



## Manifestations of Socio-Political conflict during the Italian Colonization of Libya in Alessandro Spina's *The Marriage of Omar*

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### Abstract

*The Marriage of Omar* is one of Alessandro Spina's sequence of novels and short stories that are set in Cyrenaica, depicting life in colonial and postcolonial Libya. In these historical fictional stories, Spina (a pen name for Basili Shafik Khouzam), mingles the political and armed struggle with social and cultural aspects of two conflicting forces that play major roles in the shaping of the history of early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Libya. Equipped with his multi-identity and his familiarity with the different dimensions of cultures in both the Libyan and the Italian societies, Spina writes with a panoramic worldview that accommodates western and eastern perspectives. His temporal and geographical upbringing allows him to portray with transcultural perspectives the multiple voices that represent conflicting socio-political views of both the colonizers and the colonized. What makes Spina's historical fiction significant is that it deals with a historical epoch that has not received appropriate attention in the literature. The aim of this paper is to explore how Spina's novel, *The Marriage of Omar*, opts for multifaceted and contradicting perspectives in its engagement with the history of Italian colonization in Libya. The focus of the article is on the deployment of narrative voice in the narration of this historical socio-political conflict.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Italian colonial history, Libyan resistance, narrative voice, polyphony.

### Introduction

Alessandro Spina, the pen name for Basili Shafik Khouzam, was born in Benghazi in 1927 to an industrialist family of Maronites from Aleppo, Syria. He received his proper education in Italy and returned to Libya to manage his father's textile business in Benghazi, where he spent most of his adult life. After Gadhafi nationalized his textile factory, Basili left Libya to settle in Italy in 1980 and got the Italian citizenship. Spina's narration, which is written in Italian, reflects his lived experiences in both Libya

and Italy during a historical period that witnessed the uprising and fall of powers and the transformation of Libya from an Italian colony to an independent state under the rule of King Idris in 1951 and then a republic after Gadhafi's coup in 1969. During these years there have been tremendous changes in the structure of the Libyan society. Spina was awarded the Premio Bagutta, Italy's highest literary accolade for his fictional narrative, *The confines of the Shadow*. They are a sequence of novels and short stories that are all set in Cyrenaica, mainly in the city of Benghazi and its surrounding villages. They follow a

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chronological sequence of Libyan history from 1912 to 1964, a colonial and postcolonial period that has not received much attention in the literature. Equipped with his multi-identity and his familiarity with the different dimensions of cultures in both the Libyan and the Italian societies, Spina writes with a panoramic worldview that accommodates western and eastern perspectives.

This panoptic depiction of multiple voices produces a polyphonic narrative that decentralized the dominance of a monologic western voice. *The Marriage of Omar*<sup>1</sup>, one of Spina's novels set in Cyrenaica, opts for multifaceted and contradicting perspectives in its engagement with the history of Italian colonization in Libya. The aim of this article is to study the deployment of narrative voice in the narration of this historical socio-political conflict and its role in creating channels through which opposing and conflicting stances are conveyed.

## Historical Background

Up to this date, only two volumes of Spina's work have been translated from Italian into English, *The Colonial Conquest: The confines of the Shadow* Volume I (2018), and *The Fourth Shore: The Confines of the Shadow* Volume II (2019). They both deal with novels and short stories set during the Italian occupation of Libya (1911-1943). Volume one includes three novels each preceded by a specific year to signal the period in which the events of the narrative are taking place, highlighting, thus, its historical significance. The year 1920 signaled the beginning of *The Marriage of Omar*, which is located as the second novel of the book, after *The Young Maronite*, which starts with the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911. The third and last story in volume I, *The Nocturnal Visitor*, starts in the year 1927 during the rule of the Fascists in Italy.

The marking of these novels in *The Colonial Conquest* with certain dates corresponds to the historical phases of the colonial history of Libya as pinpointed by Ali Abdullatif Ahmida<sup>2</sup>: "The Italian conquest began in 1911; ....That period is divided into three phases according to the conquest of territories: 1911-1914, 1915-1922, and 1923-1932" (p.105). Thus, the historical and fictional events of *The Marriage of Omar* took place during the second phase of colonization (1915-1922). According to Spina<sup>3</sup>, *The Marriage of Omar*, which was first published in Italian in 1973, "narrates the ensuing

truce and the attempt by the two peoples to strike a compromise before the rise of Fascism". Ahmida<sup>2</sup> writes, describing this period:

*The second phase of Italian colonization began in 1915 and lasted until 1922. Colonial policy makers, defeated by a highly motivated and well-equipped resistance and burdened economically by their entry into World War I, made many concessions to the resistance, such as recognizing the autonomy of the Sanusi order in interior Cyrenaica in the treaties of 1915, 1917, and 1920.... and granted Cyrenaica a parliament in 1920. (p. 106)*

However, this colonial compromised arrangement of allowing "autonomy and self-rule" to the people of Cyrenaica lasted only until the year 1922 during the rule of the Liberal government in Italy. In 1923 the Fascists came to power and followed a very pathetic policy towards the Libyans, initiating the second phase of their colonization of Libya.

What makes Spina's historical fiction significant is that it deals with a historical epoch that has not received appropriate attention in literary works. His fictional work, which is mainly about the colonial and post-colonial history of Cyrenaica, has immersed, as described by Arianna Dagnino<sup>4</sup>, "into the midst of modern Libyan history, exposing the 'forgotten' pages of Italian colonization in Northern Africa" (p. 4). According to Ali Mumin Ahad<sup>5</sup>, "Italian literature is marked by the absence of any authentically post-colonial form of expression proper to itself," and it seems that it lacks the curiosity for "critical reappraisal and analysis of the present-day consequences of the colonial past both in Italy and in the former colonies" (P. 4). Ahad believes that, unlike writers in English and French-speaking areas in which there are literary depictions of their formal colonial encounter in their literature, there is "a literary failure" in the Italian language, to present accounts of "the reality or realities of those subjects who were once involved, in spite of themselves, in that colonial experience" (P. 1).

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The Italians generally are not interested in understanding and acknowledging “certain episodes in their national past”<sup>5</sup>. Andre Naffis-Sahely<sup>6</sup> reveals in the “Translator Note” of the English translation of *The Confine of the Shadow* that Spina is addressing the Italian readers who “barely remembered the tricolour had once flown from Libyan shores,” and that he took on himself this mission of “resurrecting that episode from the oblivion into which it had shamefully been cast” (p. 278). Vimercati<sup>7</sup> refers to this lack of attention as “Italians’ national amnesia”(p.1). Spina, through his novels and short stories, ventures to shake the memories of the Italians. He approaches issues of colonization, of “how occupiers operated and conquered their territory, how they imposed rules or bent to local customs”<sup>4</sup>(p.9), which were left to oblivion with all their contradictions. The translation of *the Confines of the Shadow* volume I and II into English is certainly an important phase for Spina’s historical fiction to transcend to a more international outreach and recognition. In a BBC Radio interview, Hisham Matar<sup>8</sup>, the Libyan American Writer, comments about Spina’s fiction and its translation into English saying that he considers this work “a gift” because “what’s happening in Libya is tragic but also baffling to a lot of people, not least of all Libyans”. He believes that this “luxurious” historical dealing with a period of time that has not been written about before is very valuable.

During the occupation period of Libya, literature was limited to oral folk poetry such as the magnum opus of Rajab Buhwaysh’s thirty -stanza- poem, which starts with “I have no illness but El-Agheila Camp,” (translated by Mattawa)<sup>9</sup>. The restriction of receiving proper education enforced against the Libyan people during the Italian occupation led to limiting the number of Libyan intellectuals who would produce written literary works or even write the history of their country as they experienced it. It was not until Libyans got their independence in 1952 that efforts were made by intellectuals to recollect and record their political and cultural history of the colonial epoch. These intellectuals, often translate available books, literary works, and documents written by the Italians which ultimately represent more of a colonist and orientalist perspective. Lahmar<sup>10</sup> studies the impact and criticisms that follow Mohammed Khalifa Tillisi’s translation of two studies of Libya written by the Italian officer Enrico De Agostini. Lahmar notes that doubts were raised concerning the “empirical accuracy of

those studies” and how they have been carried out to facilitate the occupation of the whole country of Libya.

Spina recognizes the problem of depending on books and references about the colonized nations that were written by the Italians. He articulated this view In *The Marriage of Omar*, through one of his main characters, Count Alonzo, who criticizes Bergonzi, an Italian researcher because he represents a view that is based on misleading books describing colonized people and their cultures”<sup>1</sup>(p.193). Bergonzi’s “ignorance of the context” as articulated by Alonzo, leads to emphasizing the superiority of the colonizer and overlooks the true nature of the native people in these colonized nations.

### Historical, Polyphonic Fiction

Spina’s sequence of novels and short stories including *The Marriage of Omar* are historical in nature. Historical novels are considered channels through which the reader is acquainted with the socio-political milieu of society and the people in which the narrative is crafted.

Ann Rigney<sup>11</sup> in her study of Walter Scott’s *The Heart of Midlothian* asserts that “literary works—by virtue of their poetic and fictional properties—may have a distinctive role to play in reawakening eroded memories in later generations” (p. 389). She proposes the notion of considering these works to be “the means for broadening the horizons of what one considers one’s own heritage” (p. 389). The reading of historical novels, according to David Harlan<sup>12</sup>, allows us to pursue the voices coming from the past that help us in our efforts to understand our present. Harlan believes that “voice is primary; everything else – life and times, setting and background, ... – is driven by and follows from the voices we hear in the novels we read”<sup>12</sup>. The polyphony effect of different voices in such novels is similar to what Edward Said coined “contrapunta”<sup>13</sup> (p. 99), describing the musical polyphony writing and forms, competing in these polyphony narratives to be heard.

Spina utilizes the writing strategy of polarity and counterargument to depict inter- and intra- conflicting voices in

the city of Benghazi in the 1920s during the Italian colonization of Libya. These irreconcilable polarities are facilitated in the narrative through certain techniques such as the application of narrative voice and focalization that is associated with free indirect discourse and stream of consciousness, producing dialogical polyphonic discourses that compete with each other and expose conflicting world views. As asserted by Manfred Jahn<sup>14</sup>, focalization is a vital device in textual analysis as it is the “submission of (potentially limitless) narrative information to a perspectival filter” (p. 94). The constant shift of focalization in *The Marriage of Omar* enables the narration to move quickly from one angle of perception to another, thus accommodating different world views and facilitating polyphonic discourses through the utilization of free indirect discourse. These multi-phonetic voices are described by Bakhtin as: “A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices”<sup>15</sup> (p. 6, italics original). They fetch their way through the narrative voice and the direct and/or indirect speeches of the characters.

The title of this series of novels, *The Confine of the Shadow*, evokes multiple meanings that reflect the state of mind of the colonizers. It exposes a psychological projection of captivity within the *shadow* of the self as Carl Jung coined it, “the dark side” of the self that people dislike and avoid confronting<sup>16</sup>. This dark side represents the evils of colonization that haunt them as they attempt to conquer the whole territories of the invaded land. In facing strange and unfamiliar lands, they live within the confined space that they created. They are afflicted by the resistance of the native people who repel their invasion, and their presence becomes “a shadow that pursues”<sup>1</sup> (p.173) the invaders and threatens them everywhere. Conquering the whole Libyan territory with its vast desert was the dream of those colonizers but it turns into a nightmare. In Spina’s novels, these attempts of conquering the Libyan land unmask the ugly face of colonization and expose its dark side.

The Libyan desert as elaborated by Giovanni Vimercati “is a metaphysical space of psychological introspection where all certainties about European civilization and its alleged superiority turn to dust”<sup>7</sup>. The Italian soldiers are confined inside a fortified city zone, not emboldened to stretch into the desert lands that were protected by the resistant group of Cyrenaicans.

### Inter-/Intra-Conflicting Voices

In this novel, the narrative devices of voice enhance the exploration of various inter-political and cultural conflicts on ethnic, and racial prejudice, and political ideology and domination. The primary socio-political conflict in this novel is between the Italian colonizers and the people of Cyrenaica. However, this conflict is not homogeneously constituted because it extends to some cases that represent intra-political conflicts among the colonizers as well as another intra-political conflict among the native people of Cyrenaica. The narration of the interaction and communication among the characters in the novel reflect their worldviews, their culture and tradition, their struggle for power, and their ideologies. The creation of such characters in this polyphonic novel gives voice to whole communities to become collective voices or a community of voices. These multi-phonetic voices find their way through direct or indirect speech presenting multiple points of view. Bakhtin describes this polyphony in novels as “a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event”<sup>15</sup>(p. 6, italics original). Count Alonzo, Countess Rosina, Antonino, Khadija, Omar, Sharafeddin, and some other characters in Spina’s novel are all representative of interdependent yet autonomous consciousnesses that coexist and engage in dialogical interaction forming a polyphonic narrative.

### Intra-Conflicting Voices of the Italian Colonizers

The *marriage of Omar* unfolds in the house of the deputy governor of the Italian Colony of Libya in Cyrenaica, in the city of Benghazi. Most of the narrative takes place in this house in addition to some scenes in other parts of Benghazi. Instead of beginning with the narrator’s description as typical of the realist novels, the narration begins with a dialogue between the Deputy Governor, Count Alonzo, and his wife Countess Rosina, in which two ideological stances of the Italian colonizers’ power policy have been put forward. The argument was over the attitude of these colonizers towards the people of Cyrenaica. The choices of words and phrases relay certain positions and raise certain assumptions and presuppositions of two intra-political and social conflicting voices from one family

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with the same cultural and political background. The first sentence on the page is of the countess who expresses how "tormented" she is by having the native Cyrenaicans work as "servants" in her house. This type of attitude that Rosina expresses towards having the Cyrenaican servants in her house is elaborated by Albert Memmi<sup>17</sup> in his analysis of colonization:

*Indeed, the distance between master and servant is never great enough. Almost always, the colonialist also devotes himself to a systematic devaluation of the colonized. He is fed up with his subject, who tortures his conscience and his life. He tries to dismiss him from his mind, to imagine the colony without the colonized. A witticism which is more serious than it sounds states that "Everything would be perfect . . . if it weren't for the natives".(p. 110)*

Memmi's analysis of such attitude held by the colonizers towards the colonized is demonstrated by Countess Rosina's reaction of rejecting the presence of the Cyrenaican servants as part of her household. She displays an extremist superiority stance of the colonizers towards the native people, which carries with it an unspeakable wish to exorcise their existence altogether.

In essence, Countess Rosina represents a voice of an archetypical ideology of a community of colonizers who disregard the oppressive power of their conquest and claim their mission to work towards civilizing the aborigines. The Countess believes in the superiority of their civilization and the inferiority of that of the native Cyrenaicans: *"The two civilisations – the one we represent, which left a splendid mark on history, and that of the barbarians, which history ignores..."*<sup>1</sup>(p. 227). The Countess refers to the conflicting perspective of her and her husband as a *"psychological situation"*. This type of situation that represents opposing views of how to deal with matters related to the colonized aggravates the harmony in their life and their peace of mind.

This attitude towards the colonized, held by the countess, is shared by others as represented by some characters in the novel such as Doctor Amilcare and Professor Bergonzi, as well as the high functionary of the Political Office. Doctor Amilcare,

for example, believes that there can be "an open dialogue with these people" only when the Italians are in a strong position. In this way, he believes that the Libyans "should model themselves" on the Italians and accept their teaching which consequently leads to the "wiping" out of their own native culture. The interchange between a high functionary of the Political Office and the gentleman who belonged to the Prince of Urbino's highlights this intra-conflict of two policies within the Italian colonization system. While the gentleman who belonged to the Prince of Urbino declines the idea of destroying the colonized civilization in the process of colonizing their country, the high functionary holds a position similar to Countess Rosina, Amilcare, and Bergonzi. He asserts that they are offering the native people a "splendid edifice of civilization", which they should absorb at the expense of losing their own because they "will be unable to survive our presence as an organic whole: every day that passes sees us removing a stone from its foundations"<sup>1</sup>(p. 233), in an effort to lead their institutions to "a point of crisis". In their view, "all aspects of indigenous culture" are regarded as a "citadel of the enemy – precisely because it has been sanctified"<sup>1</sup>(p. 233).

Count Alonzo is holding a different position that represents the liberal policy of the Italian Government that was in power as the events of the novel are unfolding. In his discussion with his wife, he summarizes the different policies that are available to them in dealing with the Libyan people: "Either we return to our ships, or we exterminate them and push them away to more distant borders. Or we could educate ourselves about them and try to make our presence here more acceptable to them"<sup>1</sup>(p. 173). The Liberal policy as expressed by Count Alonzo seeks to grant the Libyans in Cyrenaica a limited self-government based on a "Basic Charter" that Alonzo is hoping to persuade the Libyan tribes' leaders to accept and which he thinks: "it's more like a door" through which the colonizers' "consciences will be able to flee"<sup>1</sup> (p.213). Fanon in the introduction of *The Wretched of the Earth* explains this strategy held by those colonizers: "The 'liberals' are stupefied; they admit that we were not polite enough to the natives, that it would have been wiser and fairer to allow them certain rights in so far as this was possible"<sup>18</sup> (p. 20). Although the Count and the public policy he holds tend to compromise their conquering of the Libyan land with the native people, the utmost goal of this policy is the same as all other policies, as elaborated by the count himself: "Our conquest of this colony is based on the

effect that the force of our faith, language, willpower and strength can have on their lives”<sup>1</sup> (p. 173).

The conflicting voices among the Italian colonizers are depicted through dialogical interactions and interior monologues of the characters. Spina attempts to portray the deep psychological dilemma experienced by these colonizers when faced with the struggle between conquest ideology and the oppressive consequences of this conquest on the natives. He utilizes the technique of interior monologue in a free direct speech mingled with heterodiegetic comments. The character’s interior speech is written in italics to distinguish it from that of the narrator. The Count’s interior thoughts, for example, are voiced, elaborating on the conflicting situation. Similar to “a pendulum, his mind oscillated” between what the democratic values inspire and the true situation of colonization, questioning himself:

*Is Rosina right to accuse me of oppressing these people, despite the appearance of generosity and justice. [...] Generosity cannot overcome our fundamental problem: is our presence here legitimate? What right do we have to interfere in their destinies? Did anyone ask us to bring order to their world?*<sup>1</sup> (pp. 213-14)

The count confesses that they are granting this “Basic Charter” to the natives because of their failure to control the colony by arms and that this “Basic Charter” is in fact used as a “passport” for the Italians to get the acceptance of the natives and seize their resistance to the Italian conquer.

These voices inside the count’s head are in clash with each other presenting a counterargument. Albert Memmi describes these contradicting positions within the colonizers.

He asserts that since they accept their role as colonizers, they, inevitably, accept “the blame implied by that role,” and consequently, they will lack a “permanent peace of mind”<sup>17</sup> (p. 95). This ironic situation represents the tension that exists between liberal thought and the actual practice of

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colonialization. While defending “the principles of universalism and equality, the same individuals still defended the legitimacy of colonialism and imperialism”<sup>19</sup>. They settle these contradictions by holding the excuse of a “civilizing mission”, to indicate that it is a required step taken for humanitarian purposes to civilize the native people whose land was conquered by the Europeans. Although the Count thinks that the bureaucrat is driven by “*the divinity*” he is supposed to serve through expanding the territory of the empire, he is, at the same time, tortured by “*the doubt that this divinity is the devil itself*”<sup>1</sup>(p.214). The Count is aware of these contradictions within himself and within the whole system of colonialization.

Another type of tension that is experienced by these colonizers is depicted in the relationships that exist with the colonized and which stretch back and forth according to the development of events. Count Alonzo has a special attachment towards Omar, the servant who belongs to the oppressed people, while Alonzo represents the oppressors. Although he is referring to him as his son, Alonzo deep inside knows that no real bond can exist between them “*except through oppression,*” because, as a matter of fact, Omar is his *prisoner*. Although he believes that Omar is loyal to him but he doubts that this loyalty will last if the proposed plan of the Basic Charter fails. Then, Omar will be the enemy who is defending his *sacred homeland*. Their strong feeling of attachment will be affected by the outcomes of the negotiations between the *two warring parties*. Alonzo sees their bond *grows in the narrow patch of shadow created by the Basic Charter*. *If this should disappear*, both Alonzo and Omar will be obliged to take different paths<sup>1</sup> (p. 223). Alonzo in his free direct speech recognizes his status as a foreigner and that this occupied land can never be his in spite of their heavy arms and cannons which will not be able to put down roots.

The colonizers know that they have done “an offense against moral” and they seek out “for justification”<sup>20</sup> (p.7). They prefer to get rid of the native people, but they recognize the inevitability of accepting their existence. As Memmi states, they know that “to eliminate the colonized from the roll of the living”, leads to “eliminating”themselves<sup>17</sup> (p.98). They try to create excuses for their oppressive treatment to the native people to appear as holding to their democratic or liberal principles. Count Alonzo, for example, believes that the “Basic

Charter" granted by the colonizers is "all in order to show these barbarians how they would be better off as citizens"<sup>1</sup> (p. 223). He thinks civilization is a gift given to the Libyans and they should be thankful for that.

### The Voices of the Libyan People of Cyrenaica

The social, historical, and economic contexts in which *The Marriage of Omar* is written reveal a political struggle from different perspectives. The Italian colonization disrupted the economic, political, and social structures of the Cyrenaicans' traditional society resulting in conflicts not only between the Cyrenaicans and the colonizers but also between members of the same community. Spina in this novel displays the tension at work between socio-cultural voices and personal voices through polyphony, offering a plurality of perspectives that allows the reader to hear contradictory and opposing voices that represent different worldviews.

Different characters in this novel symbolize internal conflict for colonized people in Cyrenaica who are caught in the middle of two competing forces and clashing cultures, traditions, and worldviews. Through the creation of individual characters, a voice is devoted to whole communities, representing a multitude of voices, thus, shadowing the boundaries between individual and collective voices. These characters' voices and worldviews depend on their sociocultural background and their interactions with people close to them.

Social-economic factors can lead to a splintered group within a given community. Some of the characters in the novel represent the Cyrenaicans who were – as a matter of securing a living- willing to work with the Italian colonizers, mostly as servants or in other low-rank jobs. These are portrayed through the characters of Omar, Khadija, and Saber who work at the Italian Governor's house and become close to them. They feel responsible for maintaining a safe environment for the people they serve. The presence of those native Cyrenaicans among the Italians creates tension of cultural conflicts. Spina, having an awareness of both cultures, depicts the manifestation of this tension in the narrative discourse of the novel.

Other voices represent a strong counter front against the Italian occupation of Cyrenaica and other parts of Libya. They are portrayed through the character of Sharafeddin, Omar's cousin, who refuses to deal with the Italian colonizers. Sharafeddin represents the resistance to the Italian occupation, both passive and arms fighting.

Sharafeddin's attitude towards Antonio, the Count's nephew, depicts his strongminded position of refusing all connections with the colonizers. Regardless of many of Antonio's attempts to cross the bridge and gets closer to Sharafeddin, "the door to Sharafeddin's shop seemed to be impenetrable, as though it were guarded by a dragon"<sup>1</sup>. He is described as "the closed door past which Antonino couldn't go". He does not believe that the conflict with the Italian colonizers can be resolved peacefully, and he expects that the two forces soon will take up arms and start fighting. When Sharafeddin sees Omar with Antonio, he recalls the "Basic Charter" which is for him "abhorrent and laughable"<sup>1</sup> (pp. 240-42). Sharafeddin is one voice among many symbolizing a community of voices that holds a powerful front line in face of the Italian occupation and refutes any compromise with them. They represent the resistance held by the Libyans in Cyrenaica.

### The Narrator's Voice

Spin's hybrid identity enables him to depict aspects of different cultures with an intrinsic eye. As a product of distinct cultures, he "always includes two sides to the conversations he stages"<sup>21</sup> (p.3). Dagnino points out that this multi-identity "made him simultaneously an insider and an outsider of the cultures in and with which he worked"<sup>4</sup> (P. 9). When referring to the Libyans the narrator uses such terms that demonstrate intimacy and belonging. For instance, Spina chooses that the narrator uses the title *Sidi* for King Idrees and Omar El Mukhtar, similar to the Libyans who call them *Sidi*, as an indication of respect and recognition. As the events are folded into the narrative of the novel, the narrator does not miss a chance to describe aspects of Libyan customs and traditions with such elaborate details of an insider. For example, there are comments and explanations of the way Khadija prepares and serves the tea, her meeting with Muna and the special greeting they have, the traditional rituals of the re-marriage of Omar, and the description of the

different pieces of clothes that Libyan women wear. At the same time, Spina appreciates and is inspired by the high literary and musical aspects of the Italian culture. The title and the main characters in *The marriage of Omar* echo the Italian Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais's 1784 play *Le Mariage de Figaro*. Countess Rosina who is assigned the same name and role as in Beaumarchais' uses lines from this Italian play to describe and reflect on similar plots and settings that involve characters in *The Marriage of Omar* and their interconnected and conflicting relationships.

In *The Marriage of Omar*, the narrator imposes comments and explanations of certain historical facts and events and uses the techniques of free indirect discourse to express characters' inner thoughts that reveal their deep psychological dilemmas and contradictions. As Celia Wallhead states, "within the choice of writing technique and the structuring of the narrative, the voice chosen is crucial, whether it be that of the narrator or of other characters presented by the narrator"<sup>22</sup> (p.8). In his writing and through the narrative voice, Spina "eulogized traditional Libyan society," while criticizing colonization and "the silence of all Italian political factions regarding the country's colonial crimes"<sup>21</sup> (p.1).

For example, in the epilogue, the narration starts with Benito Mussolini's speech on November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1922, announcing the end of the Liberals' government and the beginning of the fascist ruthless era. Then the scene in the narration moves to the month of September 1931 when Count Alonzo is in Italy, attending a meeting with liberal anti-fascists. Just two days before this meeting, "the legendary leader of the twenty-year Libyan resistance to the Italian occupation Sidi Omar al-Mukhtar had been hanged at the age of seventy-four"<sup>1</sup> (p.249). The Count is "astonished" because those anti-fascists did not refer to this war crime while, as he ironically states, they were having what they consider to be "their noble, scholarly, and passionate discussions"<sup>1</sup> (p.249).

Spina's choice of language that both the narrative voice and the character use highlights his condemnation of colonization, his criticism of the indifferent attitude of the Italians towards their colonial oppression and criminal acts, and his sympathy and respect for the Libyan resistance movements. This is

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facilitated by assortments of expressions he uses such as "legendary leader" and "murder" to express his empathy towards the Libyans, in addition to the writing technique he utilizes to excavate diverse perspectives and inconsistency of the stances of the people involved in this colonial affair.

### Contrasting Cultures

The fictional narrative of *The Marriage of Omar* displays an overlapping discourse that moves confidently from a recognition given to Italian high culture symbolized by Mozart opera to "the ancient local customs—...—that offer meaning and succor"<sup>21</sup>. The two contrasting cultural aspects are demonstrated by the musical instruments that are held high for both people. While Rosina loses herself in the music created by the ivory keys of the piano, Khadija is suspicious of this instrument and believes that there is an invisible demon dwells on its black keys. The flute, a Libyan musical instrument played by Omar competes with the piano and the Italian opera in the vice governor's house and affects them tremendously. Rosina complains that "*the sound of the native flutes has led Alonzo's soul down secret paths, far away from all that's familiar*"<sup>1</sup>(p. 226). The influence of these simple Cyrenaican servants on the Italian residents of the house has been tremendous. The count was eager to understand and be close to the Cyrenaican people and their culture and tries to observe the new culture in the action and behavior of its people. As if in a theatre attending a play, he is watching the meeting of Khadija with Muna from his box, the window upstairs. This special meeting of two local Cyrenaican women was described as "a meeting of queens"<sup>1</sup> (p. 235), with all the traditional ceremony of greetings that is typical among women in the Libyan culture. Equipped with his lifelong experience in the Libyan cultures, Spina was able to give with a keen eye elaborate details of these Libyan customs and traditions.

Both communities affect and were affected by the other's cultural virtues and traditions. Khadija enforces her special Libyan method of preparing food and serving tea to the Count and his wife, and to their guests. After Khadija solemnly delivers the news of Antonio's death to the Count and the Countess in the middle of the night, they follow her in a hypnotic march to where the young man's body is, feeling



“consoled” in her company, as well as Saber’s and Omar’s. These native Cyrenaicans appear to have a subtle way of expressing and managing such grief. As described by Lindsey, “[t]he Libyans’ condolences—formulas full of ancient authority, resignation, and resilience—light the way in a house fallen into darkness”<sup>21</sup>. As much as Rosina hated having these locals in her house, as much as she is now grateful to have them supporting her in their own sincere way.

Ironically, she “thought with horror about those empty phrases she would be forced to hear a thousand times”<sup>1</sup> (P. 247) from her fellow Italians when they hear the tragic news of Antonio’s death.

The counter-existence of aspects of the two cultures has been manifested in the comparisons of personalities and traits of characters from both sides. For example, Rosina, who loathes having Omar and the other Cyrenaicans in her house, has eventually developed a different perspective toward Omar. In her search for her nephew, Antonio, she spotted Omar sleeping on a wooden bed. She, as a focalizer, is fascinated by his posture which, she thinks, resembles how “Byzantine painters depicted their subjects” and “late Gothic sculptors modeled their saints,” or like how “warriors lie in their funereal”<sup>1</sup> (p. 219). Omar, whose name highly illustrates the Libyan resistance leader of Cyrenaica, Omar EL Mokhtar, has been perceived as a symbol of his people and their culture. This growing recognition of the image of Omar leads her to understand “the fascination Alonzo felt for that archaic society, with its fixed rules”<sup>1</sup> (P. 219).

She regards this image of Omar as completely different from how her husband, the count, sleeps in a “disorderly way”. Rosina now thinks that a “river divided the two images: one belonged to a world where order still reigned, the other to a world that was falling apart”<sup>1</sup> (P. 219). She reaches this conclusion after she gets to know those natives whom she used to describe as uncivilized and barbarians. The way that these inner thoughts of Rosina are depicted reinforces the polarity of the discourse and the portrayal of the inner struggle that these colonizers are experiencing when they are faced with cultural clashes that expose the reality of their artificial superiority in contrast to the integrity and genuineness of the culture of the

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native people in Cyrenaica. Spina ironically displays this polarity through the creation of contradictory discourses that represent indirectly a condemnation of colonialism.

## Conclusion

Spina, in *The Marriage of Omar*, creates a combative textual space in which he utilizes historical and social backgrounds to depict two completely opposing socio-political forces of two worlds, the Italian colonizers and the Libyan people in Cyrenaica. In these historical fictional stories, Spina mingles the political and armed struggle with social and cultural aspects of two conflicting forces that play major roles in the shaping of the history of early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Libya. This is manifested by full-fleshed fictional characters who are vested with conflicting worldviews, values, and beliefs. Through their actions and interaction with others, each represents a voice within these agonistic worlds. The events in this novel are presented in a hybrid dialogical narrative where conflicting voices from different cultures and backgrounds intercross and mix, forming polyphonic discourses. They are perceived by the narrator as “a splendid cacophony of sounds”<sup>1</sup> (p. 233).

Because historical fiction is, by its nature, a hybrid genre<sup>11</sup>, these sounds extend to include voices from Italian literature and music, along with historical documents and actual accounts of historical events. In addition to the polyphonic conflicting voices of the characters, it seems that in this heterodiegetic narration, the authorial voice is predominant, clashing with some other voices and revealing certain ideological stances. This authorial narration represents a spatial venue through which the author conveys his social and political ideas and beliefs to the reader.

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