ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY

Dicorce Islamic Style
Amara Lakhous
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“The real problem is that we live in a society where the male is both the opponent and, at the same time, the referee.” So observes Safia, a smart and funny young Egyptian woman living in Rome with her devout Muslim husband. He insists she wear the veil, which at first chafes yet ultimately becomes an assertion of her right to her own identity.

Amara Lakhous explores the culture clash between Europe and its Muslim immigrants through alternating chapters in the voices of two characters: Safia, who is called Sofia in Rome, and the ironically named Christian, who takes the name Issa upon joining the Italian military intelligence service. Both confront issues of identity while navigating the terrain of immigrant culture in Rome.

Christian is a typical young Italian male, with one difference. His parents were Tunisian immigrants and he speaks fluent Arabic. Posing as a Tunisian immigrant, he moves into a house full of Muslims in Rome and seeks to expose the members of a terrorist cell. Sympathizing with the plight of these immigrants, he ends up helping them, loaning one some money and pulling strings for another with visa problems.

Meanwhile, Sofia is in danger of becoming an outcast of Muslim society, a divorced woman, because her husband has already twice said to her, “I divorce you.” Once more, and it will be done: divorce, Islamic style. The threads of the two characters’ lives intersect with surprising results.

This engaging tale is teeming with current cultural issues: sexism, racism, female circumcision, polygamy, and assimilation. But it never feels pedantic—rather, the issues are gracefully introduced as they relate to the characters’ lives.

When the film *Divorce Italian Style* was made in the 1960s, divorce in Italy was illegal. The main character plots to kill his wife after finding a lover for her, knowing he would get off lightly for such an “honor” killing. With his reference to this film, Lakhous reminds us that one need not look too far back into European history to find issues of inequality and injustice similar to those for which the West condemns Muslim society today.

Amara Lakhous was born in Algiers and currently lives in Italy. His previous novel, *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, won Italy’s Flaiano prize.

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