

Studi Interdisciplinari su Traduzione, Lingue e Culture

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Studi Interdisciplinari su Traduzione, Lingue e Culture

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and Young Adults

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et la jeunesse

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Gender and Literature

Islamic Veil, Secularism and Gender in Texts for Children and Young Adults

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The debate on the Muslim veil is now crucial in Western Europe's cultural and political context, where societies daily tackle not only issues related to different cultural and religious communities living together, but also complex and difficult events, such as mass migration or terrorism, which are a major source of anxiety for the population and are often manipulated by politicians.¹ Moreover, the debate on the Muslim veil clearly questions and challenges contemporary European feminisms, especially from an intersectional perspective, for at least two reasons. First, it concerns women's body, their emancipation, freedom, and self-determination, by juxtaposing 'exhibited' and covered bodies, which are always perceived, commented on, and evaluated by a socially-

¹ I would like to thank Raffaella Baccolini and Valeria Illuminati for their precious help and useful suggestions.

constructed gaze. Second, it is closely related to the issue of the integration/inclusion of citizens with different cultural traditions, who are also bearers of secular and religious gender models and representations that can come into conflict.

However, these issues are crucial also from an educational point of view insofar as they allow us to reflect upon what messages and values we should try to pass on to younger generations. In this perspective, it is very interesting to examine if and how children and young adult literature deals with these themes. In fact, literature plays a crucial role in the development of gender identity through the representations of girls and boys (Connan-Pintado and Béhotéguy 2014; 2017), and can be instrumental in the education for open and inclusive citizenship.

In this article, first I briefly review the debate as well as the laws on the veil in France and Italy. Then, adopting a gender perspective, I analyze a small corpus of French and Italian literary texts for children and young adults that revolve around the Islamic veil.²

1. The Debate on the Muslim Veil in France and Italy

France and Italy have dealt with the debate on the Muslim veil in very different ways. France, the country which has the largest Muslim community in Europe, has distinguished itself for a series of particularly polemic episodes, which culminated in the approval of specific laws regulating the wearing of veils in public places. There were three veil *affaires*: in 1989, in 1994, and finally in 2004, when the controversial anti-veil law was approved. In the name of secularism, the law bans the wearing of ostensible religious signs in all state schools, with the exception of universities (Nordmann 2004; Pepicelli 2012; Rivera 2010). In 2010, a new law introduced by Nicolas Sarkozy was approved. It states that no one can wear an outfit intended to conceal his/her face in public spaces, targeting the niqab and the burka full-face veils in particular (Baubérot

² In this article, I use the term *hijab*, or *headscarf*, or *veil* to refer to the most widespread Islamic veil, covering the head and hair, but not the face. In contrast, the *niqab*, which is generally black, differs from the hijab as it masks the face, except for the eyes, while the *burka*, a blue veil typical of Afghanistan, covers the whole body, including the face, whose eyes are hidden by a cloth grid.

2014). Secularism is currently being discussed in relation to professional contexts, as well as in relation to the legitimacy of wearing a burkini on French beaches (in summer 2016, several Riviera Mayors on the Côte d'Azur imposed local burkini bans). Secularism was also one of the major themes discussed during the 2017 French presidential campaign.

In Italy, the controversy over the Islamic veil is periodically revived, but it has never acquired the same relevance and vehemence as in France. And, at the time of writing, it has not had legal consequences yet. This is due to several reasons: a radically different concept of secularism that clearly distinguishes between public and private sphere in France; a more recent and varied immigration in Italy, where Muslims are not the largest group; and, finally, the lasting Catholic imprint left on the Italian society (see Rivera 2010: 137). However, from time to time the debate takes again centre stage assuming extremely controversial, polemic, and disruptive tones. The discussion is often revived by people who have a high profile in the media, such as left journalist Giuliana Sgrena, who is in favour of a law against niqab and burka, or far right politician Daniela Santanché, whose crusade to 'unveil Muslim women' gained extensive media coverage (Pepicelli 2012). From a legal point of view, from the 2000s onwards, some mayors from the Northern League, a right party often accused of xenophobia, have banned the wearing of full-face veils in the public space, or the use of burkinis in municipal swimming pools. But each time the Italian Council of State has rejected these resolutions.

In France, the veil *affaires* caused deep divisions in society and especially within the feminist movements (see Roux, Gianettoni, Perrin 2006). Elisabeth Badinter and Christine Delphy effectively discussed the main arguments against and in favour of the laws on the veil, respectively. More generally, their positions summarize two completely different feminist views on the choice of whether to wear the veil in European countries.

According to Badinter (2003) the wearing of the headscarf, imposed by Muslim (and patriarchal) fundamentalism, legitimizes a specific view of women as guilty of arousing impure desires and whose bodies represent a threat. The female body should then be covered and hidden in order to desexualize it and make it harmless. Moreover, before the 2004

law was approved, Badinter stated that, by adopting a differentialist philosophy, the French Republic would pave the way for the development of an intolerable process of women oppression within French society. Therefore, the aim of feminism must be the struggle for equality and equal rights:

L'égalité se nourrit du même (=), non du différent (≠). À méconnaître cette logique élémentaire, à vouloir forcer le sens des termes, on aboutit au contraire de ce que l'on désirait. La parité qui en appelle à l'égalité dans la différence est une bombe à retardement. Très vite, comme on l'a vu, on surestime la différence et on relativise l'égalité. (2003: 217)

In the case of the headscarf, this means that all women are equal if they do not wear it, thus refusing the symbolism of male oppression and domination it conveys.

A few years later, Delphy (2007; 2010)³ also faced this debate that has divided feminists. While many of them experienced it as a painful and impossible choice between anti-sexist and anti-racist struggles, Delphy believes it is actually a false dilemma. In fact, for Delphy the discriminatory French laws about the headscarf derive from a conception of the veil as a political-religious sign with the universal and univocal meaning and scope of representing women's oppression and discrimination. But pro-law feminists did not compare the headscarf to specific symbols of Western femininity (high heels, lipsticks, make-up, etc.) and did not ask the opinion of those wearing it. They readily considered Muslim women that wear the veil as victims who are incapable of rebelling, and Muslim men, especially those living in the banlieues, as oppressors. Such an interpretation produced a view of Islam as an essentially (and irremediably) patriarchal religion. In opposing this view, Delphy recalls the importance of taking into account non-Western feminisms, which refuse to separate feminist and anti-racist struggles and to deny the solidarity ties that bind them to the men of their groups. Moreover, these feminisms challenge the idea that their

³ See in particular the chapter "Le post-colonial en France" in the first volume, while in the second, a collection of papers, see in particular "Race, caste et genre en France" and "Antisexisme ou antiracisme? Un faux dilemme."

culture is fundamentally more sexist than that of the dominant group, while rejecting the idea of applying ready-made, emancipation strategies that were conceived in other situations and contexts. Finally, Delphy calls for empathy that has proved to be, and still is, the most successful and effective “feminist technique.”

As highlighted by Delphy, the debate on the veil implies therefore the need to take into account the opinions of Muslim women (see e.g., Chouder, Latrèche, Tevanian 2008; Zerouala 2015) and Islamic feminisms (see Zahra 2012). Several recent analyses adopting a gender perspective criticize what they define as an overly fixed and monolithic idea of an essentialized Islam, which is the same everywhere in the world, and whose headscarf represents the radical and patriarchal side to be fought (Nordmann 2004; Salih 2008). In fact, there are widely different interpretations of Islam; at the same time, gender relations, gender roles, and women’s rights represent dynamic cultural constructions and are constantly negotiated in time and space (Pepicelli 2012; Salih 2008).

The scarf that we see in European countries is therefore an extremely polysemic symbol. There are at least four different veils: those of immigrants, regarded as ordinary because ‘cultural’; the veils of adolescents who are forced to wear them by their parents; those of second or third-generation post-adolescent women who claim them to express an identity they consider neglected and diminished (Gaspard and Khosrokhavar 1995); and the veils as objects of consumption and fashion (Salih 2008). Similarly, in France many young people recognize themselves as French and Muslim, and try to reconcile democratic and religious principles, Islam and modernity. Far from being models of passivity and submission, many young girls re-read sacred texts to return to an ideal of gender equality, which would be specific to the message of the Quran, according to many Islamic feminist movements (Kada 2012; Pepicelli 2012).

2. The Muslim Veil in Children’s and Young Adult Literature

The analysis of the literary production for children and young adults in Italy and France shows a lack of works that focus on the issue of the Islamic veil, on the one hand, and their little resonance in the field, on the other. Such lack of works (and dissemination) is striking, given the rele-

vance and pervasiveness of the debate that has developed over the years, especially in France. It also reveals that the veil still represents a taboo subject, despite many good intentions in promoting the intercultural education of younger generations. Another interesting aspect is represented by the evolution of these literary texts (and themes), which follow and adapt to social, cultural, and political changes. Thus, French texts move from the debate on wearing the veil at school to the enlistment of young French citizens in the ranks of the Islamic State. Italian texts, instead, convey the everyday difficulties of a more recent immigration, struggling to find its place, both socially and culturally.

In my analysis, I will look at three French and two Italian texts among the few books that have been published so far, written both by second-generation women and by white writers of non-immigrant origin. It is interesting to note that, with the exception of one picture book for younger children, these novels are primarily intended for young adults (12 y.o. and up). This seems to confirm the existence of a taboo on the subject, which is not considered suitable for a younger audience.

As for France, *Un foulard pour Djelila*, by Amélie Sarn (2008 [2005]), tells the story of two sisters, Sohane and Djelila, who live in a French suburb and experience their relationship to the Muslim religion in very different ways. While Sohane is very religious and respects Muslim traditions, including the use of the veil, Djelila, who is more westernized, behaves as her non-immigrant peers. The tragic death of Djelila, who is burned alive by a young Muslim member of a banlieue gang for her disrespect of Islamic rules and precepts, represents for Sohane the starting point for a complex and painful reflection on topics such as integration, religion, and the veil.

More recently, *Samiha et les fantômes*, by Clémentine Beauvais (2010), edited by the important feminist publisher Talents Hauts and officially supported by Amnesty International, is a picture book dealing with the niqab. Set in an unspecified time and place, thus providing symbolic rather than realistic meaning, the book tells the story of Samiha's family, where all women are referred to as "ghosts": they are veiled from head to toe to respect their fathers, brothers, and husbands. Seen through the naïve and yet acute eyes of Samiha, the full veil, whose name is never pronounced, fully reveals its oppressive dimension. It represents a means of

female subjugation, until the day when Samiha's uncle, who imposed the use of the veil, dies, becoming a ghost himself. Women abandon then their "linceuls," a French word meaning *shroud*, on the banks of the river, to mark their resurrection from a metaphorical death.

Finally, I will consider the very recent *Ma meilleure amie s'est fait embrigader* (2016) by Dounia Bouzar, a French Muslim anthropologist who has always been active in the debate on the veil and who was against the 2004 law. Bouzar, who also directs the "Centre de prévention des dérives sectaires liées à l'Islam" (Centre for the prevention of sectarian excesses related to Islam), writes therefore about a phenomenon she knows well, i.e., the recruitment of very young French citizens, not necessarily Muslims, in the ranks of the Islamic State. One of the most interesting aspects of the novel lies precisely in the fact that it is Camille, a non-Muslim teenager, who is recruited through the Internet, and not her best friend Sarah, a practicing Muslim. But Camille's indoctrination is very effectively countered, both from a narrative and an ideological point of view, with Sarah's words. Sarah actually explains to her friend that terrorists' arguments have nothing to do with Muslim religion and the Quran. In this novel as well, the veil is represented by the niqab: Camille begins to wear it after being recruited and it takes on a very important, symbolic value for the girl.

Moving on to the Italian literary texts, it is possible to observe the presence of very recent works for young adults written by second-generation immigrants. I will focus in particular on two of these. The first one is *Oggi forse non ammazzo nessuno: storie minime di una giovane musulmana stranamente non terrorista*, by Randa Ghazy (2016 [2007]), a captivating novel written with a fresh and brilliant style. Jasmine, the protagonist and self-declared alter ego of the author, is of Egyptian origin, but she also feels Italian, and more precisely from Milan. She respects her religion and her family values, but she also tries to find a mediation with the lifestyle of a normal Western student. The many prejudices about Islam do not make her life easy and the marriage of her best friend, Amira, undermines her convictions.

The second book I will analyse, *Porto il velo adoro i Queen: nuove italiane crescono* (2008), is a collection of reflections by Sumaya Abdel Qader, who ironically conveys how difficult it is to be a Muslim wearing the veil in Italy, but also identifies herself as an emancipated woman. In

particular, the author deals with complex issues such as immigration, integration, and the plural identity of Italian second generations in an ironic and at the same time profound way, describing the difficulties, the conflicts, and the contradictions of her daily life. The veil, clothing, being a woman, school, family, holidays, and citizenship are all issues that are dealt with from the point of view of a young woman who rejects any predetermined category, but who finds herself fighting against deep-rooted prejudices on a daily basis.

It is interesting to note that almost all these writers define themselves as feminists (in particular Beauvais, Bouzar, Abdel Qader, and Ghazy), and/or discuss being Muslim and wearing the veil from a gender perspective. However, this occurs in different ways and, above all, with opposite outcomes, attesting to the complexity and relevance of these issues within the feminist debate. Finally, it is important to underline the diversity of these writers' gaze and positioning. In fact, while Clémentine Beauvais and Amélie Sarn are two white French authors, Dounia Bouzar, Randa Ghazy, and Sumaya Abdel Qader are French and Italian citizens of Muslim religion and immigrant origin. It is my intention, therefore, also to highlight different perspectives, from the inside and from the outside, on the veil.

2.1. The Refused Veil

In two French texts of the corpus (Beauvais's and Bouzar's), the veil has an extremely negative connotation. More specifically, they deal with the full veil as a symbol of a patriarchal culture that implies complete and inextricable submission and female oppression. It is also a veil that is imposed by force or deception and is not chosen.

In *Samihha et les fantômes*, a few simple sentences, made even more powerful by Beauvais's illustrations, dramatically oppose life with and without the integral veil. Life without the veil means freedom, both to be who you are and to do whatever you want; wearing the veil means instead living under constraints:

Samihha sait qu'elle devra dire adieu aux arbres, adieu aux baignades dans la mare, adieu à la balançoire du parc. Les fantômes ont du mal à bouger, à courir, et le vent ne sèche jamais leur sueur. [...]

Quand elle sera fantôme, Samiha aura d'autres devoirs. Elle glissera sur le trottoir en poussant une poussette, elle étendra le linge, elle servira le thé aux amis de son Oncle. (Beauvais 2010: 9; 12)

In this picture book the full veil is equated through the images and the use of the word “fantômes” to the shroud of a ghost. It refers to an existence without identity and personal desires, completely dedicated to respecting and serving others, namely men. Significantly, the liberation from the veil/shroud, even if triggered by the accidental death of her uncle, is presented as an act of self-determination by the protagonist, and just as significantly, with her brother's solidarity: “La main de Salman dans la sienne, Samiha assène: - Je ne serai jamais fantôme” (2010: 23). The choice to reject the veil is therefore shown as a personal but also as a political and generational one, thus taking on a paradigmatic value. Despite the name of the protagonist, which may sound exotic to a French child, the fact that the story is not anchored in a specific social and cultural context makes it even more exemplary. In fact, the lack of contextualization seems to make the full veil as something wrong a priori that should be firmly condemned. To this effect, the picture book may also be considered as a ‘manifesto’ of a supposed secular feminism that rejects cultural relativism and places women's rights above everything else – a feminism that is embraced not only by the author but by the French feminist publishing house Talents Hauts as well.

In Bouzar's novel, fragile Camille wears the niqab like an armour that protects her from the world, sublimating her existential crisis into a crusade in the name of what she believes to be forces of good. In her case, the niqab seems also to appease her adolescent anxiety about the male gaze on her body, establishing a physical boundary between “the elects,” those who want to apply the word of Allah on earth, and the others, those she defines as ignorant, hypocritical, lost. This barrier has the effect of separating the girl from that same community she was formerly part of – a community that reacts to the image of her veiled body with repulsion and refusal, without attempting to understand her reasons:

Abucobra avait raison : se voiler est une libération. C'est bizarre que Sarah ne se voile pas. Je suis complètement à l'abri des forces nocives. Plus

rien ne peut m'atteindre : je suis invincible. Est-ce mon niqab qui agit comme un bouclier ? Ou Dieu qui, satisfait de moi, me protège particulièrement ? [...] J'ai l'impression de planer au-dessus de toute cette masse humaine sans discernement et sans conscience. Mais tous ces ignorants, ces hypocrites, ces égarés ne peuvent rien me faire. Ils me regardent de loin mais ne me parlent plus. Ils m'évitent même : certains changent de trottoir. Les hommes ne me calculent plus non plus, eux qui me mettaient si mal à l'aise, surtout le voisin d'à côté, avec son sourire vicieux. (Bouzar 2016: Kindle positions 325-331)

In Camille's case, the niqab is therefore not linked to a cultural and religious tradition of which the girl is the heir or guardian. It embodies, on the contrary, a radical and gloomy faith meant to lure young people to Syria and use them to fight the 'holy' war. In this regard, it is interesting to note that her friend Sarah, a Muslim who has well integrated into French society without giving up her faith, helps Camille contextualize and historicize the use of the niqab. She also points out the crucial difference between the niqab and the hijab. While the former somehow 'erases' a person, the latter allows one, in contrast, to remain a woman, thus preserving not only a personal, individual identity, but also a gender identity:

Leur but, c'est que tu oublies qui tu es parce que vous devenez 'toutes les mêmes'. Tu vois, quand tu portes le foulard, tu restes une femme qui choisit son foulard en fonction de sa chemise. Quand tu portes un jilbab ou un niqab, tu deviens personne, et c'est ce qu'ils veulent. Que tu t'oublies, que tu deviennes un copier-coller parmi d'autres... (2016: Kindle positions 1324-1327).

In this novel, therefore, a clear contrast emerges between a fundamentalism that is not recognizable as 'Islamic' by Muslims themselves and an Islam that is moderate and perfectly compatible with French democracy and its republican values. This contrast may perhaps seem a little naive, since it does not account for the complexities and difficulties of coexistence between the various cultural and religious communities. However, it seems designed to promote a positive image of Islam, personified by Sarah's character, with reference to the role and status of women. In

other words, the author strives to show that Islam is compatible with women's emancipation in a Western European country like France, while showing that fundamentalist drifts have nothing to do with the spirit of the Quran.

The other three novels, however, do not talk about the niqab but about the hijab, and more precisely about what the daily life of a European girl wearing a veil is like. Examples will be shown from two of these in particular.

In *Un foulard pour Djelila*, when Sohane goes to school wearing the hijab for the first time, she immediately ceases to be a person and becomes a symbol to be firmly rejected. If not properly opposed, her choice, which is illegal according to the French law on religious symbols in schools, could actually spread like wildfire. Sohane's choice is deliberate: nobody is forcing her to wear the veil. But while the other members of her family accept her choice, even though they share their perplexities, nobody at school asks her to explain her motives:

Je ne suis plus qu'un foulard. Où est Sohane Chebli ? Elle a disparu, elle n'existe plus. À sa place, on ne voit plus qu'une adolescente en quête d'attention et de scandale. Je suis devenue, du jour au lendemain, le symbole d'une population issue de l'immigration, à la dérive, victime de la montée de l'intégrisme. [...] Mais pourquoi est-ce que personne ne prend la peine de discuter avec moi sans présupposer que mon choix est stupide ou que je cherche à provoquer ? J'ai envie de crier : - Je suis Sohane Chebli ! Regardez-moi, c'est moi, Sohane Chebli ! (Sarn 2008: 62)

Significantly, after Sohane's exclusion from high school, the headmaster and professors organize a debate on the wearing of the veil at school, so that everyone can express her/his opinion. However, Sohane is not invited to this encounter (see ch. 18).

In this novel, the refusal by school authorities to try to understand the reasons of a girl who chooses to wear the veil is opposed to another form of radicalism: that of a young Muslim band trying to force girls to wear the veil, thus attempting to exert male dominance over women, who are considered as inferior human beings to be submitted. Caught between these two extremes, within which Sohane finds no room for affirming her personal position, at the end of the novel, she decides to

abandon the veil: “Je n’ai pas couvert ma tête, ce matin. C’était inutile. Mon foulard n’est pas un étendard. Je ne veux pas qu’il serve de justification à une quelconque violence” (2008: 103).

In a more amusing and less dramatic way, in *Porto il velo, adoro i Queen*, Sumaya Abdel Qader, a second-generation Muslim young woman who wears the veil by choice, ironizes on Italian stereotyped views about Muslim women:

Non ne possiamo proprio più del comune pregiudizio che le velate siano delle sfigate nascoste sotto una tenda. È vero, ci sono paesi dove il velo è obbligatorio e le donne non se la passano certo bene, ma la colpa non è della religione, bensì del delirio di onnipotenza di certi uomini che, soffrendo di misoginia, si sfogano prendendosela con l’altra metà del cielo e inventandosi mille giustificazioni. (2008: 71)

Beyond the humor of some situations, the author daily and painfully confronts the inability of the people around her to empathize or even to just try to go beyond prejudices. In fact, in Italy, wearing the veil still means to be different and it can have serious consequences also from a professional point of view. And yet, it is interesting to note how being a member of a minority culture/religion combined with being a woman results in a double discrimination, linking ‘race’ and gender and thus twice penalizing Muslim girls:

Innanzitutto siamo donne, genere sbagliato per trovare facilmente un impiego. Secondo, siamo viste come immigrate: no comment. Terzo, siamo giovani, e qui abbiamo gli stessi problemi dei nostri coetanei autoctoni. Quarto, siamo musulmane, che fa rima con integraliste filo Bin Laden, quindi antioccidentali, ergo pericolose per l’identità e la cultura fondante e la democrazia del paese. [...] Quinto, siamo velate: e qui si apre un capitolo infinito. C’è chi ti dice in faccia che per una determinata posizione servono ragazze di bella presenza e che il velo non aiuta. Eppure siamo carine, giuro. (2008: 72-73)

2.2. *The Claimed Veil as a Religious, Cultural, and Identity Symbol*

Choosing to wear the veil in Italy and France, therefore, is loaded with social consequences, which are not always easy to cope with. The protagonist of Abdel Qader’s autobiographical book, Sumaya, jokes about

it: “Ormai il nuovo dilemma shakespeariano del secolo è: to veil or not to veil?” (2008: 67). Yet, in most of these novels, the veil is claimed as a personal choice, completely free from men’s will. Wearing the veil is a religious, cultural as well as an identity choice that does not prevent the protagonists from living an active and emancipated life, that is, studying, working, and freely choosing who to marry.

For Sohane in *Un foulard pour Djelila*, the decision to wear the scarf stems from a need to express her Arab religious and cultural identity and to be herself: “J’ai besoin de me sentir moi-même, j’ai besoin d’être respectée, que mes croyances et mes choix soient respectés. Je suis arabe, Djelila. Arabe et musulmane. C’est la religion de mes parents et de mes grands-parents” (Sarn 2008: 44). On the other hand, the fact that Sohane is the first of all the family members living in France, including her grandmother’s generation, who chooses to wear the veil shows very clearly how for these third-generation girls and young women it is something different from the use of the veil in their country of origin. The veil is a religious symbol which is undoubtedly linked to Islam, but at the same time it represents an identity and cultural choice that depends on being a young Muslim living in Europe, in search of a difficult identity that has to be mediated between two different cultures. Not surprisingly, Sohane’s grandmother, who is modern and emancipated, while respecting her granddaughter’s choice, tells her to pay attention, and points out that her decision has nothing to do with the past of her family:

Il faut faire attention. Très attention. Y aller doucement avec la religion, vous le savez, les filles. [...] Non, Sohane, tu fais tes propres choix, bien sûr. *Inch Allah*. Notre passé n’a rien à voir avec ton présent, mais fais attention, ma petite fille, fais quand-même attention. (2008: 73)

If wearing the veil is presented as a choice that is not imposed by men, it is however still related to the desire to escape male gaze and desire. It is a way to reject a certain model of Western femininity, whose real emancipation these girls seem to question, as it is often linked to the objectification of the female body: “Tu sais que je déteste ces filles qui s’affichent sur les murs, qui s’exposent dans les magazines. Je ne veux pas leur ressembler. Ce n’est pas ça, être une femme, j’ai besoin d’être respectée” (2008: 44).

The veil is then associated with a form of respect by other people, especially men; the female body is covered for the benefit of the spirit, reaching a different dimension that is far away from social conventions and that privileges spirituality over corporeity. Jasmine, the protagonist of *Oggi forse non ammazzo nessuno*, explains it well, acknowledging at the same time that she would be incapable to wear a veil. Her attitude shows a deep respect for the veil's cultural roots but also the capacity to detach herself from it and to make a personal choice. And this could be linked to her belonging simultaneously to two sensibilities, the Islamic and the Western one, and her oscillating between them:

Allora, il velo è una delle esperienze più profondamente e sinceramente spirituali che conosca. Diventa un modo per azzerare le convenzioni. Un modo per elevarsi lì dove altrimenti non arriveresti mai. Lì dove contano la mente, il cuore, lo spirito. Un modo per costringere gli altri a guardarti dentro, perché fuori non c'è nulla da vedere, non hai nessun biglietto da visita da mostrare, non hai nessuna libidine da soddisfare. [...] E io, dal basso della mia umanità, del mio più umile e prosaico essere al mondo, non ci arrivo proprio. È il mio modo di vivere, non ne conosco altri. (Ghazy 2016: 30)

In fact, in some cases like Sumaya's, the use of the veil does not necessarily imply renouncing to femininity or beauty, it is just another way of being women: "Ma tornando a noi, dietro, o meglio sotto, il velo c'è una donna [...], che come tutto il genere è carica di passione e sensualità, malizia e creatività. Solo che non le ostenta continuamente e gratuitamente" (Abdel Qader 2008: 71). And the veil can thus turn into a fashion and a consumption object as well (cf. Pepicelli 2012).

The veil is also linked to a conception of sensuality and sexuality as something that is very private and precious, to be devoted solely to the person with whom one shares her life (a view very close to the Catholic one, if this were to be strictly applied). This brings the protagonists of the novels to confront and often collide with other female models from other cultural traditions, and particularly from Western feminisms. In this comparison, however, young Muslim writers do not really seem to condemn or reject Western female models. However, their models are often neglected in Western societies. Therefore, they suffer from a lack

of recognition, and subsequently from the difficulty of bringing together ideas of femininity which are far apart. Still, they struggle to find their spaces in searching for a delicate balance between the yearning to be an active part of the society in which they live and the desire not to give up their cultural roots entirely. Thus, Jasmine, the protagonist of Ghazy's novel, struggles to find her identity among the positions and the contradictions of her Muslim and Italian friends. On the one hand, her Muslim best friend is a seemingly submissive wife, who actually dominates her husband in private:

E così non tutte le ragazze musulmane con la cittadinanza europea hanno come massima ambizione di spaccare il mondo e mostrare a tutti che vogliono fare un lavoro brillante, essere indipendenti e fare un sacco di soldi. E così una ragazza che sembra la perfetta moglie sottomessa magari dietro la porta di casa si trasforma in un'amazzone che gestisce da matriarca ogni singolo aspetto della vita di coppia. (Ghazy 2016: 191)

On the other, her non-immigrant Italian friends wear short skirts and high heels, and feel free to have sex before marriage. The most painful thing for Jasmine is the (apparently) impossible mediation among so many different choices, her desire to position herself halfway between different cultural models, without accepting or refusing a priori neither one:

Che a qualcuno passi per l'anticamera del cervello che forse non esiste un modo giusto di essere donna, ma esistono solo modi diversi? Improbabile. Che si provi in qualche modo ad andare oltre il luogo comune, il sentito dire, il blocco monolitico, ad andare più a fondo? Impossibile. Ma io la sento, la mentalità. È qualcosa di stratificato, complesso, poliedrico. Mi complica, proprio così. Voglio dire, a che pro appiattirci? Perché diventare anonimi? Perché rinunciare a esprimere la nostra diversa identità? (2016: 143)

Even in *Un foulard pour Djelila*, two different gender models are compared and confronted through the conflicting choices of the two young Muslim sisters, while their family equally respects both choices. Sohane decides to wear the veil claiming her Arab and Muslim identity, while Djelila claims her right to be like other Western young people, to ex-

hibit her beauty, to drink alcohol, and to have fun with her friends. After Djelila's death, Sohane understands that she was wrong about judging her sister and that freedom is the most valuable thing:

J'ai eu tort, Djelila. Ton jean n'était pas trop moulant, ni ton blouson trop court. Tu avais le droit d'être toi-même, mais d'autres en ont décidé autrement. J'ai oublié, oui, moi, j'ai oublié les préceptes du Coran. Je n'aurais pas dû te juger, Djelila, mais te comprendre et, de toute façon, te défendre. Je ne me sentais pas concernée par ta révolte, Djelila, mais je me suis trompée. Tu avais raison, la liberté, c'est sacré. (Sarn 2008: 101-102)

Moreover, it is interesting to note that the protagonists of these novels openly deal with feminism, reworking it on the basis of their own personal experience. Feminism, which for Ghazy essentially consists in the freedom to choose, lies precisely in the borderland between different cultures and in their meeting and intersections. As we have seen, it is an exchange that is often difficult and painful, but that may free women from all imposed and fixed schemes and open new, different possibilities of self-determination:

Abbiamo il diritto di essere frivole, e abbiamo il diritto di essere serie, o persino intellettuali, se e quando ci va. La fondamentale libertà delle decisioni di Jasmine è l'unico vero messaggio di questo "libretto leggero". Un po' femminista, un po' estremista, ma in fondo molto sincero. (Ghazy 2016: 6)

Likewise, Sumaya wears the veil but claims her choices as an emancipated girl, who studied and went to university, who works and shares with her husband domestic chores and her daughters' care. And she does not hesitate to blame male chauvinism and paternalism, inviting women to rebel in order to create a new world together with the men:

Comunque è inutile; gli uomini, anche i migliori del mondo, come mio marito, da Oriente a Occidente ce l'hanno radicato in testa. Si sentono superiori e basta. [...] Donne di tutto il mondo, unitevi e ribellatevi! Non contro gli uomini, ma con gli uomini. Le cose migliori si fanno insieme. (Abdel Qader 2008: 174)

Finally, the different views on women's condition and what it means to be a woman also seem to reflect the different authors' backgrounds and positions. Beauvais writes a fairy tale explicitly based on female empowerment and the rejection of the veil as a symbol of patriarchal submission. Sarn, who extensively documented herself before writing her novel based on a real story, tries to understand the reasons of those who choose to wear the veil and then makes her protagonist decide to remove it definitively, thus avoiding any political and ideological manipulation. On the contrary, the positions of the other second-generation writers are more nuanced. Bouzar writes a novel denouncing the deceptions of fundamentalism as opposed to a moderate and integrated Islam, in which the veil exists as a free choice but does not seem to play a prominent role. Ghazy has a more secular attitude towards the veil, but is also very respectful of freedom of choice, while Abdel Qader is a convinced supporter of the veil as a religious and identity symbol.

For these Italian writers, it is also striking that there is a certain gap between private and public spheres. In fact, while both young women are very emancipated from the 'public' point of view – they are or have been university students, they aspire to important jobs, and want to change the world – their private lives are instead in line with the dictates of their religion, especially with regard to alcohol, premarital sex, and the conception of love. Sumaya explicitly writes that,

Sinceramente immaginare mia figlia con un non musulmano non mi e-letterizza. Certo non per ragioni discriminatorie, per carità, ma per una concezione di vita matrimoniale e di coppia che va oltre il fascino del grande Amore fatto di sola passione e irrazionalità. [...] Certo, queste sono parole, la società multiculturale ci pone davanti alla possibilità di avere coppie miste. Ancora una volta, a ognuno la sua responsabilità. (Abdel Qader 2008: 126; 128)

The veil perhaps takes on an even different meaning, identifying a 'new' generation, different from those who preceded it but also from the generation of their peers with no migrant heritage. A generation painfully torn between different identities, which at the same time is searching for a new one:

Non credo che noi altri ibridi possiamo pretendere di essere veri italiani (chissà poi cos'è il vero italiano; a me pare che dall'Unità d'Italia a oggi non si sia creata un'identità italiana, per non parlare di identità europea). Insomma siamo roba nuova. Nuovi italiani che crescono. (Abdel Qader 2008: 16)

3. Conclusion: The Female Body

To conclude, women are carefully and often critically looked at by both women and men, in short, by society: a gaze that derives from somebody's point of view, from her/his social and cultural positioning, a gaze that judges other women's body, as it is covered, or revealed, for the colours being worn, for hairstyles and makeup. The societies in which we live – which can be actually considered multi-cultural as many sometimes radically different cultures coexist within them – are exposing us more than in the past to gender issues, to different notions and ideas of women and femininity, which are intersected with 'race' issues.

As Bonfiglioli writes, an open discussion on the veil within European feminisms is necessary to redefine plural and intersectional, non-ethnocentric emancipatory practices that take into account the interaction between gender oppression and other forms of domination and inequality (2012: 297). Such an open exchange cannot, however, be exempt from considering the political and ideological significance of the veil. In fact, even if many women freely choose to wear the veil, thus giving it a new identity and even a feminist meaning, the veil in itself refers to a centuries-old culture of female modesty and segregation of the sexes, not only of Islamic origin. And this culture of modesty, which forces women to cover their bodies in order to prevent and avoid arousing male desire, is linked in turn to a culture of rape that cannot and should not be ignored (Sciuto 2018). Consequently, it is imperative to discuss publicly the nature of the veil for its performative and political value of building a public space or a collective imaginary that goes beyond simple individual freedom (2018: ch. 3.3-3.6).

Finally, it is also important to reflect on the presence of these issues in a literature for children and young people that is increasingly gendered and simultaneously crucial in the formation and consolidation of gender models and representations among younger generations (Biemmi

2010; Chabrol Gagne 2011; Cromer 2010). The theme of the veil remains for now occasional in French and Italian books, despite the numerically important presence of veiled girls and women in both countries and the need, in all age groups, for stories that deal with the existence of those who choose or are eventually forced to wear the veil. We need stories that are as plural and open as possible and that make readers reflect critically on gender stereotypes, differences, and the uniqueness of women and people in general. This also places the ethical dimension of children's and youth literature at the centre of attention in an age of conflicts and radicalisms:

À la fois miroir et reflet de la société qui la porte, la littérature de jeunesse porte la marque des mouvements d'idées et de formes qui affectent ou conditionnent les relations humaines, cristallisant ainsi de façon emblématique les processus normatifs qui régissent les configurations sociales et culturelles quitte à les dénoncer chemin faisant. À ce titre, elle constitue à la fois un témoin de son temps et une avant-garde de ce qui pourrait advenir – à l'orée d'un troisième millénaire en voie de constitution, on ne saurait rêver meilleur compagnon de route. (Clermont, Bazin, Henky 2013: 16)

In this context, publishing texts aimed at children and young adults dealing with these issues is very important since they can open, promote, and enhance diversity, in the name of a plural, complex, and respectful notion of citizenship. This is certainly a difficult challenge, perhaps almost impossible in times of rising populism, when physical and ideological walls are increasingly built. Yet, it is a necessary, even vital challenge we should be ready to take on, especially if we care about the future of younger generations.

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