brings together Italian and American contemporary authors. But why Italian? Did Editors consider the “literary value” of Italian language before accepting Lahiri’s challenge? The
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prestigious “literary value” of Italian traditions rooted in Dante and the Italian Renaissance as Casanova writes in his “The World of Letters”? Casanova himself considers the Italian Humanism as the first "World Republic of Letters" in Europe after the Latin literature. Italian literature has an authority and prestigious place in the "World of Republic of Letters" especially because of Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto, Machiavelli, Boccaccio, among many late Medieval and Renaissance writers.

A Somali who writes in Italian: Ali Mumin Ahad

The third section of my thesis is dedicated to Ali Mumin Ahad a historian and writer born in Somalia in 1958, at the time this country was under the Italian Trusteeship of Somalia, the AFIS (Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana Della Somalia). The United Nations delegated Italy for assisting its former colony toward independence and the establishment of a democratic government. The trusteeship lasted from 1949 to 1960. July 1st, 1960 Somalia became independent but only nine years later, October 21st, 1969, Siad Barre organized a military coup instituting a dictatorship in the country.

The Somali historian and novelist Ali Mumin Ahad enlightens some fundamental aspects of the Italian history. In particular, Ahad’s unpublished novel, “Memorie del Fiume ed Altri Racconti del Benadir” and his historical essays tells the readers about the Italian colonization in Somalia. For the first time, the history is told from the perspective of a Somali and not of a Western historian. In 1993 Ahad wrote his first essay in Italian, “I Peccati Storici del Colonialismo Italiano” (the Historical Sins of the Italian Colonization), which officially inaugurated the postcolonial studies of Somali writers. Ahad’s works should be enumerated among the Italian Literature, because of its topic (Italian history) and also because of the language the author chooses (Italian language). Ahad writes in Italian, and therefore, to Italian readers.

Before of plunging into the work of Ahad, I will briefly summarize some relevant chronological facts about the Italian colonization in Somalia.
From the “Italian Empire” in Somalia to the UN trusteeship

Despite the fact that the “footprint” left by Italian colonialism is minuscule compared to the linguistic remnants of imperial English, Spanish, and French, Italy also had its own “empire,” especially in Africa. During the busy time of the Congress of Berlin (1884-1885) known as the period of the “scramble for Africa,” the major European powers were splitting among them the African continent. Italy, which a decade before achieved its independence, was left behind from the other nations, but stubbornly it decided to fight for its “right” of owning its piece of the “African cake.” The Italian “Hero of the two world” Giuseppe Garibaldi and the politician Giuseppe Mazzini, who both played a crucial role in the Italian Unification in 1871, were the first in wanting to grasp the African leftovers of the other European powers. The fact that there are not countries today, which have Italian as the official language spread the idea that Italian colonization was less cruel and destructive of the others. As a consequence, it alimented the myth of “Italiani brava gente” (Italians as good people), which contradicts with the fact that Italians were the first in using chemical weapon against civilians in Lybia, as the Italian Angelo Del Boca documents in his four volumes of “Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale (Italian in East Africa),” (Mondadori, 2009) dedicated to the Italian colonization in East Africa.

Italian colonization was cruel as much as all the other colonization, entailing killings, expropriation, and exploitation of lands, prostitutions, and any abuse of power on the subjugated population. The AOI, Italian East Africa, corresponds to the territories that Italy owned at different times, starting from 1871 in the East Africa (the very moment of the Italian’s unification known as Unità d’Italia) to 1960 (when Somalia, the last colony became formally independent). In 1893 the Italian society “Filonardi” and after that, in 1896 the “Benadir Society” have already bought some Somali territories. In 1905 the Italian government took over the private companies and officially established its Somali colonies. The “Italian Empire” after losing World War II also lost most of his territories, such as Albanian Kingdom of Italy (1939-1943), the twelve major islands in the South East of Aegean Sea, called Dodecanese (1912-1943), the Italian Eritrea (1882-1947), the Italian Libya (1911-
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1943). Somalia, instead, was a “special” case since the UN created in 1949 the “trusteeship territory” of Somaliland through which Italy continued governing its former colony until its independence.

Linguistic remnants of the Italian colonization in Somalia are still active in writers such as Ahad, today in their 50s and 60s, who lived and went to school in Somalia when Italian was still the official language and Dante thought at school (until 1971). The youngest Somali writers, who didn’t experience in first person the Italian colonization, such as Igiaba Scego, and Cristina Ali Farah, both born in Italy, equally inherited that traumatic experience from parents and other family members who instead were in Somalia during the colonization or AFIS. They express all of it in their works as a second or third generation. Among the Somali writers spread all around the world, some decided to write Italian, while others in English. Among the authors who preferred English, there is the author that Ahad defines as the “precursor” of the Italian post-colonial literature, Nurrudin Farah. Farah’s English is not standard, but a “choral” language which includes variations of Arabic, Italian, Somali and aims to give voice to all the nations of Somalis exiled all around the world. Despite the fact that he writes in English, the protagonist of Farah works is the “Italian colonialism.”

“Il colonialismo Italiano è stato disastroso” (Italian colonialism has been disastrous) (Farah, 185)

Ali Mumin Ahad decided to write, instead, in Italian, despite the fact it implies reducing his readers numerically.

An “impure” Somali writer who speaks to Italians about their history.
Ahad defines himself as an “impure” writer, a historian that also write novels. His unpublished novel, “Memorie del Fiume ed Altri Racconti del Benadir,” was born with the idea of talking about history in a different way, more narrative.

“The idea of the novel “Memorie del Fiume ed Altri Racconti del Benadir” was born in my mind a few years after the publication of the essay ‘I peccati storici del colonialismo in Italia’ (1993) with the intention of further extending the themes discussed there in a different approach, that is, in term of narrative.” (Interview to Ahad, April 2017)

“Memorie del Fiume” is a historical novel, which protagonist is the AFIS and the people who lived in Somalia during this period, such us former colonizers, old Somali soldiers who fought in the past along the Italian fascists, new bureaucrats, etc. Besides it, the real protagonist of the novel is the country, Somalia. Specifically, “Memorie del Fiume” it is the history of Somalia.

“In my opinion, the work of a historian is bound to the present of which he or she measures the distance from the past as well as the future, more than what we usually think. In other words, to better understand the present and what we are and where we are, it is essential to turn our gaze toward the past, to translate it into the language of the present. It is by this process of translating history that the inspiration for the novel ‘Memorie del Fiume ed Altri Racconti del Benadir’ derived.” (Interview to Ahad, 2017)

Ahad’s novels and his historical essays are written in Italian since he wants to build a dialogue with the new generation of Italians and tell them about the historical relationship between the two countries. Ahad decided to write in Italian when, arriving in Italy as a refugee, he found out that Italians didn’t know anything about Somalia, the colonization and the historical relationship between the two countries. It describes this moment as a “painful discovery.”

“When I arrived in Italy for the first time directly from Somalia, not as an immigrant or a refugee but for the strengthening of a cultural relation between the two countries with a program of academic cooperation, I realized how little the Italians remembered or knew of Somalia, not to mention the colonial history. It was this painful discovery that prompted me to write about Somalia in Italian for Italians.” (Interview to Ahad, 2017)

Ahad arrived in Italy not as any immigrant. He was linked to Italy through a historical relationship, and by a “program of academic cooperation.” In spite of it,
nobody knew about it, and Somalia was, for the most of the Italians, a foreign

country with an uncertain location. In the essay “Da un emisfero all’altro”

(Kuma&Transculturazione, 2012), Ahad describes his relation with Italian, a unique

language for the author. He learned Italian when he was a kid; his parents enrolled

him in an Italian school. At that time, in the 60s, the Somali language was still only

oral, and parents had three options regarding the school for their kids: Arabic-

Egyptian school, English school which was public, and the Italian. Italian schools

were usually private and Catholic, but in spite of it, religion wasn’t a problem.

“It may sound weird that a Muslim family like mine that has always been one

of the most active in spreading and defending Islam in Somalia decided to

send their kids to a Catholic Mission. It was a very pacific decision for my

family. […] The “Suore della Consolata” (nuns) taught us everything, less than

religion. That was the agreement between the school and my family. An

agreement that the school always respected. (Da un emisfero all’altro, 2012)”

Ahad’s attachment to Italian language and culture started when he was at the

elementary school, at the Catholic Mission. At school, he used to study the same

program (“sussidiari”) that Italian students used back in Italy.

“The ‘subsidiaries’ were huge volumes with prestigious covers, with

reproductions of very famous artworks: the Moses of Michelangelo, the

portraits of Dante, of Leonardo Da Vinci, of Galileo Galilei, etc. the oleographs

of Giovanni dalle Bande Nere, of Antonio Pigafetta, of Garibaldi and his Mille,
of the Risorgimento’s myths. They were so expensive! Having the same

program than Italian schools, some Inspectors from the Public Instruction

Italian Minister regularly came to our village, at the border with Ethiopia

from Italy.” (Da un emisfero all’altro, 2012)”

Ahad also went to the Italian middle school “Mons. Filippini” of Mogadiscio, and

later to the Istituto per Ragionieri e Geometri, where he had Italian and Somali

professors. Ahad enjoyed studying Italian, and he remembers especially subjects

such as Machiavelli and Guicciardini. The Somali professors graduated in Italian

universities. Once at the Somali National University, Ahad became a professor in

Italian. All teachers, at the time, used Italian texts and spoke in Italian. Having an

education in Italian, he built a solid relationship with the language. He also spent ten

years as a librarian at the Italian Institute of Culture of Mogadishu, a critical place
for the promotion of Italian culture that had at that time a sort of “revival.”

According to Ahad, Italian politicians were shortsighted since they were not aware of the opportunity of having a close relationship between the two countries.

“I believe that the Italian politicians at that time were shortsighted. Without giving an opening to Somali refugees who arrived in Rome after the Somali civil war, they lost a great opportunity to strengthen a strong relationship with Somalia.” (Da un emisfero all’altro, 2012)

Italy never recognized some special place for the Somali refugees. Instead, they called “extra-communitarians” all the immigrants coming from outside the European Union.

“Italians, enchanted by the idea of European Union, cultivated the concept of “extra-communitarians,” including in this category also Somali, Eritrean, and Ethiopian people together with the other immigrants who disturbed their new status of European citizenships.” (Da un emisfero all’altro, 2012)

Ali Mumin Ahad lived in Italy for almost twenty years (1987 to 2006). Once he arrived at the airport of Rome, he noticed right away that the way Italians spoke in Italy was very different from the Italian language he learned in Somalia. Ahad learned the Italian of the books and the one spoken in college. In Rome, people spoke Roman dialect. The Roman dialect was similar more to the Pasolini or Monicelli’s movies than to standard Italian.

“Over time, I would have discovered that the Italian language (grammar and syntax) belonged only to the books and to the language spoken at school or college. It wasn’t at all the language people spoke in Rome. The Roman dialect, the one from the working-class suburbs of Pasolini and Monicelli’s movie, and the dialect from Puglia or Sicily were the real spoken language in Italy.” (Da un emisfero all’altro, 2012)

Ahad speaks, instead, a standard Italian, without any accent. Speaking to Italians, Ahad had different experiences. Most of them were curious in seeing an African speaking perfect Italian. They asked him where he learned the language. Not everybody knew where Somalia was. The elders sometimes remembered something about it. The younger, instead, confused it with Morocco or Tunisia. It seems that Italians didn’t know anything about the world beyond the Mediterranean.
“And what was my country? It was always the same question. Somalia. To the elders, this name meant something. Usually, their eyes lighted up or a smile illuminated their faces. Our conversation kept going nice, and we say goodbye to each other like old friends. The youngest were the most confused. Is it Marocco? Tunisia? Oh, God! Such innocence! Then, I understood that their horizon was the Mediterranean. They had a Roman vision of the world! In other words, they had a vision of the world corresponding to the later Roman Empire, when the glories of the Caesars were already history.” (Da un emisfero all’altro)

Ahad’s perfect Italian bothered, instead, another category of Italians: the bureaucratic people. They became suspicious of him when listening to Ahad’s perfect Italian. In Italy Ahad experiences discrimination in the first person. When a non-Italian person, with a different color of skin, is speaking in Italian, the Roman bureaucratic is annoyed. He wants to be the only one that owns the privilege of speaking that language. He’s the owner. On the other side, if the non-Italian person speaks a broken Italian, he feels compassion and, eventually, helps him to understand better.

“The bureaucrat, when he perceives the quality of the language, becomes suspicious and warns, ready to attack. Farewell, you’ll never sort out any paperwork! It’s difficult to explain the reaction of a bureaucratic person. Perhaps, to some extent, the Roman bureaucrat, he feels depleted of something that, according to his concept, he’s the only one who had to be the perfect holder. Above all, he feels so if his tongue is a non-Italian, as it is immediately and clearly visible from the color of the skin.” (Da un emisfero all’altro).

It seems very similar to the Lahiri’s story of when she start speaking in Italian to Italians, and they answer back to her in English. In this case, also, the native speaker felt to be the only owner of the language and felt annoyed at someone non-native who was using it.

“People who don’t know me assume, looking at me, that I don’t know Italian. When I speak to them in Italian, when I ask from something (a head of garlic, stamp, the time) they say, puzzled, “I don’t understand.” It’s always the same response, the same scowl. As if my Italian were another language. They don’t understand me because they don’t want to understand me; they don’t understand me because they don’t want to listen to me, accept me. That’s how the wall works. That’s who the wall works.” (In Other Words, 139)
Lahiri feels the same way Ahad feels when talking to Italians, who look irritated when they listen to a non-Italian to speak in their language.

“They don’t appreciate that I am working hard to speak their language; rather, it irritates them. Sometimes when I talk Italian in Italy, I fell reprimanded, like a child who touches an object that shouldn’t be touched. ‘Don’t touch my language,’ some Italians seem to say to me. ‘It doesn’t belong to you.’” (In Other Words, 139, 140)

The way Ahad experience living in Italy also reminds some passage of Lakhous’ work. For instance, Ahad points out the fact that the Italian landlords started taking advantage of so many immigrants who were looking for rooms.

“Apartments, that time ago we were able to find quickly, now became tough to get. The landlords, the majority but not all of them, discovered a mine: renting to immigrants.” (Da un esisfero a un altro, 2012).

Lakhous in “Divorzio all’islamica in Viale Marconi” also describes how so many immigrants live in the same apartment, all from different nationalities, but mostly Egyptians.

“Business almost done, the bed is mine. I can move in tomorrow. Teresa (the landlord, editor’s note) asks if I want to see the apartment and I say yes. On her phone, she calls one of the tenants, who works at the market nearby. […] Before I follow the Bangladeshi to the apartment, Teresa makes a date with me for tomorrow to finalize the agreement: I’ll have to give her the six hundred euros in cash. No check or transfers. All under the table, naturally. I don’t give a damn, since I’m on mission. On the way to see the house Omar gives me some advance information of my future fellow-tenants. He tells me, for example, that the majority are Egyptians. A Senegalese, a Moroccan, and a Bangladeshi, that is, him, represent the minority. ‘The important thing is that we are all Muslim,’ he concludes with a big laugh. (Lakhous, Divorce Islamic Style 49)”

The apartments are minuscule, with eight people living in two rooms.

“The apartment is very close to Little Cairo, it’s on the fourth floor. Omar takes me in, shows me the kitchen, the bathroom, and two bedrooms. There’s
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no one home. I’ve got time to count the bunk beds. There are six. At first glance, it seems like a dormitory.” (Lakhous 49)

Ahad, refugees, live in Italian as any immigrant. The privilege of being part of a former colony doesn’t count at all.

The situation has an exhalation, especially because the Italian government approved the anti-immigration new laws, and he bitterly realizes that the real Italy is very different from the “idealistic Italia” of his dream. The “Martelli normative,” and the Bossi-Fini after emphasized more and more the concept of “immigrant” as a subject with any citizenship rights. Immigrants assumed other labels such as “vucumprà,” “extra-communitarians,” “clandestine,” etc. The Italian law did no differentiate immigrants, from refugees: they all stay in the same category. As soon as Ahad arrived, he felt disappointed about the fact that Italians had forgotten entirely about its colonies. On the other side, he kept hoping in a better Italy and having a conversation with students and professors. He elected Italy as his second homeland. Because Italian was the language of his education and because also he lived in Italy for twenty years, he felt emotionally attached to the country. On the other hand, he starts separated the love for Italy and people, to the frustration against the bureaucratic aspect of the country. When his kids got the resident permit but not the citizenship he started questioning about all this immense love he felt for Italy. He decided to stop listening to his own heart, but only to the reasons of his mind. He moved with his family to Australia.

“Is it worthy to love so much Italy?”

Ultimately, Ahad describes Italy as an “inhospitable” homeland. Despite it, still loves Italy very much and when he left Rome in 2006, it was like leaving behind a part of himself. The new homeland is Australia. Australia is the country that substitutes the “perduta,” the lost homeland Somalia. The war in Somalia (which started in 1990), forced every Somali writers to the “exile.” Nowadays, the permanent condition of “exile” is a common denominator of all Somali writers around the world of first,
second or third generation. The “exile” is a result of the Somali history which starts with the colonization, continues with the AFIS, the independence, the dictatorship of Barre and, then, the three-decades-long civil war. Exile is painful, but also, on the other side, it helps Somali writers in building a national awareness and re-think their history.

“In the condition of exile one develops the capacity of remembrance, of reflection on the past and the aptitude to question everything. Although exile implies certain limitations, it can always be productive. As I already wrote in my essay, Africa from exile (in Poetiche Africane, 2002), “The distance from the place of one’s own roots makes the desire to understand what is happening in there and to contribute with one’s own skills to solve the problems, to identify the causes of the malaise and participate in search of remedies more intense.” (Interview to Ahad, April 2017)

Once moved to Australia, Ahad started using more English than Italian. Today he keeps writing in Italian, but it comes less spontaneous than before.

“I love Italian language and also the culture, which is the maximum expression of the language. I keep using Italian, but at work and for my studies, and in my everyday life English is becoming less prominent. Once, with my friends, we used to speak in Italian since it has been the language of our education.” (Da un emisfero all’altro, 2012)

Those old friends now live in England, in the United States, in Canada or Australia, and almost none of them live in Italy. From them, it is easier to speak each other in English, instead of Italian. Ahad keeps writing in Italian to maintain the dialogues with the younger generations of Italians.

“Today, I still think it is necessary to write in Italian, especially to keep a dialogue with the young generation of Italian scholars of colonial and postcolonial history.” (Interview to Ahad, 2017)

Ahad recognizes the limitation of Italian, compared to the internationality quality of English. Ahad is one of the few Somali writers who decided to write in Italian.

“Writing in English offers greater opportunities and a wider circulation for the writer as well as historians. If these are the limitations of the Italian language, one of its benefits, at least for me, it was to establish a direct relationship, not a meditated one through translations, with the Italians. The choice of Nurrudin Farah to write his works in English, I think it was an appropriate and good choice.” (Interview to Ahad, April 2017)
Another limit of writing in Italian his novel “Memorie del Fiume,” was the fact Ahad didn’t found any publisher. Writing in Italian narrows the readerships only to the Italian public.

“During the almost twenty years I have been in Italy, I have always written from my knowledge of both Somali and Italian cultures and of their reciprocity, but it was never easy to publish with Italian publishing houses. I think this is mainly related to the fact that the issues that were at the heart of my interest were not among those areas that Italian publishing houses like, since Italian readership, as I said earlier, are unaware of what concern the Italian colonial past.” (Interview to Ahad, 2017)

Armando Gnisci, a professor of Comparative Literature at La Sapienza University, to whom Ahad is still very grateful, always supported Ahad and his works. In the Italian “Accademia” Gnisci, which was also my professor and advisor, was one of the few interested in the Comparative Literature and Postcolonial Italian literature.

“I keep writing in Italian, because of the request of my "Maestro," Armando Gnisci.” (Da un emisfero all’altro, 2012)

Referring to the essayist Valentina Anselmi’s work dedicated to the Postcolonial Italian literature (“La questione Post-coloniale della Literature Italiana nella Letteratura della Migrazione,” 2009), we can agree that writing in Italian is for postcolonial writers such as Ahad is of a “pedagogical,” “therapeutic” and “political” value.

“We become aware of the educational value of the narrations of the Somali postcolonial writers when we listen to them who talk to us in our language. [...] Those authors guide us in rethinking our shared colonial history enriched by their point of view of colonized. On the other side, those writers help us in being prepared in encountering other cultures different from ours. Our Italy is not yet “de-colonized,” that's why it is unprepared.” (my translation of Valentina Anselmi, “La questione post-coloniale della Literature Italiana nella Letteratura della Migrazione,” 2009)

Together with Anselmi, I think that writing in Italian is for Ahad, besides pedagogical, also “therapeutic,” since it is a way of reconnecting with the colonial past, and overcome it "in the memory and the language." Ahad’s “political” reasons
for writing in Italian are also related to the colonial “responsibility.” In other words, Ahad is asking Italy, to take their historical responsibilities toward the Somalia. The new generation of Italians should know what happened in the past. They should be aware that there is a “historical memory” of the relationship between Somalia and Italia.


Ahad writes his novel in Italian, but his language is not standard. He re-invents Italian. The Italian written by Ahad is full of Somali terms. They are included in the text in italics and emerge as “foreigner” words. He explains all these Somali words at the end of the novels through notes. There are also some words that are “neologism” born from the encounter of Somali and Italian language. Those words emerge, especially in the dialogs. The most relevant are: “Muso-lini,” which is a mispronunciation of Mussolini. “Taliani” which stays for “italiani.” I find the word "taliani" fascinating since it is not just a misspelling of the Italian word that indicates the people who come from Italy (Italians). Taliani are the “Italians” who live in the Colony, far from their native country. Once they arrived in Somalia, a territory made mostly of desert and far about 5.000 from home, they inevitably changed their identity. They started working as dealers, as landlords who expropriated the lands from the local farmers and made them work there for a miserable wage; they fought along with Somali soldiers; they gave orders, got married to Somali women, had family there. They became “taliani” not only for a misspelling of the Somalis. Some of those “taliani” who started a new life in Somalia, also learned the Somali language. For instance, Giovanni, one of the main characters of “Memorie del Fiume,” became the symbol of an Italian presence in Somalia. Giovanni lived in the colony since the beginning of the century, adapting to all the changes that the country had during the Italian presence there.
Giovanni arrived before WWI when Italy was a liberal state, which unified just a few decades before (1871). Giovanni started working as dealers, in banana plantations. He got married to a Somali woman, learned the language, embraced the Fascism when Mussolini occupied Rome, and eventually after Italy lost the colonies he stayed there during the English occupation, protected by the Somali people. When Italy came back to Somalia with the UN trusteeship, he “recycled” himself into the ranks of AFIS. Giovanni adopted as his heir a Somali boy, Mohamed, the son of his wife’s sisters. He wants him to be a relevant minister in the Somali nation of the future, the country that would have been soon independent. Giovanni is a symbol of those “taliani” who living in Somalia adapted their lifestyle to a new country and also tried to create a reality, which was favorable to colonists. From one side, he wants to prepare Mohamed in being a good minister who takes care of his people, but on the other hand, he also cares that the Italians who will live in the new Somalia will survive and keep having their privileges. Giovanni envisions a Somalia like a mirror of the Italy he left more than half a century ago. Giovanni was a farmer in Italian (from Emilia Romagna) and is still a farmer in Somalia. He was an “Italiano” in Italy, and he is a “taliano” here in Somalia. Characters like Giovanni are dangerous since they are sure of being “brava gente,” good people, while in reality are trying to shape the Somali people – and the country – in his likeness. Giovanni uproots Mohamed from his clan and village, and gives him an Italian education; he teaches him about European laws and democracy. Mohamed grows up without knowing the reality of the “clans” which are at the basis of Somalia society. At the end of his life, Giovanni has a crisis of consciousness. He understands that colonists didn’t do enough for the natives, but instead they exploited their lands, made them work as slaves in their own land that Italians expropriated. On the other side, Giovanni is proud of what he has done: he gave Somalis their identities and made them hardworking people.

What does it mean giving an "identity" to Somali people? It’s a very delicate topic that Ahad explores within his novel. It seems that Ahad confers the responsibility for the current situation of Somalia both to Italians and Somalis. From one side Italians exploited Somalia, especially the farmers, making them forced
workers, and also create the myth of the Great Somalia (especially during the Fascism) and injected in the people this idea of "nationalism" against Ethiopia (which also caused wars along the borders). Plus, Italians didn't want Somalis to go to school, another reason why they did not learn Italian so well, and many people stayed with no education. On the other side, Somalia, instead of becoming independent and creating its way of being a nation, inherited the worst behaviors of the colonists. The "new" Somali politicians started caring only about power and prestigious positions in the public administration and the "Parlamanka." They were concerned only about taking a slice of the power after the independence. Ministers and politicians didn't think about the people, but only about their clan. They cared about having Land-lovers, large offices, money, etc. The metaphor of this bad behavior of the new Somalis is the episode of the palm trees. Abdi-Nur, who became a minister because his clan wanted it (even though he didn't have any political background) cut some palms which were of symbolically importance for an old wise man called the "Old man from the River." This old man scolded Abdi-Nur and his generation to inherit the vices of Italians and spending money cutting the palm trees instead of taking care of the poor people. Responsibilities, it seems to say Ahad, are half and a half: not only Italian's. The contradiction of a man such as Giovanni is that for many years he was teaching to his nephew about the importance of democracy, made by parties and not clans; then, suddenly, he changed his mind for the sake of the “power.” When he becomes aware that clans have the real power, he pushes Mohamed in finding compromises with them to achieve his remarkable position in the Parlamanka. In the end, Mohamed is the result of a mix of the teachings of Giovanni, and the tribal tradition. He has many wives, according to the tradition of polygamy, but on the other side, he also lives his life on European standard, owning huge cars and apartments, and working at the Parlamanka.

The work “Parlamanka” (misspelling of the Italian word Parlamento) is for me very evocative. “Parlamento” is a form of govern elected by the people through elections. The desinence “–anka,” symbolically represents a different kind of parliament when the deputies are chosen instead by the most influential members of the clans. Democracy as we know it in Europe – with all the imperfections that it
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conveys – cannot survive and be installed in Somalia where clans traditionally are
the ones who have power and make decisions. Ultimately, the clans are the only
authorities that the people recognize. Somali politicians – which embrace and
imitate European and Italian style – need to be supported by the families. Otherwise,
they are not going to endure. Giovanni understands it, and he renounces to the
“ideal” of democracy and tells Mohammed only to attain the approvals of the clans.

In Ahad novels, there are so many Italian word and places that depict
Mogadishu as a kind of Italian city. There are Ristorante Damari, Strada Imperiale,
Bar Savoia, Ospedale Martini, Fonte Cecchi, etc. and also many “fascist” symbols.
Even though in Italy the Fascist is already defeated and surpassed, it seems to
survive in the colony. Mogadishu looks like a Roma on the Indian Ocean. In
downtown Mogadishu, there is a monument, an Arch of Triumph that reads:

“An UMBERTO I DI SAVOIA ROMANAMENTE” (to Umberto I of Savoia in a
Roman style) (Memorie del Fiume 206)

Italians re-create a Roman Capital over there, in the Sub-Saharan Africa. An episode
which is very significant to understand how Somalis absorbed Italian cultures and
behaviors is when the Old soldier, who fought in the colony along with the Italian
fascists, talks today when he is retired, using some Italian expressions, especially
curses. Even though he is Muslim, he cries: “Cristo!” (Christ). That’s what Italian
soldiers used to do when he, as a young guy, used to fight along with them. The same
old retired soldier remembers the Italian nostalgically as “brava gente,” the ones
who gave Somalis the dream of the Grande Somalia. However, when the student
asks him for which ideal did you fight? He answered him “For the “taliani” king.” It is
very indicative of how Italian brainwashed the mind of the Somali soldiers who only
looked for rifles, a status symbol of nobility, and some salary. In fact, Italians use to
pay Somalis who fought for them against Ethiopia. Ethiopia was Italia's real strategic
objective. To achieve it, Italians created a false myth of “Grande Somalia” to convince
Somalis in fighting against their enemy.
The relationship of Somalis with the Italian language how it emerges from the novel.

Ahad describes in his book, “Memorie del Fiume,” the relationship Somalis have with the Italian language, which also enlightens the relationship Ahad had with it. As we said, Ahad learned Italian when he was a kid since he went to an Italian Catholic school in Mogadishu at the time Italian was an official language in Somalia – it was until 1973. On the other side, Italian colonists didn’t allow most of the population to achieve an education. They feared that to go to school would have created in them an awareness of their status of subjugated and they would have protested and rebelled. That’s why only a few Somalis went to school. During AFIS Italian was the language of the administration. Many Somalis weren’t able to understand Italian, but in spite of it, Italian was used as the official language.

There is a crucial scene, which in my opinion is very revealing. Abdi-Nur is about to be elected as Director of Public Works, but in reality, is going to be the representative of his clan piece of power in the new Somalia. Abdi-Nur doesn’t have a political background, but it seems not to be important. He’s invited by the Governor to go to his office. It follows the scene of the “investiture” of Abdi-Nur, which is grotesque. The Governor is waiting for Abdi-Nur in his big office. On his table, there is a sword symbol of power. He doesn’t speak; he’s silent. Abdi-Nur is confused since he doesn’t know what to expect from this official meeting. The Governor doesn’t speak but communicates with “papers” asking Abdi-Nur “to sign” them. The climax of the scene is achieved when other “influent” people, such as the Chief of Police and the Governor’s secretary show up in the Governor office. The Governor starts reading in Italian an ordinance wrote by the President of the Republic to formalize Abdi-Nur in his new office, but Abdi-Nur does not understand anything of what is going on. He doesn’t know who is the President of the Republic and doesn’t even speak Italian. The secretary noticed that and asked the Governor to translate for Abdi-Nur. As in a theater, everybody is acting. The Governor is acting, as well the other people who stand in the room. Abdi-Nur himself, who is confused, acts. He doesn’t say anything and signs the ordinance. He accepts the power, which
is scary and fascinating for him. Ahad through this scene criticizes the way the new Somali politicians started the "New Deal" of their young country. Plus, the fact that they accepted of using Italian as the official language for the administration means that they were passively inheriting the power and the status quo of the previous Italian government.

In another section, Ahad talks about the farmers or employees who worked with Italians at the time of the Italian Somalia. They know how to speak Italian since the Italian colonists usually talk to them in Italian, but they intentionally use a wrong Italian. They don't want to speak Italian since their boss; the Italian Mario would be disappointed in seeing that they are educated. He doesn't want them too smart, but ignorant and weaker. Toward the end of the novel, Ahad introduces a new character: the teacher of Roman history. He's Italian, and he argues that Roman history is more important than Somali history (which is only “oral” and not written) and Somali should keep learning Italian and Italian history also after the Independence. On the other side, the Neapolitan chef, Peppino, states that Italians should teach Somalis how to cook. The Italian art of cooking is more important and useful of the Roman history, Peppino believes. Peppino is a fascinating character who speaks Napolitan – how it emerges from the dialogues. Ahad knows the Italian dialects and includes it in his novel, showing multilingualism, which was the reality of the Mogadishu during the AFIS. Neapolitan, Italian, Taliani, Somali, Creoles, Americans, English, etc. all of them lived together in the Somalia of the late 50s. In the Somalia that Ahad is telling us, to Italians. But we are not listening, since his novel, "Memorie del Fiume" is still unpublished. All these words are part of the Italian-Somali history. They are not simple sounds but carry an exact meaning.

Concluding together with Ahad,

“[The Italian language spoken by postcolonial writers] is full of words, terms that belong to the mother tongue, which is destined to be assimilated by the Italian dictionary as much as all the many English and French terms.” (Ahad, “Per un’Introduzione alla Letteratura Postcoloniale”)

Does have the post-colonial literature a “Literal Capital and conclusions.”
If we refer to the theory of Casanova’s “World of Letters,” the Somali literature from postcolonial writers such Ahad is not probably been considered literature with a huge “literary capital,” since the Somali literature was in the past mostly oral. Writing in Italian, Ahad opens the Italian literature to the Somali culture and tradition, and vice versa. His literature connected to the Italian “literary capital,” enters as a part of it. The Italian “cosmopolitan intermediaries” such as editors, critics, academics, etc. resists to it, sometimes closing the door to this Somali literature which is so impregnated of “italianità.” Some chapters of Ahah unpublished novel, “Memorie del Fiume e Altri Racconti del Benadir,” is opened with some verses of Dante. It seems that in a way Ahad himself, sharing with Dante the condition of “Exile” from his country, feels an empathy with the poet. If Dante is an exile from Florence, Ahad is from Somalia. I also see Dante’s citations as a way in which Ahad connects to the Italian tradition, almost as inserting himself into it.

“Apri la mente a quel ch’io ti palese e fermalvi entro; ché non fa scienza, sanza lo ritenere, avere inteso.” Dante Alighieri, La Divina Commedia, Paradiso, Canto V.” (Memorie del Fiume, 1)

Besides the literary tradition, the historical link between Italy and Somalia is something Italians (and Somali) should remember about. As in the essay, Ahad wrote together with the professor Gnisci, in 2002, “Alcune ragioni per non bombardare la Somalia,” he asks the international community to help the country not bombarding but giving practical support to the people.

“Somalia is still waiting since 1950 that the International Community would allow it to become a Nation and Democracy. […] The roots of the institutional failure of the Somalia government are in the Independence’s process. It’s about a particular responsibility of the former colonizer nations.” (Alcune ragioni per non bombardare la Somalia, 2002)

As conclusion of this thesis, I believe that while recognizing the “literal capital” and some unique qualities of the Italian language for the reasons we explored previously
(first the heritage of Humanism, and closeness of Italian to Latin), we should look at Italian with a wider zoom, without cutting out crucial historical experiences such as the colonialism. Italy and the Italian “world of letter” should listen and give space more to writers such as Ali Mumin Ahad who re-write the Italian-Somali history and also linguistically enriches the language. As Ahad states in “Per un’introduzione alla letteratura post-coloniale italiana (Introduction to Postcolonial Literature) the post-colonial writer speaks a standard Italian, enriched with “Africanism.” Assimilating those new terms and concepts would improve our vocabulary and also our historical awareness. England and France did it already; it’s not something new.

“[The Italian of post-colonial writers] is an Italian of return, assimilated, adapted to the culture and customs of the people of the former colonies. The Italian of the former colonies is re-invented. […] Italian language spoken by postcolonial writers is a standard Italian, but enriched with shades and concepts of the African reality. It is full of words, terms that belong to the mother tongue, which is destined to be assimilated by the Italian dictionary as much as all the many English and French terms.” (Ahad, “Per un’Introduzione alla Letteratura Postcoloniale”)

Only when the history would be re-discovered and accepted by Italians, also the language would benefit from it. Italian won’t be just the language spoken by the 60 million people who was born and live in the country, but also from who experienced the language in other historical and geographical circumstances.

Ahad describes the language like a territory inhabited by people who speak this language. Language is “un bene pubblico,” a “public good” that belong to everybody.

“The language of Dante belongs to the people who speak it. Dante’s language also became the language of “Italian” writers who have roots from non-specifically Italian cultural and historical environments. Contemporary writers (not defined “postmodern” but postcolonial) write in Italian, without necessarily being Italian. To live in Italy, live together with the Italian culture, make those writers “Italians” more than any documents. Of course, to recognize them also the citizenship would be the right thing to do, since with their works they contribute to the public good. Language is a public good.” (Da un emisfero all’altro, 2012)
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Ahad also states that those non-Italian writers for the birth but “migration” have the right also of maintaining their primary cultural roots. Sharing with born-Italians their cultural roots (and their different and unique perspective on the world and history), the non-born-Italian writers build a dialogue among cultures and enrich the Italian culture.

It doesn't mean that Italian is not anymore the language of Dante, but instead it is the language of Dante, Ali Mumin Ahad, Lakhous, Lahiri, etc. A language which looks at himself with transparency, accepting historical events such as the colonial past, assimilate them as experience. Doing that, Italian won't be only the language with the highest “literal capital” but much more. A fearless language who creates building with other cultures and with its own history.

Maristella Lorch. A native Italian writer who writes in English.

While working on my thesis for my Master’s in English in New York City, I became for a few months a “writer” assistant for a unique professor and writer, Maristella Lorch. My task was writing blogs and doing research for her trilogy Beyond Gibraltar together with her. Maristella was born in 1919 in the South Tyrol, an Italian region in the middle of the Alps characterized by bilingualism: Tyrolean (a German dialect) and Italian. The fascist Mussolini increased contrasts between the German speakers of the South Tyrol, which belonged to Austria until the end of WWI, and the Italian speakers. Mussolini ruled Italy from 1919 to 1944 and forced the linguistic minorities to integrate into an Italy. “Il Duce” envisioned Italy as the nation descendant from the Roman Empire, characterized by a uniformity of “national” Italian language.

The bilingual Maristella went to an Italian high school in Merano (South Tyrol) and then chose Rome as the city where to continue her University studies in Latin and Greek. In Rome, she experienced WWII, and because of her knowledge of German, she got a job as a translator in Italian for German movies. She worked for
the, at that time prestigious, fascist Institute of Cinema, Instituto Luce, and during the war, she was imprisoned by the SS with spying accusations. After a few years of her marriage with an American soldier in Rome, she moved with her husband to New York in 1948. After four years of “apprendissage” in which she taught German language and culture in a college of New Jersey, she started a brilliant career as a professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Columbia University, which has lasted more than half a century. Among many things, Maristella created a Department of Medieval and Renaissance Literature and founded IAASA, the Italian Academy of Advanced Studies in America, the only high-culture institution that the Italian government owns in the States.

Besides her many academic publications, Maristella, once retired in the 1990’s, started writing novels. Her trilogy, Beyond Gibraltar, which is about to be completed with the forthcoming publication of her third book, is – as Maristella defines it – the “story of a family.” The first volume, “Mamma in her village,” narrates the story of Maristella’s mother living in South Tyrol. Her “mamma” was a woman with humble origins who married an older man of a higher class (Maristella’s father), and after his death had to raise four kids by herself. The second volume of the Trilogy, “Beyond Gibraltar,” is mostly focused on the “Roman” period of Maristella’s life: her University studies, the war, the wedding and after, her crossing the Atlantic Ocean and “discovering” America. The unpublished third volume, “The Other Shore,” is about the new family Maristella built with her second husband, the mathematician Ray Lorch, in America and many travels she did in Africa and Europe. All of Maristella’s academic publications are in English, as is her trilogy Beyond Gibraltar. Choosing English as her primary language while working as a professor at Columbia and for her “memories,” the trilogy Beyond Gibraltar, Maristella seems to be a “reverse” case of the other writers that I have talked about in my thesis such as Lakhous, Ahad, Lahiri. Those writers, not Italian by birth chose “Italian” as their “creative” languages, but instead, Maristella, a native Italian who moved to New York in the late 40s, preferred to be English her professional and creative language. Italian was always the Maristella’s “subject of studies” when during her long career at Columbia as professor of Medieval and Renaissance
studies, she taught Petrarca, Dante, Ariosto, Machiavelli among many, to thousands of American students. Having worked with Maristella for almost six months as assistant and editor, I found it interesting to observe her process of writing. If English is the language Maristella uses for academic publications and novels, Italian is the “language of the family,” since I heard her always speaking in Italian to her three “American” daughters who live scattered around the world (France, Turkey and New York).

Italian was the language Maristella, and I used to communicate each other because obviously, it was the mother tongue that we both share. During our working together she used to speak to me in Italian, but she often switched automatically to English when we started working, and she began dictating. More than one-time Maristella asked me to check for an English word, confessing me that, in spite of so many years she spent in America, English is not still a language she feels to dominate completely. Her novels in English needed some “editing” made by native speakers, mostly her daughters. In a different way than Lakhous, Maristella doesn’t use “regionalism,” and the characters of her novels don’t usually speak dialect, but plain English. Maristella’s public is mostly American, or English even though her story Beyond Gibraltar is very “Italian.” Her “English” is full of Italian words or expressions, and in her trilogy, there are many cultural and linguistic references to Italy. “Nella realtà dei fatti (In the reality of facts), as Machiavelli says” she often dictated to me when we wrote blogs together. While writing in English, Maristella sometimes integrates the text with some great sentences of Machiavelli, Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto but also Cicerone, and other Latin. It seems that they come in helping her English while English is not enough. Or, simply this is the multilingualism that represents better Maristella: English full of cultural reference from many other languages, which are part of her education. First of all, Italian.

Interviews.

Interview to Maristella Lorch, the day of her 97th birthday.
Maristella and I meet on the day of her 97th birthday in her apartment at 445 Riverside Drive near Columbia University. While we talked, sipping some tea made by Ana, the Ecuadorian woman who cooks and takes care of the house, the bell rang once in a while. Gifts for Maristella from all over the world arrived at her door at more or less regular intervals. Among them, there was a bouquet of flowers by her nephew who lives in France, a huge basket of fruit and chocolate by an older student (class 1948) to whom Maristella used to teach “German Culture and Language” in a women’s college in New Jersey back in the 50’s. Maristella also received flowers from her grandchild.

Although during my interview I did ask Maristella questions in English, she tended to answer in Italian, perhaps without even realizing this “switching” from a language to another. As is my case, Maristella feels more “natural” speaking Italian with me. I tried to follow her thoughts without interrupting her. I would return to English when asking another question, but Maristella returned to our mother tongue of Italian. It was as if English created a “distance” between the two of us.

Maristella, you were born in 1919 in a very “special” region of the North of Italy, the Tyrol or Trentino-Alto Adige, with a unique cultural and linguistic identity of Italian and German. Just after World War I, by the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1919 this region passed from Austria to Italy. It was a result of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Also, you have been a direct witness, in your childhood, of the advent of the Fascism with Mussolini (1922-1925), which opened an entirely new chapter of the Italian history. How was it to grow up in this region on the “border” in such special political and historical period?

Being born in an area passed to Italy after so many years of Austrian Government, forced me to an understanding of border problems of which the main was the language. The “natives” felt that they have the right of speaking their language, but, after the advent of the Fascism, Mussolini wasn’t indeed soft with them. He didn’t want to accept that they wanted to maintain their language and culture and not integrate with Italy. I think that one of the worst mistakes of Mussolini was forcing Tyroleans to renounce to their mother tongue for “accepting Italy.” Until I moved to Rome in 1938, I experienced this tension and struggle between South Tyrol and Italy.

**What did it mean for you to grow up during Fascism?**

I am glad to be born at a time when Italy was in peace. Before allying with Hitler, Mussolini was trying to build a nation.

[There is an interruption due to the arriving of more bouquets for Maristella]

I consider myself fortunate to be raised during the “golden years” of Fascism: the first fifteen years after the advent of Mussolini until 1938 when I moved to Rome for
studying, shortly before the outbreak of the World War II. Fascism did something good for Italy. It eliminated the Mafia, which returned to America and looked seriously to reconnect the North with the South of the country. In addition to fighting the "Wheat battle," draining the swamps and making them cultivable, Mussolini made an important political decision: the "peace" with the Pope: he signed the Lateran Pacts, which in fact allowed a reconciliation between Pope and the Italian state. The chef of Fascism understood that in order of making Rome the real capital of Italy (although Rome already had been the capital of the newborn Italy since 1870, year of the unification of the country), he had inevitably to come to terms with the Pope, and have a good relationship with it.

**Which language did you speak with your family in your little village in the middle of the Alps?**

My mother never talked to me in dialect. Since we were now living officially in an Italian territory, she believed we had to be loyal to the Italian citizenship. My mother was bilingual. She studied in Trento to become a teacher, but knew Germany very well and used to teach also in Austria.

**What is the dialect of South Tyrol?**

It's a mixture of German, Latin, and more dialect. It's unique. It sounds more as a Bavarian German than the German of Berlin. Italian was considered a "luxury," spoken mainly among adults. Parents spoke dialect to kids, and my classmates always used dialect, which also I spoke very well, more than the standard German. In high school, Italian was the only language allowed among students and professors.

**Tell me about your family in South Tyrol.**

My family's origin was very unusual. All my grandparents were born as Austrians since the South Tyrol belonged to Austria until the end of World War I. The only exception was my grandmother Maria, the Ciani Countess, who was born instead in Rovereto, which has always been in Italian territory. She was a very wealthy woman who loved painting, was a Catholic but never went to church. Austria was ruled by a gangrenous Emperor, extremely conservative, and the paternal family – family of landowners and lawyers – gravitated around Italy which was liberal instead. My paternal grandfather Augusto was the founder of the Liberal Party of Trento, a central city of the Austrian Empire since it was the access to the southern Italy. He was an influential lawyer, who defended prominent personalities such as the politician and irredentist Cesare Battisti – who unfortunately was executed anyway. He was also a kind of feminist ante litteram: he supported women who had been indicted of being "witches."

Do you know my grandfather Augusto was also friend and teacher of Alcide De Gasperi, the founder of the Italian Democratic Party Alcide De Gasperi, the first president of the newly formed Italian Republic after World War II? Yes, the great De
Gasperi, the head of the Democratic Party was inspired by the Liberal Party my grandfather, Augusto, founded in Trento. I knew it from the same De Gasperi.

When did you meet Alcide De Gasperi, the first President of the newborn Italian Republic in 1945 soon after WWII?

I met him with an incredible coincidence, one of many of my long life. My old professor of Latin and Greek in Rome, Professor Ussani, sent me to do some research in a very special place, not accessible to everybody. It was the Vatican, in the Manuscript Room, where De Gasperi was the person in charged. When he saw my last name on the recommendation letter of my professor, Maristella "De Panizza," he remembered my grandfather Augusto and De Gasperi treated me from that moment on as a member of his family. The Pope protected the Democratic Party during the Fascism, with De Gasperi who guided it secretly from inside the Vatican, where he lived with his family.

What about your parents?

My mother was the daughter of farmers, - entirely different lineage from my wealthy paternal grandfather - a kind of feminist, able to pay by herself her studies in Trento, and also helped other girls of the valley in doing the same. My father was sui generis, the “black sheep” of the family. Instead of studying law he used to go dancing or write poems. He wasn’t made for being a lawyer and deluded my grandfather Augusto’s expectations because he married the wrong woman: Flora, an Austrian dancer. As a punishment, grandfather August sent him into exile to America, where my father worked in some of Cincinnati’s banks.

Was your “disobedient” father the first person of the family to move to America, “beyond Gibraltar” (as the title of your Trilogy)?

My father went to America as “punishment” by my grandfather Augusto. He had no reason to go since he was not poor and he wasn’t looking for a better life. I don’t know how his life was in Cincinnati, besides the fact his wife, Flora, was a beautiful dancer, who probably worked also in Hollywood before to get tuberculosis and eventually died. They probably had a son, who died prematurely. When my father also got sick, he decided to come back to Italy to recover. He also made that decision because his father Augusto had just died, and he wanted to see his mother, Maria. It was on that occasion that my father met my mother, who wasn’t a child anymore, but a notorious young teacher in the valley, even though she kept being a farmer, milking cows.

How did your parents, a teacher, and farmer, and an American and son of landowners end up marrying each other?

It's incredible, but my maternal grandmother Ursula and my paternal, the Ciani Countess, Grandma Maria, were good friends. Maria was a painter and enjoyed
painting Ursula’s husband, who was one of the most handsome men in the valley. Nonna Ursula let her do this, while also my mom used to spend many afternoons in the Ciani’s villa. My mother helped the Countess writing letters to her son in America. In a way those letters written by my mother in the name of my paternal grandmother, made my father fall in love. My mom, on her side, envisioned my father as a kind of knight of the Orlando Furioso, one of those who traveled around the world. As soon as my father came back from Cincinnati, he fell in love with my mother but World War I interrupted their paradise. My father was interned immediately by the Austrians and taken to a concentration camp because he was “American” and liberal. After the war, in 1919, South Tyrol became Italian, my father came home and married my mother finally.

**It seems that Tyrol was a place where there were no “social” distances: your two grandmothers, one farmer and one noble and wealthy were good friends, and also you mom married your dad who was a different and higher social class.**

It's true. In Italy, social distances were stronger than in Tyrol. I grew up in an environment where a peasant may marry a landowner, and it influences my view. I am not very able to see the difference between classes but consider people as individuals.

**Had grandfather Augusto ever been in America?**
No. He was too Central-European. My dad was the first of the family.

**Do you feel more Italian or American after almost seventy years of America?**

I'm American. Many years ago, I gave up my Italian citizenship and decided to keep only the American passport. At the same time, I love to think of myself as a collaborator of a civilization which unifies people. If this civilization is “Italian” or “Turkish,” it doesn't make a difference for me. However, I still feel very “Italian,” and actually, I feel more Roman than Tyrolean, since in Rome I lived the most crucial years of my European life.

**What’s Roma for you?**

In Rome, I went to the university and started my career as a researcher in the “Manuscript Room” at Vatican. I was in Rome during World War II, and the SS also imprisoned me. Rome was for me a “dream” long time before. When I was a little girl, my dad used to tell me many stories and legends about ancient Rome and Greece. Unfortunately, my father died when I was five. Rome has always been the center of my classic studies of Latin, Greek, and archaeology. I have also to admit that Rome in a way created my place in America. I dedicated part of my career at the Italian Renaissance, which was for me mainly the revival of Rome.
Throughout your long career, the Renaissance is the period to which you devoted most of your research. Why is this time so special for Italy?

1500 was the most difficult century for the Italian peninsula since it was the land where French and Spanish used to fight cruelty against one another. Despite this, it’s in this period that the Roman civilization found its full rebirth, coming to light, touching the highest point thanks to the contribution of the thousand years of the Middle Ages, culminating with Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Before dying Italy came to life with the Renaissance, with the great works of Orlando Innamorato of Boiardo, Orlando Furioso of Ariosto, the Prince of Machiavelli, and many studies of history.

You also dedicated many years to teaching Dante at Columbia, giving monographic classes on the Florentine poet. Why the Sommo Poeta was crucial in your courses?

Dante expressed the latest fury of the Middle Age, the anger of the people that don’t have the language to express themselves. His journey into the underworld comes from traditional legends and is told in a new language, the language of the people. Dante gives us the language. The Italian we speak today is Dante’s Italian, the Italian of Florentines. Although considered “Middle Age,” it is with Dante that the Renaissance begins.

You arrived in New York soon after WWII, with your project of launching “Napoli Milionaria,” a play by the famous writer of theater, Eduardo De Filippo. Is Italy with you since your first "landing" in New York?

With my first husband Claude, an American soldier who I met and married in Rome, we wanted to launch Napoli Milionaria. But unfortunately, we failed because the funds offered to us to promote the play were then retired. Everybody feared McCarthyism and Napoli Milionaria were considered probably too “communist.” The Italian theater was anyway one of my first experience in New York since I acted as the main character in a Pirandello’s play, “La Vita Che ti Diedi” directed by Marta Abba.

When did you start working at Columbia?

In my duffle bag, I had a critical document when I crossed “Gibraltar” for the first time with the General Muir. It was a recommendation letter from my illustrious Professor Ussani, from Rome to the president of Columbia to employ me in the Latin and Greek Department. Unfortunately, the president was sick, and he didn’t receive anybody, so for four years I taught in New Jersey German language and culture, commuting many hours a day, also when pregnant with my first daughter. I recalled that period as my four years of “apprentissage.”
Why did you write your Trilogy “Beyond Gibraltar” in English, even though your story is so “Italian”?

Language didn’t matter for me when I started writing the Trilogy. English is usually for me the language for writing since I have taught at an American university for over half a century.

How many languages did you speak in your home in New York, with your husband Ray and your daughters?

All languages! My husband Ray was a British citizen with a French Swiss mother.

How did you decide to write a Trilogy?

I’ve never thought of writing a novel until a Brazilian friend of mine, the famous writer Nélida Piñon, suggested me to write a story dedicated to the Atlantic Ocean. It happened in the ’70 when my husband Ray and I were spending a month in Brazil giving lessons in different universities. We were in Rio de Janeiro in a restaurant looking at the ocean in the company of the Brazilian writer. I remember the conversation with Nélida like it was yesterday. Anyway, at that time I forgot about it, and the idea of writing a novel on the Atlantic Ocean reappeared in my mind many years later, when I retired from teaching, and I was urged to do something else. It was in the early 90’s when, after founding the Italian Academy of Advanced Studies in America in the same building that hosted already the Casa Italiana, a seven-story building given in 1927 by the Italo-Americans to Columbia after the murder of Sacco and Vanzetti.

How do all the languages you know (Latin, Greek, Italian, French, English, German) contribute to your process of writing?
In my head, all the languages work together and never come into conflict. Sometimes I think in English, and sometimes I do in Italian. Some events call for Italian and others that call for French or German.

Your “multicultural” family is today spread all around the world. Where are they?

All of my three daughters live in three different continents. Clodia, created a "hotel for the world," at a delicate moment when ISIS attacks France, after teaching English and American history in Paris for 30 years. The younger, Donatella, wife of the head of World Bank, a former journalist of The New York Times, after traveling to Afghanistan, Nepal, and Africa, she settled in Turkey. Lavinia, instead, the closest to me, lives in the neighboring house to mine and teaches at Columbia.

I dedicate my Trilogy to all of them, to my family, to the family my husband Ray and I wanted to build, a family open to the world but with a "casa" in Napanoch, Upstate
De Luca

New York, where we own a home in the mountains where every Christmas we all meet.

Interview to Amara Lakhous, April 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2017.

You learned Italian as a necessity, when in the 90s escaped from the civil war in Algeria and "migrated" to Italy. Initially, you wanted just to be an Algerian writer in the Arabic language. Was there an exact moment in which you decided to become a bilingual writer?

Since I moved to Italy, I promised to myself to accept the "physical" exile but not the "linguistic" one. On March 2004, after nine years of "exile" from Algeria, I traveled to my country. I stayed there three weeks. I was constantly feeling a feeling of dizziness. I remember repeating to my youngest sister of how everything in Algeria looked small to me: the kitchen table, the street, my home, some distances, etc. I realized how my new perspective of the world and my culture changed, becoming much more wider and complex.

As a consequence of my return to Algeria after so many years, I took the decision of "adding" the Italian as a language of my writing. I never thought of giving up Arabic. A writer friend of mine, Carmine Abate, told me once about the metaphor of "living with addition, not with subtraction."

Is adding a language in your life the same as adding a new identity to your old one?

Yes, exactly.

Translation seems to be a crucial element in your way of being a writer. Starting from the first novel that you published, "Le Cimici e Il Pirata" (1999) to the second "Scontro di Civiltà per un Ascensore in Piazza Vittorio" (2006), which is the result of more than twenty versions of the manuscript you rewrote from Arabic to Italian. In your third novel, "Divorzio all'Islamica in Viale Marconi" (2010) you work simultaneously on both the Arabic and Italian versions.

What does the translation mean for you and how it affect your creativity?

My name, "Amara," means constructor of bridges. I build bridges among the language, not walls or borders. The idea of "bridge" is crucial to understand my work as a writer. My bridges aren't one-way highways, but they go both directions. All of them communicate to each other: the Italian with the Arabic, the English with Berber, etc.

How do you relate yourself with the other no-Italian writers who chose to write fiction in Italian? For instance, lately, the American Pulitzer winner Jhumpa Lahiri published a book in Italian "In Altre Parole" (2015), followed
by the bilingual version "In Other Words" (2016). When Lahiri talks about her relationship to Italian, she refers to a form of "being in love" with the Italian language. Do you believe that "love" works for you as well in describing your relationship with the Italian language?

When you write in a language, you establish an intimacy with it. Without intimacy, there’s no love. Intimacy means to expose yourself to this language, be vulnerable. Metaphorically, we may say that linguistically I am a "polygamous," not a monogamous.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s case is pretty different from mine. When I met her on May 2014 in Italy, she confided me that her relationship with English was going through a crisis, a kind of linguistic divorce. She wasn't reading or writing in English at that time. She felt strangled and closed in a role of well-known writer of novels dedicated to Indian or Bengali characters that try to reconcile with United State. Italian became for her an "extramarital lover." A lover, even though over time may become the love of your life, is a traitor, someone who damages others.

How has your relationship with Italian changed after so many years? After writing and publishing novels in Italian, how is your relationship today that you knows it almost as your mother tongue?

I changed in a way that if I don’t speak Italian to my wife, she gets mad at me.

(Laugh)

What does English represent to you? Last year you published your first short story in English ("On the quest to write in a third language. Amara Lakhous dreams of green cheese and being reborn into New York City," 2016). Is the decision of writing in English a consequence of your moving to New York? Do you consider the “internationality” of English and so the possibility of reaching more readers through the most global language?

Writing in English is related to "The American Dream." "The American Dream" is unique in the world. There are not French, Algerian, Italian dreams, but only one: the American. Each immigrant who leaves his land follows a "burning dream," a very passionate one. Writing in English is the dream I need as an immigrant, the source of my energy, my compass to find the direction and also the consolation for what I’ve left. It becomes the compensation and the justification for what you give to yourself when abandoning your country. As an immigrant, I need the American Dream.

The fact that English is a global language is surely a tempting quality, but it’s not the real reason for choosing it. As a linguistic "polygamous," I have a balanced relationship with all of my languages. I don’t have only administrative or opportunistic relationship with English, also because it will also be the language of my daughter. Behind the decision of adopting a new language, there are aesthetic,
political, creative reasons; it’s not only about the market and the readership. That’s why I decided to also write in Berber, which is a local language.

**What does the Berber mean for you? Why did you decide to write in Berber?**

It's related to my mother, who speaks only in Berber. Because of the Algerian nationalism, Berber wasn't allowed in school, and I didn't have a chance of studying it when I was a kid. I'm planning to study it, perhaps in France, at the Center of Oriental Studies with a professor that I know. I need to learn how to write it, while I know already how to speak it.

**It seems that the languages that you learned and in which you writes correspond to the places where you over time "migrated." Why didn't you write anything in German even though you spent some time in Germany?**

German is fascinating, as much as all the languages. Besides it, I have to recognize, coming from a family of farmers, that languages are like lands. Some lands are hard to work, other malleable. Even though German is a beautiful language, it is very hard to work. In 2009 I was about to move to Germany, but I didn’t. In the end, I didn't spend too much time in Germany to learn the language. I believe it was the Destiny.

**Do you believe that some language is more prestigious than others? According to Pascal Casanova ("The World of Letters"), some languages have a higher "literal capital" than others and, as a consequence, there is a hierarchy among languages. Do writers choose the language according to also a "literal capital"?**

In other words, this is the theory of center and periphery. It is the hegemony of a language. Language and literature are not neutral. For instance, in Holland English books are not translated but published in original language. In Italy, instead, about 50% or 60% of the books sold in the bookstores are translations from the English. Only the 3% of the book published in U.S. are translated into French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese. In my opinion is illogic that three every hundreds books in U.S. are different from English.

Talking about "literal capital," the U.S. is a very young country, a teenager. Besides the contemporary American literature, the U.S. literal capital is nothing compared to the European one. Let's think about Dante, Petrarch, and we can also going back much further in time much.

There is not so much "literal capital" in the U.S., but the cinema supports the American literature. Almost all the successful books are translated into a movie. In the Italian movie theaters, seven on ten movies are Americans. It is hegemony on the editorial market.

**How do the market and the Casanova’s "World of Letters" limit or stimulate writers?**
How does an author have to deal with a real and economic editorial market, and compromise with less "poetic" aspects?
It all depends on the dream and priorities: if you want to write something original or if you prefer being enumerated among the best sellers. They are two entirely different things.

Jumpa Lahiri’s event at McNally Jackson Independent Bookseller, Soho.

Jumpa Lahiri, Domenico Starnoni and Michael Reynolds: Ties – A Novel.
Thursday, March 9, 2017, at 7.30 pm.

Moderator: Pulitzer Prize-winner Jhumpa Lahiri recently made the decision to live her creative life in Italian. Her very first translation from the Italian, the most palpable manifestation of her love affair with the language, Strega-prize winning author Domenico Starnone’s Ties, is “brief, brilliant and unnerving,” according to Margot Livesey. Starnone is considered by many to be Italy’s best living novelist. For decades he was rumored to be the writer behind the name Elena Ferrante, and looking at Ties you can understand where the mistake arises. His preoccupations — marriage, abandonment, lies, cowardice and the effects of all these on the emotional and psychological lives of those involved — are similar to Ferrante’s. For that matter, they are also the same preoccupations that animate Lahiri’s most recent fiction. Moderated by Michael Reynolds. Michaels (editor-en-chief of Europa Editions), is the publisher of Ties. Jhumpa Lahiri, the translator and Domenico Starnone is the writer of Ties. Lilian is the translator of Starnone, who doesn’t speak English. Domenico is one of the greater author. At this point very much to thank Lilian, the translator of Domenico tonight, we’ll hear Domenico speaks through her.

Michaels: I would love to ask Domenico where he’s in his career, at the moment of “Ties”, his thirteen works of fictions. What have his experience, his age and practice given to his fiction?

Starnone: (translated) I’m very happy to be here tonight, and for the magnificent translation of Jhumpa Lahiri. I actually can’t say it is magnificent myself because I don’t actually speak English. I read it a little but everybody tells me that it is magnificent. (Laughing) I actually started writing and publishing quite late. I published the first book when I was forty-two or forty-three. But since then I’ve never stopped writing and publishing. Now I’m an old man and I’ve written many books, but still I don’t know what I’ve learned, rather the opposite. I think, writer in general feel that they never learn to write. It’s a torment well described in the book “Lo scrittore fantasma,” “The Ghost Writer.” The author talks is when middle age. His character says on his deathbed: “Maybe now I understood how to write.” Anyway, you do learn something when you work a lot. If I have to sum it up in an easy way, I would say that at the beginning it’s important to have a story to say. A lot of my colleagues in Italy, and all over the world, think that. With age, one learns that
even if the story is important, what’s truly important is which kind of life experience can fill this story. Without this feeling of what being alive means, every story becomes just an empty container. And it doesn’t help either the writer or the reader. One last thing is that language itself is like a net that tries to catch something but at the end what matters is what is on that net: all the sufferings and all the joys that one goes through. One always feels it is not enough; language is always a deception. It is an illusion. There is always something that one doesn’t grab. That’s why probably we keep writing for all over our life, and we go on the same story over and over. This is not necessary a bad thing; it’s an experiment men have been doing since Adam’s days. The world out there is very hard to see, it’s hard to grasp, and it jumps all over the place. Sometimes one wins, sometimes one loses but the enjoyable part is the process.

Michael: During your forty years of writing, you alternate from long forms of fiction to shorter, like “Ties” (160-170 pages). What does decide whether a short form is better or no? Which of these forms –long or short– seem to grasp better reality?

Starnone: (translated) Overtime I became convinced that short stories are a tighter net. It allows you to concentrate better on the subject. Sometimes it’s the same story asking to become wider. It happens when the story itself pulls other elements into it. Think about a building and a window into this building. For instance, the movie “Rear Window” by Hitchcock. The reader is the one who looks at this window and at the people that come and go in front of it. But, in other cases, your look goes all over the place in the building, at all the structure, and the story becomes more complicated. During my long career I wrote mostly short stories, 120 pages, besides three novels over 400 pages. I thought that through short forms I can contain the story.

Michael: Lahiri, might I ask you your own opinion about it? We all know that you published long and short novels. From our conversations, I know you prefer as a reader and writer the short form novel – the “novella.”

Lahiri: I think the “novella” is the best contain. I love short story also. Now I am editing a volume of Italian short stories for Penguin Classics. I’ve been spending so much time to define for myself and the purpose of my volume, what constitute a “short story.” Usually, you should to make some arbitrary cuts regarding 20-25 pages to be in the definition of short stories. There are also wonderful longer stories, for instance by Bassani, Morante, etc. of 50 pages range. How do you call them “novella” or short story? I love this kind of long stories, which become short novels. There is just enough space to explore the dimension of something and still maintain a very definite shape. I’ve always enjoyed reading novels of that length, like “Ties”; they had a stronger impact on me.

Michael: Ties is structured as a play, in three actions. I wonder if stagecraft and playwriting have influenced on the structure of this book.
De Luca

Starnone: Yes, the structure for Ties is theater-like, but it is at the same time also very specific. It’s divided into three parts like the Eneide, called II, III book, and I. My intentions were that each book stands alone in its story, self-contained. The first can be read and isn’t correlated with the others. It’s up to the reader to connect the books. Indeed, in Italy “Ties” became a small success for a play. I did conceive it as a literary work, and then it became a play, but it didn’t stand up that way.

Michael: Beginning with the structure itself, without offending author here, I think this book is not entirely self-contained because the way is structure. The first part opens in chaos and closes in a calm; the second section opens with calms... the three parts fold one over another perfectly. There are three lines, etc. Ties is a story of a marriage of a man and woman who meet in 1962 and stay together for 40 years. They have three children together. Then the father meets a younger woman, and leave wife and family and stays with her for four years and he returns to the family. As an instinct of survival, both wife and husband decided to put his transgression under the rock and go ahead as nothing happened. The third part focuses on the grandchildren and possibly the impact of the decision the parents made on them.
One of the things Lahiri in the introduction of Ties identifies is called a “mechanism of tension” between containment and freedom, between limits and emancipation. This tension emerges through the book in multiples way, in the characters, in the story, in what happens to the relationship, etc. And I would also love to talk of how Lahiri sees this tension manifested in the prose itself. Another thing that struck me is that the story, being set in the late 60s and 70s, presents socially this tension between containment and freedom. A tension, which defines those decades. How would love to ask Domenico about the social tension, family, individual, intelligentsia of that time.

Domenico: (translated) Talking about the structure, the story of the different characters is imagined to be self-contained. However, the reader while reading can separate the words of these characters and their pains, which are articulated with the structure. The reader learns first about the wife in the book I, and then he can close it (self-contained story). Then, there is a time-lapse and book II, with the reality of the elder couple who has sided aside this pain, paying the consequences of it. So, it’s a complex structure, which works with these self-contained building boxes. The story is set in the 60s and 70s in the beginning but actually, takes place today. The changes of the 60s and 70s still influence our lives and undermine them. In Italy and Europe, the 60s were years of social revolution. The couple got married in 1962, and divorce didn’t exist at this time. They got married in Catholic Church, and marriage was “eternal.” Then the world changed, and this old vision collapses. In Vanda’s character the old world is resisting, and she feels abandoned and protests. He is not even capable of confessing to himself that he’s in love with a younger woman. In the 60ies being in love was seen as something awkward. I was insisting on the part that the story was placed today because for me the true meaning of the story is that the problems about couples and family in 60s and 70s
are still opened today. There is no solution that can work with the new order that followed the explosion of the 60s and 70s. Those years made the explosion of desire legitimated. I’m talking about the explosion of desire at individual and collective level. The desire for different lives. We are all desiring beings, and people need to play out this desire within a structure which provides order. The clash that happens with the explosion of the 70s created a strong divide. Desire needs structure otherwise it is shaky.

**Michael:** This is not just a very special book, but also a very special translation. Jhumpa you wrote “In Other Words”, a book about language and identity. Beautiful, readable, engaging, moving book. In this book, you describe your relationship with Italian, and one thing that becomes clear is that this relationship becomes very complicated. It’s a mix of need, desire, trepidation and frustration. And most of all, it’s clear that the relationship is guided by a deep love for that language and languages. It’s a relationship that takes a book to explain, to convey, impossible to summarize. Can you summarize your relationship with Italian? (Laughing)

**Lahiri:** Thanks, Michael, because you stand behind this book. Michael is the person in New York that made possible to me the journey to Rome. He found the first apartment that I recounted in the novel do not be able to get into it. (Laughing). When I got up today and walked out the door, looking forward to this evening with Domenico and Michael, I thought about this journey. I thought about our talking and what it meant to move to Rome, to make this linguistic lead and write a book in Italian, come back to United Stated and now start translating... It all seems wonderfully “un Destino,” a destiny and it’s a very powerful feeling for me. In any case, I think the most effective way to summarize what Italian has come to represent for me, it’s precisely what Domenico was just very eloquently explaining about the force of desire and this idea of freedom, and the legitimation of our reckless desires, that we don’t understand and seems incomprehensible wrong. My move into Italian and the away from the US was in some sense not just linguistically. It was driven by a search for happiness. This is why I reacted so strongly to Ties when first I read it, among other reasons. Besides that, the novel is great, beautiful, and profound, and the language is stunning. I cannot have higher Italian teacher at this point, that being Starnone’s translator. It opened up to me what means to study a new language and to turn yourself toward it as thoroughly as you can, which is never enough, unfortunately. There are always pieces that stick out. But the effort is there. It’s the same effort that Domenico talks so beautifully regarding what the writer does. We try to contain, try to capture but we can’t, but we keep trying. The journey of Italian is the journey of writing as well. It’s the same journey, the same desire to reach something, whether is meaning, whether is mastering the languages. You know is the desire that pushes you and you know that you are never going to hold it together. My relationship to Italian has that force behind it, and it was so hard to me to leave Italy and come back here after. I felt that something very beautiful that was growing, that was taking shape, rooting, was interrupted, cut off and tripled. I was
afraid. And it was having Domenico’s book to translate that sort of grounded me here, in a way that was essential.

**Michael:** You certain underline similarities between the active creation as an author and the work as a translator. To learn, do dive into language, to remember, to perfect the language as a writer is similar to the abilities of a translator. What is the difference as a published literary translator and as an author? Tell me about the different at a linguistic level between writing and translating.

**Lahiri:** The activities are very intertwined, and the act of translation is deeply feeding my creative process. It’s interesting now to be translating. People react and are surprised because consider it as a secondary act, not a truly creative act. In some sense, it is true, I am not creating a story – and I have to when I write my own fiction. Here the story is created, is fully functional and I’m working on the linguistic level. But I believe that if you want to make the translation alive you have to work on the linguistic level as well. You have to. Otherwise, it is an exercise. And there is a difference between how I translated Latin when studying at Columbia University 30 years ago and how I’m translating this novel. Those are two different operations. The translation extraordinary strengthens my relationship to Italian, is the most profound form of reading, and reading is the basis of all writing. Therefore, as I translate Domenico, as I read the passages again and again, and language goes deeper and deeper into me, I cannot help but absorb, I hope, so many other things that he’s teaching me about storytelling, and how to create characters, organize sections, how to establish sentences, how to work with images, and a million more things, that we are constantly hungry to learn, and we learn as writers.

I’m writing as well in this moment, slowly and difficulty for a variety of reasons, but if I can have, at this point of my life, two or three hours of translating in a good day, I can feel totally fulfilled. It’s a privilege and joy. I arrived quite late to translation, at this stage of my life. I’m hungry for it, as I was hungry to learn Italian, to which I also arrived late in my life.

**Michael:** Do you feel that your position as an acclaimed woman of letter in the contemporary American literary landscape has changed? Is there a great responsibility that you bear?

**Lahiri:** I have changed. That’s all I hope to do while moving through life. I don’t want to be in safe place, in a creative sense. First, the discovery of Italian and relationship with Italian and now the translation led me to two new vantage points as a writer, which is very exciting for me. I wish that more fiction writers would get so excited about translating and bring more literature into the mainstream. This is very important and happens often in other countries, and Italy is an example. You have important Italian writers from a certain generation, such as Cesare Pavese, Anna Banti, Natalia Ginsburg translating, and working simultaneously in other languages, reinvigorating languages. As an author who translates today in US, I feel like an odd romantic.
Michael: You can count on one hand American authors that translated others.

Lahiri: Poets translate. They understand this intergrowth relationship between writing and translation: one fits the other and keeps going. I feel that to live among languages allows you to confront what language is. You cannot do it if you live in only a language. You have to break out of this container, your linguistic container to understand what the language is.

Michael: Can this lack of translation from other literature be a possible cause of impoverishment of writing of our American literature?

Lahiri: The plot of Ties is a metaphor of also languages. The characters in this novel as close boxes meant to clash one to another and jostled. Languages need to have a clashing one to another to be refurbished. In my book, I talk about the necessity to replant in “Unaccustomed Earth.” What have I done by taking Domenico Starnone’s impeccable Italian brilliant crafted novel and transplanted into the “Unaccustomed Earth” of the English language? This is what the translation does in the end. There is a word I keep talking about it, “Innesto” – “Crafting.” It’s very critical to my own project as a writer, in term of my attempt to craft myself into another language as a writer. Today I was reading with my translation students in Princeton the Georgian Virgil, in which he goes on and on in planting new branches, new trees, new fruits. This is why writers need to translate, to get these different flavors, to change how forest looks. The idea of bringing in from the culture point of view is crucial, critical. Without it, you will have myopia, the same kind of way of thinking.

Question from public: Most of your work has to do with identity. Do you feel that you have found your identity within Italian language?

Lahiri: I learned do not worry about identity, to move away from identity, to have a detachment toward a very oppressive idea and reality from most of my life. Identity is a container, and I want to stay away from containers – even though I’m obsessed with containers in my real life. Also language is a container, it cannot function without a particular order, like a sentence. It has to contain meaning, and it has to have a period. Otherwise, we are moving toward a different form of communication. For instance, Joyce, with his experimental text, pushes the idea of what a text is. I’m afraid of thinking about identity. We have the identity, which is constantly changing, rewritten and revised. Like a text translated all the time. Today in class with looked at three versions of Virgil. That language is so powerful and so many people has been moved. That’s how I approach identity: as a kind of translation, open-ended translation as I move through time. I feel like I need to maintain the container opened and see what’s outside.

Question: How you deal with “dialect” in translation.
Lahiri: I have to translate another novel, “Scherzetto.” Michael and I don’t know how to translate the title. The language is quite a bit dialect. And the character talks about the disconnection among dialects and standard Italian. I’m at 50 pages, and it came up many times, and while I’m moving forward, I’m trying to understand how to handle it. I’m facing now the challenge. There are light years between mine and Domenico’s Italian. The sun is there and warms us… I don’t know what will come. To have Domenico now is having a guiding figure. My point of reference.

Lakhous’ conference at Fordham University, Bronx, New York.

Amara Lakhous, Writing and Creativity: My experience as a trilingual writer in Arabic, English, and Italian. Tuesday, March 7, Faber Hall 568 – 5:00 Rose Hill

In my novels, like "Divorce in Islamic Style in Viale Marconi," or "Clash or Civilizations for an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio," I experiment new eyes. I try to narrate Italy in new ways through new visions, and a new language. Creativity or originality are, for me, the same. Do something creative and original things, means to create something in a new way, without imitating other models. I found it very exciting because you have to create something new. At the same time, creativity is not even inventing something from nothing, which is impossible. Creativity means to take inspiration from different sources and different materials and create something new. However, you need to have intuition and intelligence, and then mix them together. It’s kind of the same strategy a famous chef uses in restaurants: he can use the same ingredients, in original ways. Creating in a new language for me is mixing all of my languages together. That means bringing images, proverbs, metaphors, and expressions from a language to another. While I wrote my novel in Italian, I never used dictionaries. It’s just about spontaneous process. I’m Berber, Arab; I speak French, Italian, and English. I used to say that my project, as a bilingual writer, is “Italianizing Arabic and Arabizing Italian.”

If you want to learn a new language and, perhaps later also write in this new language, you have to mix to levels of languages: the “language of flash” and the “language of paper.” The language of flesh is the language of the tongue, the spoken language while the language of paper is, instead, the one from literature, grammar, and books. If you want to learn a new language, you should work on these two levels. I did it in Italian, and I’m currently doing it in English.

Among my many literary references, the first is the Koran. The second is “One thousand and one night,” then Then Sicilian literature (Pirandello, Sciascia), Italian Cinema (Fellini e Pietro Germi), and American Literature (Hemingway, Parker, Carver, etc.). Koran was the first text I read and studied when I went to Koranic school at age four. Koran is an incredible book, the most important source for me, and I look at it as a literary text. After fourteen centuries since Koran was written, to consider it as a collection of rules conform to explain the world of today is impossible. There is a huge debate about the author of Koran. For Muslims, especially if believers, the Koran’s author is God that revealed it to Mohammed. Not believers and a lot of orientalists tried – and they think they failed - to say that the author is the prophet. After years, I can say that for me is a miracle. The first
characteristic of the Koran is the mix of poetry and poem. Poetry is the register of Arabic if you look for instance at the repetitions. (Amara reads a section of the Koran in Arabic.)

I also was inspired by the masterpiece of Arabic and world literature, "The thousand and one nights." I can spend hours and hours talking about this book, but its main characteristic is simplicity. For instance, you are not going to find notes that explain the text. I tried to write in the same way: "simplicity." Antoine Galland published this text in France in 1717. A century later they published the Arabic version of the manuscript and then we have translations in all languages. The most important publication of "The thousand and one nights" in Arabic is in 1960.

My first novel is "Le Cimici e Il Pirata"; I wrote it in Algeria in Arabic in 1992. In 1995 I left Algeria, and I put the manuscript in my suitcase. For me, it was very important. In 1995 a Sicilian translator, Francesco Leggio, translated the novel into Italian. After four years of leaving in Italy, I wasn't able to translate it right by myself. Francesco did the translation, and I was his consultant. We worked together, and the translation is the result of this collaboration. This book was the first step of my adventure of becoming a bilingual writer. Last years an American student at Columbia translated the first chapter of this novel from Italian into English. At that time, I spent all my saving to publish this novel. I wanted to publish two texts in a book. The funny thing is that the end of the Italian version corresponds to the end of the Arabic version. Their ends is the meeting of the two languages, and for me, it was the metaphor of my dream: two languages together that embrace each other.

The first chapter of my novel takes place in Algeria, the main character, Hassinu, meets someone, and this is the dialogue between them.

(Amara reads the Arabic version and asks to the audience to hear the sound of the language.)

I linguistically tried to work on the Arabic-Algerian language and mix standard Arabic (the language of Koran) and spoken Arabic, with also some proverbs. This novel is crucial to understand my adventure in the Italian language. I started with this background.

"Clash of Civilization for an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio" is my second novel. The novel was published in 2004 in Algeria, and I worked for two years in the Italian version "Scontro di Civiltà per un Ascensore a Piazza Vittorio." It was an incredible journey because I wrote, in the end, a new version, not a translation. Becoming the writer of the novel, not the translator, I was able to change and to add parts to the novel. In Italian, there is a wonderful expression: "Traduttore è traditore." (The translator is a traitor.)

For two years I worked at least on twenty versions of this novel. I showed it to my friends and asked them to "destroy" those texts. I wanted critics since I believe in what I call "collective" writing. I believe that writing is a collective art, no individual. It's like in soccer, we remember the name of the soccer player that makes the goal, but we know it's not only one person that creates the possibility of winning.

(Amara reads a passage in Arabic and the Italian.)
The following novel is "Divorce in Islamic Style." In 2010 I decided to do something original, and I wrote this story in two versions at the same time. I was writing the draft in Italian and then, having two keyboards in two languages, I was able to change the text. At the end of the day, I considered these books like twins. They have different languages, different titles, different covers, but they have the same characters and the same story.

The story is about a young Sicilian who becomes a spy for Italian intelligence. He's Sicilian, but they give him an identity as Tunisian since he speaks Arabic very well. He moves to Viale Marconi, a neighborhood where there is a huge community of Egyptians. Supposedly, among them, there is a terroristic cell. His goal is to discover this cell. He an apartment in Viale Marconi with eleven roommates, and, as a narrator, describes the situation of this apartment.

(Amara reads a passage in Arabic and the Italian.)

In 2011 I decided to move from Rome to Turin, to follow my characters. I followed my imaginary characters, and I went to live in the same neighborhood in San Salvario, where they lived. During my staying there I wrote two novels in Italian - without the usual Arabic version. The last one is "La Zingarata della Verginella in Via Ormea," recently translated into English by Europa Editions, "The Prank of the Good Little Virgin of Via Ormea (2016)."

For English, I’m going today to apply the same strategy I used while learning Italian. Hard work and patience are important, and I feel very motivated for it. If you have a dream, you have to work hard and make a plan to achieve it. The trick is to transform the hard work in passion. So, while you work hard, you are happy. Last May, I published my first text in English.

The future of my dream is to become a quadrilingual writer. I was born into a Berber family, but in the 70s I couldn't study Berber because of the Algerian authority based on Algerian nationality, and on "One nation, on language," decided that teaching Berber was illegal. I speak Berber very well. I have five sisters and three brothers, half of them live in France, and, among us, we talk many languages. But the language of communication into the family is Berber. If I receive a call from my father, I would answer in Berber. Also in Algeria, we were speaking Berber on the street. Some of my cousins and friends were instead embarrassed to talk in Berber in public. For me being ashamed of Berber would mean being ashamed of my mother. It's not acceptable for me, even though I'm not a Berber extremist. Many Berbers deny Arabic and say Arabic is a colonial language, and so refuse to use it. I'm going in Algeria in April and want to promote a "new" Algeria as a country based in many languages, and I'm going to do it by writing. That's why, in the future, I want to learn how I can write Berber, a language mostly oral.

Questions.

Student: When you write, do you think in a language and write in another, or you think and write in the same language?
Amara: I don’t know. It’s the same question of the language of dreaming. I grow up being multilingual. For me, it’s so easy to start speaking in a language and move to another. When I write, all the languages come together to my mind. Of course, I have to choose a language in the beginning. Now I’m working on a big project on Algeria in Arabic and then I’m going to write an Italian version of it. I don’t know if I will be able to work on an English version. But I need to have a first draft, in this case, and it will be in Arabic.

Student: I understood that you sometimes follow your characters, in different languages. Does it change the way you approach the story?

Amara: Yes it does. I did it with "Divorce in Islamic Style" because I like working on dialogues. Dialogues are full of musicality, images, and vivid language. Characters of this novel are Tunisians, Egyptians, Moroccans, etc. and I gave them the possibility of talking in local Arabic. It surfaces especially in dialogs in the Arabic Version. In the Italian version, I couldn’t do it, so I worked in Sicilian dialect. There is a lot of Sicilian in this book.

Student: How do you write a novel and work on languages, especially dialect?

Amara: For me, there are some steps for writing a novel. First of all, you need to have a good idea. Then you start reflecting on this idea and write a short story about this idea, a synopsis. Then you have to create the characters and then work on languages. My strategy is to build a "collective" writing, a team. In my text in English, I also did it and asked help to my wife, who is American. I gave the English version also to other two people.

Student: Why did you learn and write in Italian and not in French?

Amara: At the beginning, my dream was to become a writer in Arabic. Even when I went to Italy, I continue to write in Arabic. I kept thinking about that, until 2004, when my exile was over. I decided in 2004 to write in Italian. In 2014 I decided to write in English because we moved to New York. The choice of languages is usually connected to my life, where I’m living. In 2009 I also went to Berlin, in Germany, but I haven’t written in German. I have not problems with French itself. I have troubles with French colonialism, but not language. I love all languages. The reason I decided not to use French is that many Algerian, Tunisian, Moroccan writers write in French. They went to French schools and had French education. They are very creative, like my friend Kamel Daoud, that published two years ago, a new version about Camus, "L’Étranger," "The Stranger." It took a character of the novel and created the story. My challenge and goal are to be original. If writing in French, I am not going to insure originality. I went to Arabic-French schools in Algeria; I learned French by reading and by practicing.

Student: Which is the situation of Berber language in Algeria today?
Amara: In the past, Berber was illegal in Morocco and Algeria, but in the 80s, Morocco started promoting Berber. In Algeria, unfortunately, they arrived very late there, and they introduced the Berber in Algerian constitution last year. But I have no trust into it. You cannot add the Berber language in the constitution if you don't have the willing to promote it. I think writers can play a significant role to promote the role of a language through literature. I'm going to do it with Berber.

**Student:** Which strategy did you use in learning so many languages?

Amara: I am going to give you some advice about languages, but you have to find your way. For me, the first thing is motivation. You have to find a very strong motivation. Learning a language means you are going to spend time and money. You have to do it every day. For instance, you ask yourself: "I'm going to learn Italian, why?" First, because Italy is a wonderful country. It represents 0.05 in term of the surface, but regarding cultural heritage, it represents more than 50% - 70% (museums, monuments, history, art, etc.) You are investing in an incredible language while learning and speaking Italian. Second motivation, it is because Italy is a beautiful country. In general, you have to be very humble while learning a language. If you are arrogant, you are not going to learn anything. You learn a language as a kid, making mistakes. You have to work at the same time on two levels, the language of paper and the language of flesh.

**Student:** Are the characters of your novel inspired by the people you meet?

Amara: Be a novelist is fantastic because every day that I leave home, I say to myself: "Probably I'm going to meet the character of a new story." Be curious! It's another advice if you want either learn a language or write it. The reality is the base; it's the first source in Literature. Then it comes the imagination, creativity.

**Student:** What did people at the beginning think of your dream of being a bilingual writer? Did they support you?

Amara: Many were laughing. A lot of people are insecure, negative. Get away from negative people. Try to be among dreamers, try to motivate people and be driven by them. Then, remember that, when we are talking about dreams, we are talking not about destinations but the journey. When I wrote the first novel in 1993, for me, it was the initial step. Then I went to Italy, and I wrote four novels, and then these books were translated into eight languages, including Japanese. Once in New York, with this background, I become more confident. The trick is, anyway, to show your dream, the outing. Doing that, you can have confirmation if it's a real dream or not.

**Professor:** In the scene of "Divorce in Islamic Style," you talk about migrants who live in the same apartment, where there is a hierarchy. I'm interested in the cultural discourse that you present but also in the humor, the sarcasm. Where is the relationship between languages, multi-languages, and laughter,
humor, sarcasm? I can make jokes in my language, but it's more difficult in a second language. Humor is so cultivated in the language - in the metaphors, the historical context, etc.

Amara: This is the influence of impact of Italian Cinema. Italian Cinema more influences me more than Italian Literature. Especially la "Commedia Italiana," "Comedy in Italian Style." It is a genre that had a big success in the 50s and 60s and has died in 70s. I imported Italian Comedy style in my writing. It's a wonderful way of innovation because it is a mixture between drama and comedy; it's not just comedy. For instance, while watching "Una vita difficile," "A difficult life," by Dino Risi with Alberto Sordi, a popular Italian actor, you laugh and cry at the same time; this is Italian humor.

Professor: Does the humor work in the same way in Arabic? Do you have to change it to reach the same effect?

Amara: I cannot control this process, but a lot of readers in Arabic, say mine it's not Arabic 100%, and I tell them: it's Arabic Italianized.

Professor: Did you mention Pirandello and Sciascia as you favorite writers. I am curious, did you have a particular model that you use to work on your Italian to make it literary not just spoken?

Amara: I work on many Italian dialects, the “language of flash.” For example, in "Clash for an Elevator" I worked in Neapolitan, Roman and Milanese, Veneto. In "Divorce" I do it in Sicilian. In two novels that took place in Turin, I worked in Calabria’s dialect, from Cosenza, since the dialects are very local. Leonardo Sciascia influences me, for the elements of “spies” and “detective” in my stories. Last year I had the privilege to teach him for a semester in a course for Graduate students.

Interview to Ali Mumin Ahad, April 26th, 2017

When was the idea of the novel “Memorie del Fiume ed Altri Racconti del Benadir” born?

The idea of the novel "Memorie del Fiume ed Altri Racconti del Benadir" was born in my mind a few years after the publication of the essay ‘I peccati storici del colonialism in Somalia’ (1993) with the intention of further extending the themes discussed there in a different approach, that is, in terms of a narrative.

You defined yourself an “impure” writer, who writes fiction but is primarily a historian. How these two aspects get along in your work?

What we call history is nothing but the shadow of ourselves (in the present) on the path to progress. History (the past, like the shadow), is sometimes behind us when
we proceed toward progress and sometimes is in front of us (when we turn the shoulder to progress or when we have been left behind, without progressing), while very often history (the past) reflects in our present, it is always with us. In my opinion, the work of the historian is bound to the present of which he/she measures the distance from the past as well as the future, more than what we usually think. In other words, to better understand the present and what we are and where we are, it is essential to turn our gaze towards the past, to translate it into the language of the present. It is by this process of translating history that the inspiration for the novel “Memorie del Fiume ed Altri Racconti del Benadir” derived.

In some of your essays, you explained that writing in Italian is a way to talk directly to Italians about the Italian-Somali history (which starts from the colonization and continues with AFIS). Why is it important for Italians to know this shared history?

When I arrived in Italy for the first time directly from Somalia, not as an immigrant or a refugee but for the strengthening of cultural relations between the two countries within a program of academic cooperation, I realized how little the Italians remembered or knew of Somalia, not to mention the colonial history. It was this painful discovery that prompted me to write about Somalia in Italian for Italians.

Do you still believe in the necessity of writing in Italian, or after living in Australia so many years you changed your mind and adopted English?

Today I still think it is necessary to write in Italian, especially to maintain a dialogue with the younger generation of Italian scholars of colonial and postcolonial history.

How your native languages, Somali and Arabic, have affected your Italian?

How is today the relationship with Italian?

Each of us belongs to a native language, a mother tongue. The Somali language is my native language. However I have acquired the Italian language at a very young age, and it is the language through which I have always expressed my ideas, my opinions (on Somalia too), my thoughts, so I consider it a second language second only to the mother tongue. I have always had a special relationship with the Italian language.

Do you think English is more efficient than Italian form Somali writers? For instance, some writers such as Nurrudin Farah, choose to write in English instead of Italian. What are the limitations and the advantages of using Italian?

It is absolutely true that the English language has greater international importance and resonance compared to the Italian language. Writing in English offers, therefore, greater opportunities and a wider circulation for the writer as well as the historian. If these are the limitations of the Italian language, one of its benefits, at least for me, was to establish a direct relationship, not a meditated one through translations, with
De Luca

the Italians. The choice of Nuruddin Farah to write his works in English, I think it was appropriate and a good choice.

As you also wrote in your essays, the conditions of “exile” seems to be the one possible of the Somali writers, who, because of the complicated political situation in their country. Do you think things may change in the future?

I hope so. In the condition of exile, one develops the capacity of remembrance, of reflection on the past and the aptitude to question everything. Despite exile implying certain limitations, it can always be made productive. As I already wrote in my essay, Africa from exile (in “Poetiche Africane,” 2002), "The distance from the place of one’s own roots makes the desire to understand what is happening in there and to contribute with one's own skills to solve the problems, to identify the causes of the malaise and participate in the search of remedies more intense."

What were the difficulties you found in publishing your novel in Italy? Are you planning to find a publisher in the future?

During the almost twenty years I have been in Italy, I have always written from my knowledge of both Somali and Italian cultures and of their reciprocity, but it has never been easy to publish with Italian publishing houses. I think this is also related to the fact that the issues that were at the heart of my interest were not among those areas that Italian publishing houses like because of their Italian readership who, as I said earlier, is unaware of what concerns the Italian colonial past. Nevertheless, I have a long association with Armando Gnisci, the precursor of the literature of immigration in Italy, although personally I have never ascribed myself to this denomination. In contrast, I've always considered myself a postcolonial author, even about literature.

You defined the post-colonial literature as a “finestra sul passato,” a window on the past. Are Italians giving enough importance to this opportunity of exploring their history through postcolonial literature or there is still a resistance? If yes, why and how it is different from other former colonialist European nations?

I think the essay "Una finestra sul mondo" on the Italian postcolonial problems and difficulties has served as a stimulus for a new generation of Italian scholars of colonial and postcolonial issues who have rediscovered colonial issues concerning their country’s history in a new perspective. This is rather a positive development. Regarding any Italian colonial specificity, I would like to proof that the Italian colonialism was different from that of other colonial powers.

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**Articles.**


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Interviews

Interview to Maristella Lorch, the day of her 97th birthday, December 2016.

Interview to Amara Lakhous, April 2nd, 2017.

Interview to Ali Mumin Ahad, April 26th, 2017

Conference, Book events

Amara Lakhous, Writing and Creativity: My experience as a trilingual writer in Arabic, English, and Italian. Tuesday, March 7, Faber Hall 568 – 5:00 Rose Hill, Fordham University, Bronx, NY