

## **An Analysis of Aesthetic Readings of the Novel "How to Suckle from the She-Wolf without Being Bitten" by the Algerian Novelist *Amara Lakhous* in the Light of Reception Aesthetics Theory**

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### **Abstract:**

Algerian writing has made significant strides in the field of novelistic production, a fact that has become clearly evident in many contemporary narrative works. The torch of narrative innovation has been carried by a young generation that has departed from traditional writing molds, adopting boldness, the breaking of taboos, a tendency toward universality, and renewal in themes and stylistic approaches as a method of novelistic writing and composition. All of this has been manifested through the structural and aesthetic components of the novelistic work.

Accordingly, this study seeks to examine the contemporary Algerian novel by exploring aesthetic readings from the perspective of Reception Aesthetics Theory, focusing on the novel *How to Suckle from the She-Wolf without Being Bitten* by the Algerian novelist Amara Lakhous. The study concludes that Lakhous's novel opens the door to interpretation and multiplicity of readings for the recipient, while simultaneously disrupting the reader's horizon of expectations. This is achieved through the sensitive themes embodied in the novel, such as the predicament of identity between memory and forgetting, the conflict between self and Other, as well as the clash of civilizations and cultural systems.

**Keywords:** Reception – Impact – Contemporary Novel – Renewal – Amara Lakhous

### **Introduction**

Contemporary Algerian writing particularly novelistic writing has been marked by a number of characteristics that have brought it closer to global literary horizons, especially through the creative productions of a group of authors such as Amara Lakhous. These works have renewed both content and form by transcending earlier pioneering novelistic models and emancipating themselves from the constraints of dependency upon them. In doing so, they have succeeded in breaching and disrupting readers' horizons of expectation, while simultaneously opening onto new horizons by compelling the

recipient, through each reading, toward multiple interpretations that generate an aesthetic distance one that expands whenever the reader's expectations are frustrated.

It may thus be argued that the novel *How to Suckle from the She-Wolf without Being Bitten* by Amara Lakhous constitutes nothing less than "an open space for the multiplicity and collision of identities and cultures," a feature that has contributed to opening the novelistic text par excellence to plural readings. The novelist skillfully embodies this open space of clashing identities and cultures through his choice of the symbol of the "she-wolf," which represents a ferocious Italy afflicted by racism, marginalization, and discrimination an Italy that nevertheless embraces diverse and conflicting human groups.

From this perspective, the problematics of our study may be formulated as follows:

Has the novel, through its contemporary creative load, succeeded in opening the door to multiple interpretations and divergent readings for its recipients?

The objective of this study is therefore to analyze a set of diverse readings of Amara Lakhous's novel and to examine whether this contemporary work has succeeded in generating multiple interpretations in the minds of its readers by frustrating their horizons of expectation throughout the narrative progression of events. To this end, we have adopted the descriptive-analytical method.

### **Reception Aesthetics and Its Major Critical Propositions**

Reception aesthetics is considered one of the most important contemporary critical approaches that has accorded great attention to the recipient and the act of reception. It has positioned the reader as a legitimate partner of the author, granting the reader a central role in the process of literary production through interpretation and response. Some scholars, such as Holland Holub, define it as "a branch of modern literary studies concerned with the ways in which literary works are received by readers, rather than the traditional focus on the process of producing texts or examining them in themselves" (Al-Banna, 2008, p. 25).

This theory emerged within a Western intellectual context, where "this critical trend was developed by professors and students at the University of Constance in West Germany in the late 1960s and early 1970s" (Al-Banna, 2008, p. 25). It may also be regarded as "a conciliatory theory that combines the aesthetics of the text with the aesthetics of its reception, based on the reader's responses and reactions as an active and living element. Between the reader and the aesthetic text, a

process of artistic communication and interaction takes place, resulting in psychological impact, emotional astonishment, interpretation, and finally an aesthetic judgment related to collective consciousness” (Al-Bashir, 2014, p. 83).

Accordingly, reception aesthetics is as articulated by one of its foremost theorists, Hans Robert Jauss “a call for a new interpretation of the literary text aimed at uncovering its features of singularity and creativity (or their opposite: imitation and triviality), not by probing its intellectual depth in itself or describing the process of its external formation as such, but by determining the nature of its impact and the intensity of its effect on readers and critics through examining their responses and discourses. It is thus a critique of the text through a critique of its receptions” (Jauss, 2004, p. 14).

This critical approach employs a set of procedural tools formulated by its principal theorists, Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, the most significant of which include:

### **Horizon of Expectation**

This concept constitutes one of the most important methodological foundations within the terminological system upon which Jauss’s theory is built, occupying a central position in his critical project. Jauss drew inspiration for this concept from both Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl Popper. As Abdel Nasser Mohamed Hassan explains:

“The term ‘horizon of expectations’ or ‘horizon of waiting’ was not entirely new to philosophical circles in Germany, at least. Jauss adopted the concept of ‘horizon’ from Gadamer and combined it with the notion of ‘expectation,’ which he drew from Karl Popper’s concept of ‘disappointment of expectation.’ Jauss found that these two concepts, already operative in the philosophy of history, fulfilled his aspiration to demonstrate the importance of reception in understanding literature and writing its history” (Hassan, 2002, p. 16).

From Jauss’s perspective, the horizon of expectation represents the reader’s prior readiness shared even by the author along with the expectations and beliefs shaped by the intellectual references carried in the reader’s mind. Any new work prompts the reader to recall previous similar works in order to prepare psychologically and cognitively for its reception, thereby forming specific expectations about it. Jauss states that “the literary work addresses a perceptive reader accustomed to dealing with aesthetic works and adapted to their expressive traditions. Thus, the horizon of expectation is embodied in the relations, invitations, and provocations that presuppose a prior readiness on the part of the audience to receive the work. Such a horizon of expectation also lives in the writer’s mind

during the act of writing and significantly influences its construction. The author may choose either to satisfy the readers' expectations by conforming to them or to frustrate those expectations" (Hassan F., 2013, pp. 33–34).

This conception refers to the informed reader who is accustomed to engaging with numerous literary works and is imbued with accumulated perceptions and representations resulting from continuous interaction with diverse texts. Nevertheless, despite this intellectual background, the reader's horizon of expectation may either align with the literary work at hand or be frustrated when the text deviates from that horizon.

Jauss further notes that this horizon "can be reconstructed by encompassing a descriptive system produced by three factors related to the emergence of any literary work at a specific historical moment:

- The audience's experience of the genre to which the work belongs.
- Its perception of the forms and themes of earlier literary works as presupposed by the new work.
- Its awareness of the distinction between poetic language and everyday language" (Omari, 2009, p. 31).

Since a text does not emerge from nothing, these factors assist the reader in the process of understanding and may establish a prior historical, cognitive, social, and political background shared between the reader and the text, thus facilitating their interaction. Whether the text conforms to or diverges from previous texts, it produces new meaning derived from imagination and reality or from everyday language, thereby realizing the social function of the literary work.

Jauss's concept of the horizon of expectation rests on two fundamental pillars: response and frustration. When the reader encounters a text, multiple moments and angles arise through which the text may either align with or oppose the reader's expectations. In this sense, "the horizon carried by the literary work is characterized by two principal affective properties: frustration followed by response or confirmation. Jauss borrowed the concept of frustration from Karl Popper, who argued that the fundamental factor in accomplishing any scientific project in particular or any human experience in general lies in the frustration of expectations, since realizing that our hypotheses are false makes us more prepared to engage with reality" (Omari, 2009, pp. 32–33).

The reader approaches the text equipped with beliefs and preconceptions considered stable and well-founded. Yet, in dialoguing with the text, these beliefs may be destabilized, prompting revision or even abandonment. Jauss maintains that “this epistemological scientific proposition concerning the frustration of expectation helps define the function of literature in social life, for the literary work does not merely frustrate the horizon of expectation of its readers or sever its connection with them through the use of unprecedented aesthetic forms, but also raises disturbing and provocative questions that may touch upon government, state, religion, the army, and so forth. Consequently, the work may compel the audience to reconsider its beliefs or perceptions of reality” (Omari, 2009, p. 33).

Conversely, the reader may encounter ambiguity within certain literary works, producing an internal shock that contradicts prior thinking and expectations, leading to rejection of the work’s content. In this case, frustration becomes the source of conflict with the horizon of expectation. As Oushan notes, “when the reader begins to receive a literary work, the work may respond to the horizon of expectation and thus align with the aesthetic criteria shaping the reader’s conception of literature, or it may violate and contradict these criteria, thereby entering into conflict with the reader’s horizon of expectation” (Oushan, 2000, p. 104).

Thus, the reader faces two possible positions in engaging with a literary work: first, acceptance and response when the text conforms to expectations a feature particularly evident in classical works; second, shock and frustration when the work contradicts expectations, compelling the reader to construct entirely new perceptions in an attempt to adapt to unfamiliar meanings.

Accordingly, “when the recipient encounters a new work, it is measured against the existing horizon of expectation shaped by cultural stock and intellectual orientation. If the work conforms to this horizon, it is accepted as such; if it contradicts it, the reader undertakes a process of adaptation by modifying the horizon itself” (Al-Atawi, 2013, p. 49). Hence, meaning is constructed and produced within the framework of the horizon of expectation, where literary history and aesthetic experience interact with the act of understanding. Through the accumulation of interpretations across history, a particular historical sequence emerges for the reader, measuring the evolution of literary genres. Moments of frustration play a crucial role in this historical formation, as they mark instances in which the text transcends previous norms carried by the reader’s horizon of expectation thereby founding a new horizon. In this way, literary art develops through the exclusion of surpassed horizons and the establishment of new ones, such that every exclusion of a horizon of expectation gives rise to the creation of another (Bakhoush)

Thus, it represents one of the possible forms of reception, ensuring the multiplicity and divergence of readings of a single text across time. It therefore enables the recipient to produce new texts with each reading, a process made possible only through openness to diverse interpretations in addition to the reader's prior literary stock acquired through engagement with earlier texts.

What may be concluded from the foregoing is that "only high-quality literary works are capable of making their readers' horizon of expectation reside in disappointment, whereas simplistic works are those that satisfy the horizons of expectation of their audiences, and the fate of such works is rapid oblivion" (Qasim, 2016, p. 308). This indicates that a literary work which conforms to the horizon of expectation of the contemporary reader tends toward simplicity and classicism and fails to achieve aesthetic pleasure. By contrast, the work that departs from the familiar and deviates from the reader's expectations is the one that generates aesthetic value and establishes its literariness. As Jauss intended, the aesthetic value of literary works lies in the relationship between the horizon of expectation and the recipient, and in the trajectory that this relationship takes and ultimately reaches.

### **The Implied Reader**

The German theorist Wolfgang Iser focused his attention on the aspect of the effect exerted by the text upon the recipient, articulating his propositions through a set of concepts, foremost among them the implied reader, which he considers the foundation and axis of the reading process. This reader is not a real, empirical reader but rather an abstract construct: "the implied reader, as a concept, has deep roots in the structure of the text; it is a construct that cannot under any circumstances be equated with any real reader" (Iser, p. 30).

Accordingly, the implied reader is that reader who is embodied within the folds of the text and comes into being through the relationship that binds text and reader, wherein meaning is formed through the reader's consciousness. As Holub explains, "what Iser seeks is a way to shed light on the existence of a reader without having to deal with empirical or abstract readers presumed to exist in advance" (Holub, p. 103). The implied reader is therefore not an actual entity but is realized during the act of reception, contributing to the construction and reconfiguration of the text, as if residing within its structure and being summoned by conscious reading affecting the text and being affected by it.

This implied reader is considered “a textual structure that anticipates the presence of a recipient without necessarily specifying them. It is a concept that preconstructs the role assumed by each recipient, a claim that holds even when texts attempt to ignore or exclude their potential readers. Thus, the concept of the implied reader creates a network of response-inviting structures that prompt the reader toward understanding the text” (Wolfgang, 2000, p. 40).

In other words, this conception arises within the literary work itself in accordance with the author’s culture and compositional strategies, such that the implied reader is formed in a similar manner for all readers, while the divergence among them lies in the meaning of the work each reader interpreting it according to their own formation and belief system.

### **Features of the Contemporary Algerian Novel**

A researcher examining the history of the Algerian novel may observe the degree of readership and presence achieved by earlier models in Algerian literary writing during the 1970s and beyond. These works marked the birth of the fully-fledged Algerian novel, whose torch was carried by a group of Algerian novelists, among them Abdelhamid Benhadouga, Tahar Wattar, and Waciny Laredj, among others (Al-Alami, 2016, pp. 43–47).

The works of this elite constituted the initial foundation and true point of departure for the Algerian novel. From the 1990s onward, Algerian novelistic writing experienced a clear opening beyond borders, unleashing creative experiments and literary voices that ventured boldly and enthusiastically into novelistic authorship. Among these, by way of example, are Ezzedine Djoulaouji, the novelist Yasmina Saleh, Amara Lakhous, and several other names whose works gained wide readership and acceptance among contemporary audiences.

These contemporary writings were cloaked in the mantle of renewal and departure from traditional modes of writing, through “transcending narrow regional boundaries and opening the Algerian novelistic text to horizons inclined toward globality, in addition to the bold exposure of Algerian reality and the unveiling of its concealed aspects, as well as the investment of its cultural, intellectual, and political references in the formation of novelistic corpora that manifest the distinctive specificity of the novelistic text par excellence (...) These novelistic experiments succeeded in breaching the reader’s horizon of expectation by transgressing the limits of social commitment, surpassing norms and taboos, and declaring rebellion against them” (Al-Alami, 2016, p. 42 ).

Collectively, these elements have shaped the features of the contemporary novelistic scene in general, and the Algerian one in particular. Moreover, most Algerian novelists and literary voices are characterized by a dual cultural background and by writing in languages other than Arabic. Their mastery of the Other's language has enabled them to access foreign cultures and novelistic traditions, and even to be influenced by them, if one may so argue.

In addition, contemporary writings have increasingly involved the reader to a significant degree; the reader is no longer a passive recipient. On the contrary, literary works now rely on the reader's interaction, participation, and interpretations: "the reader no longer awaits a solution, but is confronted with transformations that they attempt to interpret and justify. The new novel thus becomes a project placed before the reader one that interrogates them and invites participation. There is no doubt that traditional narrative techniques are no longer acceptable, for reality itself has become anxious and disturbing, bearing multiple interpretations upon which the new novel insists" (Omari, 2020, pp. 1018–1019).

This multiplicity of interpretations reflects the manner in which contemporary literary works break readers' horizons of expectation and create a broader aesthetic distance. From the perspective of reception aesthetics theorists, this very distance constitutes a criterion for the success of a literary work. The greater the frustration of the reader's horizon of expectation, the wider the aesthetic distance, and the stronger the indication of the work's success and distinction. Conversely, when the reader's horizon of expectation aligns closely with the narrative trajectory of the novel, the aesthetic distance narrows, signaling that the text does not rise to the level of distinction.

The German theorist Jauss defines aesthetic distance as "the gap that exists between the appearance of the literary work itself and its horizon of expectation (...)," emphasizing that "good literary works are those that cultivate disappointment in the audience's expectations, whereas works that satisfy and gratify the horizons of expectation of their contemporary readers are very ordinary (...) As for works that frustrate expectations and irritate their contemporary audience, they develop the audience and refine standards of evaluation and the need for art, or they are rejected temporarily until they create their own audience" (Hamdawi J., 2020, pp. 33–34).

Accordingly, it may be concluded that breaking readers' horizons of expectation and leading them toward diverse interpretive paths that result in multiple readings constitutes one of the most salient features of contemporary literary novelistic writing.



## **The Novel *How to Suckle from the She-Wolf without Being Bitten***

Among the distinguished contemporary novels written by Algerian pens is *How to Suckle from the She-Wolf without Being Bitten* by the Algerian novelist Amara Lakhous. It is considered “one of the most prominent new novelistic experiments that opened onto experimentation (Expérimentation), which ensured its liberation from the captivity of pioneering novelistic experiences mechanically tied to Algerian reality and its circumstances. It thus opened onto creative horizons that transcended the notion of the ‘Algerian-ness of the text’ (...) What most distinguishes this novelist is his culture, grounded in references different from those of his generation. This cultural plurality contributed to producing a text divergent from the dominant Algerian novelistic norm: a migrant text that crosses the boundaries of the Other in search of new creative spaces” (Bolfous, 2016, pp. 143–144).

Despite the relative brevity of Amara Lakhous’s creative novelistic experience, he has demonstrated a distinctive creative sensibility and a high capacity to craft a narrative text that activates the reader’s mind and draws them in beginning with the titles he chooses for his novels, and extending through events, characters, and the remarkable architecture of the novel’s course and incidents. *How to Suckle from the She-Wolf without Being Bitten* is the title Lakhous gave the Arabic version of the novel: an alluring, provocative, and simultaneously “booby-trapped” title that places the recipient before numerous questions and labyrinths. In the Italian version, however, the author formulates the title differently in a way that may lead the reader toward preliminary interpretations unlike those suggested by the first title, naming it: “Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio”.

The events of the novel unfold in the Italian city of Rome, specifically within an apartment building inhabited by immigrants of various and disparate nationalities. The conflict begins when a murder is discovered inside the building’s elevator; the victim is an Italian man notorious for his intense hatred and contempt for immigrants. In the search for the killer, the author reveals his singular and distinctive creative powers of depiction, placing before the recipient a host of issues such as migration and the injustice, oppression, and contempt endured by immigrants, especially in Italy and Rome in particular; as well as the struggle of identities, cultural systems, and civilizations; and the question of belonging and the perennial conflict between the self, memory, and forgetting alongside many other sensitive themes that Lakhous moves through in a novel small in size yet deep in meanings and implications, teeming with movement, speed, suspense, excitement, surprises, and shocks.

From this point, we selected models of multiple readings of this novel, whose content crystallizes a range of important questions from the perspectives of its readers.

**First Reading: “Cultural Identity from Ideological Closure to Dialogical Openness” by Ben Ali Lounis**

In his reading, the scholar notes that the novel appeared in tandem with the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, which cast their shadow over the nature of the relationship between East and West, along with the accusations and transformations that profoundly affected the image of the Islamic East in the Western Other. He states that “in the novel there are many questions raised by its characters about identity, migration, and the lives of immigrants; about racism and the conflictual character that governs the relationship of Italians to non-Italians; and it also addresses issues related to the cultural particularities of human groups, within the context of the general international climate that marked the relationship between the West and Islam in the wake of the September 2001 events especially with the legitimacy acquired by the thesis of the ‘clash of civilizations’.” What reinforces this view is that the novelist titled the Italian version of the work “Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio” (Ben Ali, 2015, p. 188).

Through this reading, the researcher aims to foreground “the nature of the identity question in the contemporary Algerian novel, specifically as written by the new generation of Algerian novelists” (Ben Ali, 2015, p. 148).

In the analysis he offers, he addresses this issue powerfully posed by the novel by starting from the text’s first threshold, namely the striking, attention-grabbing title carefully chosen by the author and framed as an interrogative sentence. Through it, the novelist refers us to the identity of Rome in the mythical tale. Ben Ali Lounis clarifies that the identity of Rome in the myth is symbolized by the she-wolf, adding that “the narrator’s obsession and that of most immigrant characters is how they can live in the city of Rome without being harmed. Rome, in their consciousness, is the image of that she-wolf from which the features of a great city first emerged into history. To live as an immigrant means to approach the she-wolf as closely as possible, to seek for oneself a teat to latch onto and suckle from without arousing the jealousy of the she-wolf’s offspring. We will speak of merit, of the capacity to adapt and integrate” (Ben Ali, 2015, pp. 166–167).

After such a proposal of the title, one might imagine that the novel’s subject concerns the legendary founding of Rome. Yet in Ben Ali Lounis’s reading, the title points to “Rome as a place for the birth

of different experiences and intersecting destinies for a group of people whom harsh fates drove to leave their homelands in search of the remaining dignity of their existence and in hope of a better life. The Rome founded by the son of the god Mars turns into a lost paradise, within which the immigrant encounters every form of existential paradox. Thus we find ourselves tracing characters who search for illusion more than they search for a place to settle” (Ben Ali, 2015, p. 167).

Since Ben Ali Lounis’s reading investigates the question of identity, he proceeds through several stations after the title, tracking the different forms of identity deployed by the novelist. Among them is the identity of the killer: the heinous act is readily pinned upon immigrants, owing to the distorted stereotypical image of migrants especially those arriving from developing or Islamic countries. In addition, he also addresses the issue of fabricating identity.

He further examines identity and its cultural systems in the novel, stating that the novelist was highly aware “of the importance of highlighting the identity of his characters through the cultural values they carry values acquired within their own culture. Expressing their positions toward their culture or toward the cultures of others becomes a way of expressing their identity” (Ben Ali, 2015, p. 176). The researcher argues that Lakhous’s presentation of multiple contrasting characters with different identities in the novel is an embodiment of culturally distant and contradictory horizons that may reach the point of violent clash. The novel includes two main types of characters: characters of Italian origin formed within the Italian cultural space; and non-Italian characters coming from various other cultural spaces, entirely different from the new cultural system in which they find themselves and within which they live (Ben Ali, 2015, p. 176).

The researcher also adduces several cultural systems that play an essential role in furnishing the novel’s texture and intertwining its events, as they represent the identity of those expatriates residing in Italy. Such systems become their link to their homelands and a beacon when the pressure tightens in Italy and conflicts intensify. He cites, for instance, cooking as a cultural system, as well as the name particularly the name of the protagonist Ahmad, who becomes Amedeo in Italy, a change that generated considerable ambiguity and debate. The controversy does not only stem from altering the original name with its symbolic resonances pointing to the great figure of “Muhammad, the Messenger of God, peace be upon him” but also from the protagonist’s distinctive personality, blended between an eminently Italian “Amedeo” and Ahmad, the Algerian-born, open-minded man with an Islamic religious culture. If changing the name is taken as a denial of origin, Lounis interprets it rather as “a way of negotiating with the new culture, as if the Other judges people by their names, which condense the full density of their identities (...) ‘Ahmad’ did not change his name; rather, his

name was subjected to the phonetic system of the Italian language, which is easier to pronounce” (Ben Ali, 2015, p. 180).

He also addresses translation, or the path toward dialogue between cultural identities. This leads us to the gateway that allows dialogue namely language, specifically the Italian language within the novel. This is what drove “Amedeo,” according to the scholar’s reading, to master Italian to the point of near dissolution, earning Italians’ respect such that no one would suspect he was not Italian. What helped him in this was his work as a translator. The scholar supports this with Amedeo’s statement: “I am an infant who needs milk every day; the Italian language is my daily milk” (Ben Ali, 2015, p. 181).

Regarding translation, which is fundamentally Amedeo’s occupation, the scholar argues that it “enabled him to create this balance and to move between cultures and languages smoothly (...) Amedeo found in translation what grants the identity an open human dimension, insofar as it is a continuous transformation and an unending acculturation with other identities” (Ben Ali, 2015, p. 182).

The scholar also presents identity as a text open to the Other’s voice through the novel’s dialogical structure. It is difficult for any reader to overlook Lakhous’s employment of numerous contrasting characters divergent in identity, culture, language, and even in their relations with the Other meaning that he integrates multiple voices into a single work. As the scholar notes, “the novel proposed a perspective different from the dominant discourse on identity and the relationship between self and Other; through the openness of its narrative structure to different voices, it seeks to build a narrative form consistent with the proposition that grants essential value to liberated identity an identity that remains a subject crossed by different visions and opposing voices. In this very zone, it succeeded in creating an aesthetic distance from the European novel, centered on the creed of the white man as the motor of discursive authority, who alone has the right to define identity and draw its boundaries” (Ben Ali, 2015, p. 181).

Thus, according to Lounis’s reading, the novelist liberates identity from the constraints of monopoly, allowing multiple voices to resound, declare their existence, and defend their perspectives. He deploys characters from Iran, Bangladesh, Peru, and Algeria, in addition to other characters of Italian origin.

Finally, the researcher concludes his reading with the relationship between identity and place, addressing the immigrant's relation to the new city that is, the diaspora space or exile

Place has a strong presence in this novel, whether it is the place that was left behind leaving pain and emptiness or the new place that bears anguish and estrangement. Regarding the scholar's view of place through the novel, he argues that "the presence of place in these experiences is overwhelmingly dominant if not the very focal point of the novelistic text that engages in such experiences along with the sorrows of departure and leaving, the pains of longing for it, or the suffering of feeling alienated and estranged within the new place" (Ben Ali, 2015, p. 188).

This reading by Ali Ben Lounis thus highlights the many facets of identity, which speak for themselves through the diverse and distinctive presentation offered by the novelist Amara Lakhous seeking thereby to make the silenced voices heard, to affirm their existence despite difference, and to liberate them from oppressive authoritarianism that refuses to see their true, pure identity.

**Second Reading: "How to Suckle from the She-Wolf without Being Bitten? A Space for the Clash of Civilizations and the Struggle of Identity" by the Kuwaiti critic and writer Suad Al-Anzi**

This reading was published in the newspaper Awan on 13/08/2009. Through her reading of the novel, the critic traces a striking and distinctive portrayal of the reality of the expatriate and the migrant, and the bitter truths they confront truths that distort the beautiful dream they once lived before reaching "the other shore." She also finds in the novel's body what summarizes the reality of migration and the suffering endured by the migrant: pain and tragedy, beginning with the loss of family and loved ones and extending to the loss of the self. She writes:

"It is a novel of human ache, of pain that stretches with the distances of disappointment and bitterness of loss, dispersal, estrangement, alienation, fragmentation, and vagrancy... It is a novel whose voice is terrifying because it makes you hear sounds of howling, wailing, panic, and dread. It is a novelistic space that cries out with loss and catastrophe: a subject that discusses several dialectics and binaries, and a tale that gives birth to tales. It lives pain and desolation, and howls a shared human howl" (Al-Anzi, 2009).

The critic begins her reading from the title, which she regards as booby-trapped with a culture of dialectical questions, stylistic deviation, and encoded with ambiguity. She considers these elements

sufficient to stir the recipient's curiosity, entice them, and draw them in. This density of oppositions in the title urges the reader toward the narrative body in hopes of finding satisfying answers. From her perspective, "the title refers to multiple images of gnawing, biting, tearing, and dissolution; in addition, the image of the she-wolf is a symbol of Italy, a symbol of treachery and deception, and the mythical dimension of the possibility of human coexistence with beasts images that come to mind upon encountering the title" (Al-Anzi, 2009.)

As for the image of the she-wolf in the novel according to the critic's view and as the narrative draws it within the text it takes on "the image of Italy as a burner of identities: the she-wolf that deceives migrants with the seductiveness of milk, the softness of the embrace, and the warmth of settlement only to turn the milk into bait for slaughtering and devouring them. They themselves may turn into wolves, mastering the cries of howling and devouring everything, after throwing themselves into the she-wolf's embrace, as the narrator clarifies transforming the language of narration into a howl that points to the novel's soundscape (...) It is a storytelling feast composed to the rhythm of howling" (Al-Anzi, 2009).

This is precisely what greatly distinguished the novel: the writer adopts howling as a recurring refrain in the form of diaries written in the narrator's language through the voice of the protagonist "Amedeo." These entries separate the truths of the characters deployed in the single novel one after another beginning with the truth of Parviz Mansour Samadi, of Iranian origin, and reaching the truth of Mauro Bettarini, who works as an inspector in the Italian police. The novel contains eleven howls.

The Kuwaiti critic also presents the most important ideas that furnish the narrative body: the clash of civilizations and the fragmentation of identities through the course of events and the characters' positions, as well as the novel's modernist form. She argues that "just as the novel worked with a modernist intellectual content, the narration likewise worked on what is modern in narrative technique and in the mechanism of presenting the narrative tale built on the juxtaposition of a number of characters who recount their story of coming to Italy, each character presenting their tale after the chapter is titled with their name" (Al-Anzi, 2009).

At the end of her reading, she pauses at the idea of doubt and certainty and the shifting concept of truth from one person to another an idea embodied through the main character Ahmad/Amedeo, in his commentaries and in his revelations about the characters' truths, as they appear in the novel in the form of diaries labeled by the novelist as "howls," which constitute a key feature of the work.

### **Third Reading: “The Predicament of Identity between the Dialectic of Memory and Forgetting in the Novel *How to Suckle from the She-Wolf without Being Bitten*” by Saida Hamdawi**

The third reading by the researcher Saida Hamdawi takes another direction, arguing that the novel “embodies the predicament of identity between the manifestations of memory and its dialectical attachment to forgetting” (Hamdawi S., 2020, p. 504).

This reading highlights the manifestation of the relationship between identity and narration, suggesting that the former is not determined except through the latter. It takes Amedeo, the main character, as a symbol of identity caught in a struggle between memory and forgetting. It argues that narrative identity in the novel is founded upon “a discordant set of marginal identities panting after the central identity, seeking by exhausting every possible means to wrest recognition from the Other of their presence within its narrow civilizational space. Ahmad’s character integrates into Italian society through the gateway of language, in an attempt at the forced smuggling of the self away from the past and across its thorny borders, carrying the spoils of a new identity. For the character’s feeling of belonging to a certain cultural identity is no more than a necessary psychological and social need, indispensable” (Hamdawi S., 2020, p. 506).

This is because Ahmad is an Algerian refugee who fled to Italy after the murder of his fiancée at the hands of a terrorist group. He mastered Italian and integrated into Italian society, absorbing its culture and customs, and his name became Amedeo so much so that anyone who did not know him would not suspect that he was anything but Italian of Italian roots. It is as if Amedeo/Ahmad had shed his identity, memory, and past, and donned the identity of Amedeo: Italian in culture, language, name, and even memory.

Since names carry cultural connotations and symbolic loads that express the identity of a group or community, this reading clarifies that the characters’ names in the novel refer “to the cultural identity adopted by each character; thus naming becomes an expression of a viewpoint and a set of positions and visions” (Hamdawi S., 2020, p. 508). Every character in the novel reflects a particular thought, society, and civilization; and through the name that signifies identity, one can discern whether the character will find a place within Italian society which does not accept outsiders at all or whether they will be treated like every migrant pre-condemned to humiliation, contempt, oppression, and injustice.

The researcher further notes that the novel deliberately “omits Ahmad’s real and original name, exercising upon it an act of erasure and reduction. We do not discover his origins, nor do the surrounding characters know anything of his truth except in the final pages of the novel signaling that forgetting the proper name in the novel is a forgetting of identity. Identity becomes clear to the extent that it is tied to the proper name; the cunning group exploits the hero’s forgetting of his name and begins to maneuver around his identity” (Hamdawi S., 2020, p. 509).

This reading also strongly focuses on the phenomenon of forgetting, which permeates the novel and serves as a central axis upon which the events unfold. Forgetting appears as a refuge and an outlet for some, while it is rejected by others who cling to memory and truth despite their consequences. The reader therefore considers forgetting “a prominent theme in the novel, whose living presence occupies the most significant portion of the events of the lives and selves of the novel’s characters (...) Ahmad’s character surrenders to the force of certain tragic memories especially those tied to loss so forgetting comes to help him be reborn within the space of a new identity, in a desire to open a blank white page free of the sedimented layers of a bloody past. The act of forgetting manifests in Ahmad’s desire to abandon his past and free himself from it without letting it accompany him into the present, given the preference of forgetting over pain” (Hamdawi S., 2020, p. 513).

Thus, recourse to forgetting appears powerfully throughout multiple stations of the narrative. The roles of characters vary between those who flee into forgetting and those who strive to preserve memory; between the two, identity flounders.

The conclusion reached by Saida Hamdawi’s reading is that the novel is built upon a set of struggles: the struggle of identity, the struggle of civilizations and their centrality, and the struggle between memory and forgetting and their dialectic. Their alternation constitutes a cumulative human act that expresses a stance toward life, translated into events filled with contradictions and paradoxes (Hamdawi S., 2020, pp. 515–516)

## **Conclusion**

This study has sought to trace the trajectory of the multiplicity of readings and the various modes of reception of the contemporary Algerian novel *How to Suckle from the She-Wolf without Being Bitten*, with the aim of highlighting the artistic and creative level attained by contemporary Algerian writing particularly in the works of certain novelists such as Amara Lakhous. The diversity and plurality of interpretations and perspectives observed in the selected readings constitute a clear expression of the semantic richness encapsulated within the novel. Despite its brevity, the novelist



succeeded in provoking numerous questions in the minds of readers and recipients questions that generate an aesthetic distance between the work and its reader and lead toward multiple interpretations. This allows us to assert that the novel stands among the distinguished works that combine several contradictions and raise a number of fundamental issues summarizing the lives of migrants within an innovative narrative framework marked by suspense and excitement.

The preceding readings converged on three major issues articulated by the novel. The first is the issue of identity, which represents one of the most complex predicaments in the life of the migrant: either the migrant struggles to preserve their identity despite exposure to aggression, injustice, and contempt, or they accept dissolution into the identity of the Other, shedding their own origins and abandoning their history and past thus becoming devoid of identity.

The second issue concerns the clash of civilizations and cultural systems, manifested through the interaction among diverse characters originating from varied and heterogeneous environments across the world, each striving to defend itself and preserve its foundational elements.

The third issue lies in the emergence of the dialectic of memory and forgetting, which pursues the characters particularly the protagonist Ahmad carrying implications of escape from a painful reality in search of another, seemingly better one.

Although these readings agree on the general outlines of the novel, they diverge in approach and interpretation. This divergence is attributable to the difference in each reader's horizon of expectation. Consequently, the multiplicity of readings entails a multiplicity of interpretations one of the defining features of contemporary writing that remains open to diverse interpretations in accordance with the diversity of its readership and their horizons of expectation.

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## Notes

Amara Lakhous is an Algerian novelist born in 1970 in Algiers. He graduated from the Institute of Philosophy at the University of Algiers in 1994 and obtained a Master's degree in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Rome in 2002. He also prepared a doctoral dissertation at the same university on Arab immigrants residing in Italy. Among his most notable novels are *The Flea and the Pirate*, *Little Cairo*, and *How to Suckle from the She-Wolf without Being Bitten*. See the back cover of the novel.

The Flea and the Pirate is Amara Lakhous's first novel, published in 1999. His second novel, How to Suckle from the She-Wolf without Being Bitten, was published in Arabic in 2003 and reissued in Italian in 2006 under a different title: Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio. His novel Little Cairo was published in Italian in 2010 under another title: Divorce in the Islamic Way in the Marconi District