An Image of Arab Minorities: The Myth of the City of Multiplicity in Amara Lakhous' *Divorce Islamic Style* (2012)

Une Image des Minorités Arabes : le Mythe de la Ville de la Multiplicité dans *le Style Islamique du Divorce* d'Amara Lakhous (2012)

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Abstract: Against the widespread image of Italy as a melting pot that celebrates the plurality of the distinct nationalities on its territory, Amara Lakhous' Divorce Islamic Style, catalogues images of Muslims and/or Arabs minorities and their struggle with the western perceptions and mindsets. The novel is replete with instances of discrimination, reflecting current patterns of categorization and generalization associated with immigrants, in general, and the Arab Muslim community living in Italy, in particular. The overriding aim of this paper is to explore the stereotypical images of Arab Muslim minorities through male and female perspectives of Christian/Issa and Safia/Sofia. While the former offers insights into the absurdity of stereotypes and prejudices, the latter is so empowering of Arab Muslim women to grow beyond the established images and reconstruct genuine ones. Lakhous further offers a very elastic conceptualization of identity that subverts the very essence of prejudice, bringing about a beyond-stereotyping philosophy. Hence, Lakhous could unmask the myth of a polyglot Italy that celebrates the other.
KEYWORDS: Minorities, Arabism/Islam, Divorce Islamic Style, Stereotypes, cosmoplitanism.

Résumé :Contre l'image répandue de l'Italie comme un creuset célébrant la pluralité des nationalités distinctes sur son territoire, Divorce Islamique Style d'Amara Lakhous répertorie les images des minorités musulmanes et/ou arabes et leur lutte avec les perceptions et mentalités occidentales. Le roman regorge d'exemples de discrimination, reflétant les schémas actuels de catégorisation et de généralisation associés aux immigrés en général et à la communauté arabe musulmane vivant en Italie en particulier. L'objectif primordial de cet article est d'explorer les images stéréotypées des minorités arabes musulmanes à travers les perspectives masculines et féminines de Christian/Issa et Safia/Sofia. Alors que la première offre un aperçu de l'absurdité des stéréotypes et des préjugés, la seconde donne tellement de pouvoir aux Arabes. Les femmes musulmanes doivent grandir au-delà des images établies et reconstruire les images authentiques. Lakhous propose en outre une conceptualisation très élastique de l'identité qui renverse l'essence même des préjugés, donnant naissance à une philosophie post-stéréotype. Ce faisant, Lakhous pourrait démasquer le mythe d'une Italie polyglotte qui célèbre l'autre.

Mots clés: Minorités, Arabisme/Islam, Divorce style islamique, Stéréotypes, cosmoplitanisme.

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The ceaseless immigrant shifts and their growing outlandish spaces have always attracted not only political attention, but also a literary one. Arab writings in Diaspora could put under scrutiny a web of issues and impasses faced by Arab immigrants to different countries on both sides of the Atlantic who come to question, sometimes, for the first time, their true identity. In the new setting, they start oscillating between positively embracing to the new cultural dictations and resisting the high sense of appropriation that they may be driven to. The rapidly growing body of this literary genre could effectively communicate such sense of in-betweeness and otherness experienced by most Arab immigrants along with a plethora of other crucial thematic concerns. The critical body of such narratives is growing big, yet it still requires more and deeper analysis of the different layers of meanings that these narratives convey. The Arab Muslim diaspora in Italy, which is the concern of this study, is no exception. One of the writers who could represent, with a high sense of artistry, the cultural hybridity of polyglot Italy is Amara Lakhous[2]. The latter endeavors to go beyond the national borders to write Diasporic novels, actively engaging in the circulation of an accomplished literary body that appealed and continues to appeal to a worldwide audience.

His novel *Divorce Islamic Style* (2012) is the story is of an Italian spy, named Christian/Issa, who had to pretend to be a Muslim to uncover an Islamic terrorist cell in an Arab community of Egyptians living in Viale Marconi-Italy. Christian/Issa assumes a false persona to unravel the mysteries about a terrorist attack, coming to the realization that the Egyptians he has been socializing with throughout the mission are not masterminds of any attacks of the sort and they actually immerse themselves devotedly in their daily lives and small dreams. Against the widespread image of Italy being a polyglot, vibrant city that celebrates the plurality of the distinct nationalities on its territory, Lakhous poignantly captures its hindered progress toward becoming a tolerant society. In other words, Lakhous' narrative verifies the myth of Italy being a city of multiplicity. The research problem of this study stems from the fact that *Divorce Islamic Style* is a microcosm of minorities' struggle with the western perceptions and mindsets. The novel is replete with instances of discrimination, reflecting current patterns of categorization and generalization associated with immigrants, in general, and the Arab Muslim community living in Italy, in particular. The overriding aim of this paper is to explore the stereotypical images of Arab Muslim minorities from male and female perspectives.

1. The Gap between Reality and Prejudice : A Conceptual Framework

Stereotyping, as a concept, has a long, interesting history and different lenses may approach it. In other words, the original formulation of its meaning has undergone some changes aligning with the different scopes and schools of thought.

To begin with, the Oxford English Dictionary defines a stereotype as a fixed idea or image that many people have of a particular type of person or thing, but which is often not true in reality and may cause hurt and offence. The sociological approach to

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[2]Lakhous was born in Algiers in 1970. He started his career as a journalist for the Algerian national radio running a cultural programme where, despite the restrictions and censorship, he tried to offer a critique of Arabic cultures and societies. He was forced to go into exile for nine years due to death threats he received during the dark period of terrorism and civil war in Algeria (1992-1999).He recently completed a Ph.D. thesis entitled "Living Islam as a Minority." His first novel, *Le cimici e ilpirata* (Bedbugs and the Pirate), was published in 1999. Adapted from Guendaschi (2010).

stereotyping which applies only to social groups, like minorities, which is one of the dependent variables of this study, identifies two folds of stereotypes. The latter can be essentially incorrect and demeaning, or fair and flattering even (2015: p 2). According to Adornoet. al., the former are, oftentimes, reflective of the stereotyper's underlying prejudices (1950) or other internal motivations (Schneider et. al., 2004, as cited in Bordalo et. al. 2015: p 1).

The first use of the concept in social sciences is traceable back to Walter Lippmann's book *Public Opinion*. To capture the essence of a stereotype, Lippmann coined the now famous phrase 'pictures in our heads' to refer to an internal, mental representation of social groups in contrast to their external reality (1998: p 90). He further argues, "We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the process of our perception" (1998: p 90). Lippmann succinctly observes that the limitation of human intelligence in front of the powers of preconceptions always contribute to the persistence of some mental pictures, no matter how deformed they might be. In other words, the human perceptual capacities are not purely impressionistic, nor they are sovereign in their functions; a social group enduringly represent itself in some way in someone's mind just because a certain preconception succeeded at paralyzing the natural process of perception.

Perception, especially, is heavily contingent on few conditions like attitudes, mindsets and characters. Few decades ago, it could be very challenging to understand the power of a preconception in shaping a reality. Now and due to the technological advances and the tools powered by artificial intelligence, the use of camera filters and visual effects best elucidate and illustrate how any user can blur an actual image and give it new defining contours, backgrounds, and colors. Worse still, any follower will certainly fail to see through the filter because perception is under manipulation. By analogy, the gap between what genuinely defines a social group and its stereotypical images may be relatively huge. In Lippmann's terms, "the perfect stereotype. Its hallmark is that its use precedes the use of reason; is a form of perception, imposes a certain character on the data of our sense before the data reach the intelligence (1998: p 90). In case of an experience, which subverts one of the stereotypical images, an open-minded individual will readily incorporate the new piece of the puzzle to that image and alter it. Another one, whose interest necessitates the explicit or the implicit implementation of such stereotypes, will reject the paradox and "discredits the witness, finds a flaw somewhere, and manages to forget it" (Lippman, 1998: p 90). That is to elucidate that these mental pictures are so commanding that they thwart the humans' natural capacity to perceive things as they genuinely are.

According to the literature written on stereotypes and how do they function; there is a consensus among theorists that stereotypes happen in the mind. One of the proponents of this view is Banaji who contends, in *the International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, "Throughout the twentieth century, experiments have shown that in one form or another stereotypes emerge spontaneously from initial categorization and continue to have a life of their own independent of conscious will" (p 15103). That is to say, stereotypes function at the level of the unconscious mind, potentially suggesting an inherent racial bias in human unconsciousness. Nevertheless, the "social cognition approach", rooted in social psychology, defines social stereotypes as special

cases of cognitive schemas or theories (Schneider, et. al. 1979, as cited in Bordalo, p 3, 2015). Hence, stereotypes, once they form, will be sovereign and will automatically generate data according to their own will.

In the context of Arab Muslim immigrant minorities, stereotypes transcend the mental image and its social aspect; they are much more politically oriented and ideologically filled. The mental pictures of Arab Muslims in the heads of westerners exclusively ally with violence, murder, and terror, giving Arab Muslims a hard time to survive the challenges of living out of the borders of home. Ridouani maintains, "Down to the Middle Ages, especially during the Crusade Wars and along the Arabs expansion in Europe until the very days of the Third Millennium, the West has consistently promoted almost identical stereotypes for Arabs and Muslims.Whether the contact took place in the foregone centuries or it happens recently, the West preserve a persisting conceptualization of the Arabs and Muslims as an alien "Other" or rather 'Enemy'" (p.2, 2011). The new outlooks on cosmopolitanism all prove a failure as the word Islam continues to evoke images of bombs, bombs, bullets and blood in a world divided between the west and the rest. In this vein, *Divorce Islamic Style* is a narrative that beautifully and ironically discloses and demystifies a web of clichés and images of Arab Muslims in Italy.

2. Flexible Identities and the New Stereotyping Philosophy

The narrative is highly polyphonic whereby the author gives voice to two alternating narrators of a different sex, culture, nationality and social status, whose fates intertwine. Stanley (2012) contends, "the story unfolds like a duet — one in which the singers are in different sound booths and don't know when and where their voices overlap" (n.p.). One may wonder what contributes to Lakhous' unprecedented success out of the national border? A possible explanation is that Lakhous has been able to provide "the answer to an inner urgency within Italian culture, a need to look beyond national and idiosyncratic horizons, in order to look back to a Mediterranean heritage that for different reasons has been shaded today (Mazzara, 2020: p 3).The two alternating narratives offer different insights on stereotypes. While the male perspective primarily reveals them, the female perspective tends to deconstruct them. This ironic juxtaposition aligns with the characters' professions; Christian/Issa, as an informer, has the power just to communicate the truth, Safia/Sofia, as a hairdresser, has the power to reshape it. The male perspective, which is the concern of this section, unmasks a myriad of images of minorities, shedding light on a new perception of identity and stereotyping.

A central issue in the novel is the inherent difficulty of defining not only who the immigrants are but also who the Italians are, proving the issue of stereotypes so absurd. *Divorce Islamic Style questions* subjectivity itself; all its defining features are less than a chaff in a breeze. Simply put, the relativity of subjectivity undermines the very foundations of stereotypical categorizations and generalizations. Lakhous offers a very elastic conceptualization of identity, blurring its exact contours and shaping elements.

The characters of Christian/Issa and Safia/Sofia are the best instances of such a fluid identity. The novel's major characters all have a hyphenated identification, like in Christian/ Issa, Safia/Sofia, and Akram/John Belushi. Safia stands for the Arab Muslim

origin and Sofia for new foreign one, while Christian stands for the European origin and Issa for the new Arab Muslim identity. Akram/ John likewise assumes having a hybrid identity. In addition to that, everyone in Little Cairo seriously takes Christian/Issa for an Arab Muslim; even Safia/Sofia right from their first encounter calls him the Arab Marcello for his dark hair and moustaches. The fact that Safia becomes Sofia and Christian becomes Issa is so telling of how flexible identity formation is according to Lakhous. This sense of flexibility further accounts for the absurdity of prejudices that no longer lean on rigid identifications.

Lakhous seems to implement this sort of flexible identity in some of his other works too. Mazzari (2022) quotes Roberto Derobertis saying, "The development of the plot [*The Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio's plot*[3]], slowly deploys the hypothesis that there is not any native, nobody who could make claims to original territorial belonging. What the novel questions is the very idea that subjectivity can be reduced to a simple identification, by a name, a language, a passport or the belonging to a land" (pp79-80). Stanley (2012) adds, "his previous novel, '*Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*,' ...The novels are different, but both concern identity and misidentification" (n.p). With this new perception of multiculturalism that corrects the deformed images of minorities, Lakhous joins a world literature that has long been enriched by the biculturalism of authors like Tahar Ben Jelloun, Amin Maalouf, GaitamMalkani and Monica Ali who could successfully voice Arab Muslim concerns at home and abroad.

In addition to that, *Divorce Islamic Style* unmasks the nature of some stereotypes; when the stereotype is entrenched in religion, it automatically takes a political aspect; when it owes origin to a certain nationality, it takes only a social dimension. The social involves society vs. society or individual vs. individual and resolution is easy to sort out. The religious, in contrast, takes in government and power institutions vs. a religious community. The relationship, in this case, generally feeds on oppression, segregation, prejudice and why not coercion. In the novel, Christian/Issa reckons, "the Sicilian Mafioso, the Neapolitan camorrist, the Sardinian kidnapper, the Albanian criminal, the Gypsy thief, the Muslim terrorist, and so on and so on" (Lakhous, 2012, p. 97). The images of Europeans match only with their nationalities, which is very categorical. For Muslims, however, generalization thrusts them altogether to bear the stigmas regardless of their nationalities. "What is lamentably odd is that Arabs and Muslims are seen as one and unique entity with the aim to be arbitrarily regarded collectively as anti-rational, barbaric, anti-democratic, etc" (Ridouani, 2011: p 2). Additionally, Lakhous uses the character of Mohamed the Moroccan to unravel how generalizing prejudices operates. Mohamed explains, "The word 'Moroccan' doesn't refer to someone from Morocco. It is an insult, that's all, like nigger, fag, bastard," for one historical reason that lies in the rape of numerous Italian women by Moroccan soldiers during the Second World War (2012: p 75,).

A stereotype that dates back to a century ago is inevitably unfair to generalize it to the ones who belong to the same national territory. Accordingly, Arab are the victims of being Muslim. The title of the novel, *Divorce Islamic Style*, tells how Arabs tare so

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[3] A novel by Amara Lakhous. Published in 2008. It is a murder mystery set in an apartment building in Rome revealing the perils of immigration, bias, and identity in modern day Rome.

absorbed in navigating a family matter of divorce in the Islamic way, while prejudiced powers are giving it a political dimension. One of the most thought-provoking ironies in the novel is the experience of Christian/Issa, the Italian spy who fakes a Muslim identity to accomplish a mission that turns to be fake itself. Christian/Issa realizes that he is in a test and there is no actual plan to carry out any violent attacks. The irony is that Christian/Issa is neither an Arab, nor a Muslim, he is on a mission to thwart a potential terrorist plot, but there are no terrorists nor any impending attacks. The course of events from beginning to end is hence a lie, but what is in between is so telling of how Italians perceive immigrant minorities. As if Lakhous rhetorically questions where can racism and prejudice position in a world of misidentification and utter absurdity.

One of the most celebrated stereotypical images of Arabs, which according to the cognitive approach can be faltering even, is their hospitability, generally evidenced in their naivety and generosity. Sobhet. al. (2023) claim that one meaning of hospitality is to shed barriers between people and social groups and to confiscate the anxiety attached to the stranger as a danger and a threat (p 447). They further argue, "Despite the rapid economic growth and influx of foreign migrants, tourists, shops, and media in Qatar and the UAE, these societies still require strong adherence to traditional norms of hospitality" (2023: p 448). The fact that Arabs have always been friendly and approachable as an attitude towards guests who come and go in a matter of few days, unlike immigrants who come and become part of the new land. To contest that, Sobhet. al. argue that immigrants are increasingly growing in the middle East due to the economic growth that the region is bearing witness to. Arabs thus prove to be multicultural cities that still open up to the other. In *Divorce Islamic Style*, the best illustration is Mr. Felice/ the architect's invitation of Christian/Issa as a Tunisian immigrant whom he knows for a very short time over a dinner at home. Contrariwise, Italians, in the novel, are in the obligation to notify their governments about the details of their international guests and ask for permits first. The novel is replete with instances of how Italians receiveimmigrants or else without getting the governmental institutions informed. This reinforces the notion that stereotypes reflect the biases of the stereotyper rather than accurately portraying the stereotyped group.

Lippmann's impossibility of a natural/neutral perception finds expression in Captain Judas' statement, "In Italy in recent years we've arrested quite a number of Muslim immigrants on charges of terrorism, on the basis of circumstantial evidence, never almost never real proof…Tonight we planted a moderate amount of TNT in their fine Mosque" (Lakhous, 2010: pp 180-81). The absence of the proof does not only negate the accusation, but also demonstrates the deliberate violence practiced on Muslims. Western Media deliberately distort the image of Muslims through either falsification, exaggeration or generalization. Christian/Issa, so aware of how public opinion can be quickly swayed especially when it comes to Islam and Muslims, refuses to help an Italian student thinking to himself "I already see the newspaper headlines, unleashed like pit bulls: VIALE MARCONI. FIVE NON-EU MUSLIMS RAPE ITALIAN STUDENT.

No that's no good, it's too long. You need something short but striking, like MUSLIMS RAPE A STUDENT… the word 'MUSLIMS' could be understood as all Muslims,' that is a billion and a half people" (2012: p 67). The story is not even a true story, yet it will have a plethora of interpretations. Thus, for someone who is already prejudiced, a billion and a half Muslims are all rapists.

Lakhous delves into how another significant image in Islam, that of the *Mufti*[4], has also been distorted through two basic radical images namely Senior *Haram* and Senior *Halal*. The butcher, one of the figures in the novel, is nicknamed senior *Haram* just for his obsession with extreme prohibitions that give a hard time to the Muslims who seek a religious support or justification to their deeds. Lakhous portrays Senior *Halal*, in contrast, as an excessively permissive figure that may give the impression that he destroys the pillars of Islam by his excessive permissions and approvals. This may expound the manipulation and misinterpretation of the Muslims' holy text and *hadith*, showing how interpretations that reflect personal whims do not necessarily represent Islam as a religion. The dichotomy between the two interpretations implicitly and explicitly redeems Islam, which, as its name in Arabic implies, is essentially a peaceful religion, or simply a religion that advocates peace in the first place. That is to say, every Muslim essentially represents himself not his religion no matter how religious he might be.

Lakhous offers an elastic conceptualization of identity and self-identification; he represents a multifaceted nature of racism, showing that all individuals possess the potential for racist attitudes. The plot gives expression to two sides of discrimination against 'the other', internal and external. While, the former is instigated within the same race and community. The latter denotes the sense of judgmental attitudes towards the different races. In *Divorce Islamic Style*, Internal racism does not only confine to Italians. Like the blacks who suffered from a double jeopardy because of shades in skin colors, the lighter the better, at the hands of some appropriated black subjects, Arab Muslims have categorized Arab subjects according to the degree of their fanaticism with religion, the more observant the better. In "Italians and the Invention of Race: The poetics and the Politics of Difference in the Struggle over Libya 1890-1913", Lucia Re (2010) contends that Italianess comes to Italians as a collective imaginary formation. It is a highly ethno-racial formation that triggered a feeling of threat of being invaded by an ethnically different other (p 2). She adds, Historically, Italians have perennially had an ambiguous status as destitute emigrants and non-white inferior subjects and thus racially inferior and this is what probably accounts for their racist tendencies towards other immigrants (p 2). Re (2010) asserts, "The Libyan war sought to unify Italians by displacing racism from inside to outside the body of the nation and its people" (p.6). In other words, what explains why every community is racist, in a way or another, is the fact that other communities have once segregated them. The male perspective is of the outsider, which is very significant in the context of the minority. Lakhous' choice of an Italian to tell the story is not random; an immigrant narrator is customarily subjective. The voice of an immigrant could have been insignificant especially in a context of racism. The voice of the Italian/Westerner objectively lays bare the workings of representation and misrepresentation.

3. Empowering the Image of the Arab Muslim /Woman

Unlike Christian/Issa's perspective, Safia/Sofia's is, oftentimes, empowering. She decenters all the European discourses on Arabs and Muslims. To begin with, she challenges what the RAI channels communicate about Arabs and Muslims. In one of the instances, she hears a statement that an Italian speaker claims, "the real problem is

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[4] Mufti is transrption of the arabic word مفتي that stands for someone who interprets the hadith and Quranic verses and meanings

that Muslims don't know what love is" and that Islam is psychologically violent and historically marked by conflict (Lakhous, 2010: p 82). Safia/Sofia sets the radio off not in an act of passive rejection of the statement; she rather proffers to put on a CD of *Om Kelthoum*, the singer of love. One song is called *EntaOmri* 'you are my life' brings in an inexhaustible repertoire of sentimental songs of a woman who was called *Kawkab al-sharq*for being the best-selling singer for many decades even after her death. By alluding to this figure, Safia/Sofia demonstrates how Arab Muslims know what love is and celebrate it even.

She further sheds light on an Italian media host who discusses the issue of domestic violence noting that, "In Italy more than six and a half million women have suffered, at least once in their lives, some form of physical or sexual violence" (Lakhous,2012: p.122). Safia/Sofia comments, "I thought women were victims of violence in war zones, like Afghanistan or Iraq, or in countries where there is racism, like some African Muslim countries and where poverty and ignorance are widespread. But not in Italy" (Lakhous,2012: p 123). Safia/Sofia's comment on the Italian host raises questions about the Italians' ability to love; the statistics practically subvert the stereotype of the violent Muslim at home. Safia/Sofia's wit becomes a site of subversion and empowerment at the same time.

In a couple of pages, Safia/Sofia reviews the female struggle with stereotyping in Egypt. If she does not marry, she becomes a spinster, if she does, she has to succeed at the test of virginity or she will be stereotyped as a fallen woman. If she fails in maintaining her marriage, she is going to be a divorced woman, which is very offensive in the Arab context. If she gives birth only to girls, she is called*um el-banat*[5]and society considers her as half-sterile. In Cairo, Safia/Sofia proclaims that she has luckily succeeded at overcoming all the stereotypical images that could mark the lives of so many Egyptian women. In Little Cairo, however, she changes her name from Safia to Sofia to avoid categorization, but her veil is still like "traffic signal that people had to stop at" (Lakhous, 2012: p 63). Safia/Sofia avows, "I was always arm in arm with a crowd of ghost companions: their names? Jihad, holy war, suicide bomber, September 11th, terrorism, attacks, Iraq Afghanistan, Twin Towers…I was a sort of bin Laden disguised as a woman" (Lakhous, 2012: p 63). She does not let the image of a Muslim violent woman limit her realities and her choices. She starts wearing different colors of headscarves and begins a career of a hairdresser. The fact that a veiled woman styles the hair of Italian women is a success in itself. Furthermore, Safia/Sofia tricks her husband who wants to give up on a decision of a third divorce, because she is no longer afraid of bearing the stigma of being a divorced woman. Safia/Sofia has a number of European Muslim and non-Muslim friends whose sisterhood is a pointer to the fact that she no longer is the other within the Italian community.

The motif of the future Arab Muslim woman incarnates in her daughter, Aida. According to Safia/Sofia's promises, the latter will not survive being othered neither at home nor abroad. Safia/ Sofia empowers her daughter not to let anyone define her or outline of her reality. Hence, Safia/Sofia does not only rid herself of the power of those stereotypical images, but also calls all Arab Muslim women to stop internalizing their otherness and give the world a genuine image of who they are instead. As a hairdresser,

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[5] The mother of girls

her ability to cut, trim and style the hair, gives her the potential to rid herself and her people from all the stigmas, minimize misrepresentations, reconciling with the normative culture, and more importantly to design or fashion a new space for this minority to survive. The female perspective is of the voice of the insider, which is so vital in calling for a shift in interest; to move from caring about the racism without to the racism within to empower the oppressed, stereotyped other.

Conclusion

Accordingly, despite the fact that Arab Muslim immigrant minorities continue to survive their identification as one, violent, extremist other, the   Post-stereotyping era heralds an impending eradication of rigid identities and images. The ending in *Divorce Islamic Style* is circular, symbolizing the absurdity of the war on Arab Muslim minorities and the surge of a move on to synchronize with a world that celebrates plurality. The future images of Arab Muslim minorities will relatively vindicate the myth of Italy as a city of multiplicity.

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