Introduction: Il Caffè by Tahar Lamri

Il caffè is a short story by Tahar Lamri, an Algerian author who immigrated to Italy and began writing various short stories and most notably his collection of stories, *I sessanta nomi dell’amore* in the Italian language. Il Caffè is a story about a young man who returns home after spending twenty years abroad. The story portrays the fear and excitement of returning home once again, but ultimately confirms that one can never truly go home, at least not as the same person. It is expected that one’s home and family will have changed and although this may be true, most often the one who has changed the most is the person that left. In this story Majid returns home as a completely changed person, due to his diverse experiences abroad, and it is his mother who notes that this young man is not her son.

The story also explores the relationship between food and culture, describing Majid’s newfound love of *caffe amaro*, the typical dark, bitter espresso loved by Italians. This metaphor of food is further cemented with the use of passages from Pellegrino Artusi, an Italian businessman and writer, who most notably wrote the cookbook *La scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiar bene* (“Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well”) in 1891. Artusi gives many useful recipes, but also makes connections between food and identity. These passages were exceptionally difficult to translate due to their philosophic nature and the linguistic differences between 19th century and modern Italian language.
There is a mixing of culture, traditions and languages that occurs for almost all immigrants who often feel the pressure to assimilate and to become part of the new culture and the new country, while also maintaining their origins. This often leads to the formation of a new, multi-faceted identity. In this short story there is an overarching theme of double identity that is shared by both Majid and the author himself. Although the story is fiction, there are many autobiographical elements present throughout the story. In approaching this translation, I wanted to assure that these two elements of Majid’s identity and the tension between his two cultures were still at the forefront of the story. Due to the context given in the story and the use of Arabic words, that identity comes across quite clearly, but since the text itself was being translated out of the Italian language and into English, I feared the Italian context might be easily lost. The metaphor of food, and in particular Italian espresso, is what maintains this Italian identity. Therefore, I decided to maintain the Italian word for coffee, *il caffè*, as the title of this story. Thankfully this word is, for the most part, universally understood and thus can be left in the original Italian without explanation.

Tahar Lamri and many other immigrants use literature to show that they belong in both cultures and also as a way of proving their legitimacy in the new culture through their mastery of a new language. In present day Italy, there is a lot of resistance and fear of the immigrant population, even second-generation immigrants who are born in Italy. It is through authors like Tahar Lamri, Igiaba Scego, Cristiano de Caldas Brito, and so many others who focus their writing on migrant and foreign narratives, that the dialogue begins to change and with it, the majority of Italians’ perception of immigrants living in Italy. These migrant narratives are written in Italian, thus the audience for most of these texts is the general Italian public. Stories such as Lamri’s can serve both as a way for Italians to
understand the opposing point of view, as well as to serve as a form of solidarity for other immigrants who may be facing similar challenges and resistance.

In thinking about my target audience, I realized that through translating this piece into English, I would be providing access to a broader public that consists of English-speakers around the world. I think this access to the piece is key in today’s society, with the influx of migrants, especially with the prevalent Syrian Refugee Crisis affecting the United States as well. I wanted to make sure not to domesticate the piece, because I think domesticating in any form, other than translating it into English, would result in a true loss of the essence of the story and the importance of these two specific cultures. Therefore, I chose to foreignize the text through maintaining foreign words and concepts, as well as by not altering the cultural context of the story. In doing such, I tried to remain as faithful to the original as possible.

Lamri maintains Arabic words in his original Italian story and in keeping with the tradition of foreignizing, I decided to keep these foreign words in order to keep the Arabic culture and identity at the forefront of the reader’s mind and to place the reader in a foreign cultural context. An example of the use of Arabic words is: “Prendo Lham lehlou, carne di manzo addolcita con sciroppo, prugne e mele” which I translated as “I take some of the Lham lehlou, beef sweetened with syrup, prunes and apples.” This is one of the many Algerian culinary dishes Lamri refers to throughout the story and I decided it does not need a footnote, because Lamri describes exactly what the dish is made of and due to the larger context of the story and the plot, the reader should be able to deduct that this is a traditional Algerian dish. However, I did feel the need to add a footnote in moments where Lamri inserts not only a foreign word, but also a historical concept, that is not commonly known,
especially to an English speaking audience. An example is “Penso all’atopos greco” which I translated as “I think of the Greek tópos” and for which I inserted the footnote—Tópos—from Ancient Greek τόπος, meaning “place”—in order to provide more context and clarification. I also have to be aware of the different collective histories and knowledge of Italy vs. The United States or any other English speaking target audience. Italians, as well as other Europeans, tend to have a better understanding of Greek and Latin roots and this term would appear less foreign to an Italian audience than an American one.

One of the many reasons I was drawn to this piece was due to my personal experience and connection to the idea of leaving a place and returning as a changed person. Through my experience studying abroad in Florence, Italy for a year I became immersed in an entirely new culture, living in a European city and speaking a foreign language. Through this exposure to a culture and an environment different than my own, I went through a transformative process and like Majid, I did not realize just how much I changed until I returned home. I also relate to the challenge of having to prove one’s self in a language. I have realized that finding a personal connection to the piece and being able to understand, to some extent, the author’s point of view is an integral part of the translation process and for me personally, made me more connected and dedicated to this translation.

One of my biggest concerns in translating Lamri’s story was maintaining this beautiful imagery that he is able to create through his carefully chosen words, such as “Le file di palme ancorate alla terra rossa ai bordi dell’autostrada laggiù ammiccano e mi invitano con le larghe chiome e da quest’altezza immagino il fruscio dei rami al vento. Mi sento sospeso come una piuma ma fra poco avrò i piedi, finalmente, per terra,” which I translated as “The rows of palm trees anchored in the red soil along the edges of the highway below wink and
welcome me with broad foliage and from this height I imagine the rustling of the branches in the wind. I feel suspended like a feather but soon I will have my feet, finally, planted firmly on the ground.” Tahar Lamri successfully paints this image in the mind of the reader and you feel as if you are there, immersed in the story. He achieves this immersion not solely through imagery, but through all of the senses. Lamri describes the sights, smells, noises and tastes of his surroundings and through his illustrative writing is truly able to transport the reader into his story. To make sure I was rendering the same imagery in my English translation, I read the story aloud to a couple of friends and asked them to describe the scene of the story back to me. Notably, reading aloud is one of the most helpful techniques I have utilized in my translation process. Once you have done the bulk of the translation, most of the final edits come down to personal choices of one word over another. Often multiple words can fit and render the same meaning, but the final choice often is a result of style and which word sounds better in that particular phrase.

One of the biggest challenges I faced in this translation was deciphering the meaning of one colloquial phrase that I had never heard before, neither in Italian nor English. The phrase was “quella signora dai capelli color menopausa” that after much difficulty and debate, I translated as “the woman with the fake red hair.” While I was working on my rough draft I was stumped by this phrase and decided I would ask my advisor, Giovanna Bellesia, what the meaning is in Italian. Much to my surprise, she did not know what it meant either and we both set out, together, to figure out what this phrase was referring to. With significant research and talking with both Professors Bellesia and Vanpee we were able to figure out that this is referring to women of menopausal age whose hair has gone white and then upon coloring it, often with the use of henna typical of France and many
Northern African countries, it turns a bright, fake-looking red color. This process is a reference to Lamri’s Algerian roots and culture, as well as an ode to his Italian culture through finding the vocabulary in Italian to express this concept. One of the most beneficial techniques in translation, that is almost inevitable, is collaboration. Without help from my professors, I would not have fully understood the concept and that would have resulted in a significant amount of translation loss.

Overall this translation process has been a positive experience helped me to further my Italian language skills, taught me knew ways of approaching translation, as well as allowing me to make personal connections with the piece. I think the most difficult part of this process was navigating the cultural context and figuring out what to change and what to maintain in order to crate a clear understanding, but not domesticate the piece. My biggest takeaway from this process has been learning the skill of collaboration, with peers and advisors, both Italian and non-Italian speakers. Going forward, I want to reach out to the author of this short story, Tahar Lamri and send him my translation. I am interested to see his reaction to the English translation and inquire about any changes he would want to make to the piece. At that point, if Lamri is receptive of my translation, I would like to ask him about the possibility of publishing it. I am extremely interested by this genre of migrant narratives and would like to keep translating short stories and other longer pieces similar to this one in the near future.
Il caffè by Tahar Lamri

I was reading this paragraph:

_Cooking is like a little rascal; it will very often drive you crazy, but will also give you pleasure, because the times when you succeed or you manage to overcome an obstacle, you taste satisfaction and sing victory_

…When the loudspeaker, cheerfully nasal and often incomprehensible, announces that in a few minutes the plane would be landing at Houari Boumediene Airport in Algiers.

“Twenty years!” I think to myself, and I am unable to think of anything else while looking out the window and seeing the plane approach the red earth. My red earth, I can’t remember when I forgot its color and certainly its scent. My senses heightened, I try and stick my forehead to the window, banging my head against the protruding frame. My eyes become fixed and I become lost in staring at those three tiny holes. I become lost while staring at those three tiny holes, although their function totally escapes me. Maybe because of the condensation. Who knows? I think unwittingly of couscous and of the steam cloud that filled the small kitchen of my childhood.

As my red African earth becomes closer, my fear of this meeting intensifies, for it is these encounters that prove to me that even I know how to return somewhere, to some place. I think of the Greek _tópos_¹, of the sociological studies and the “Double Absence” of Sayad²,

¹ _Tópos_-from Ancient Greek τόπος, meaning “place”
unable to accept it. The rows of palm trees anchored in the red soil along the edges of the highway below wink and welcome me with broad foliage and from this height I imagine the rustling of the branches in the wind. I feel suspended like a feather but soon I will have my feet, finally, planted firmly on the ground. A Berliet truck stares at me, captures my eyes with no possibility of escape. The memories are burning and insistent. Before leaving I was proud of having had the strength to cut all ties with the past and then the cold reality of seeing this heavy piece of equipment, is a sharp contrast with my warm memories. I am already talking about a yesterday and therefore I notice that there is a today that is possible and different. I make the effort and return to my book, even if I detest reading during landing.

“There are two main functions of life: nourishment and propagation of the species.”

I can’t read any further, I peek over the book and see that the red earth is already along the sides of the plane and no longer underneath us. Some words come on the loudspeaker and right after that the repeated clicking of the seatbelts unfastening arouse me completely. The passengers around me begin to stand up even before the airplane has completely stopped. I don’t have any desire to get up, but the woman with the fake red hair becomes impatient, almost wanting to push me out of the seat, she gets up, looks helplessly and annoyed at the luggage overhead compartment. Finally I too get up, I take my luggage and hand her bag to her. She doesn’t even thank me.

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2 **Abdelmalek Sayad**, often referred to as the “Algerian Socrates,” was an Algerian sociologist who studied immigration and helped to shape the study of migration issues in France. The Double Absence (translated officially as The Suffering Immigrant in English) was a book published after his death exploring the personal and spiritual suffering of the immigrant.

3 Quote from the famous Italian Cookbook, *La Scienza in Cucina e l’Arte di Mangiar Bene* (“Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well”) written by Pellegrino Artusi in 1891.
The air that I thought would be suffocating is strangely light. Extremely light. I see myself passing through the corridors and controls and find myself in a huge parking lot. Plant roots sink into the red earth. It is an obsession. Almost.

My brother, despite the distance that until now I believed to be insurmountable, recognizes me immediately. A smile comes across his face, a face I didn’t initially recognize. He accompanies me to our house where, upon my arrival, welcoming echoes of shrill *you you* ring out. I am not emotional and I don’t understand why. I ask the names of my other siblings who I left when they were very little and whose faces now blend together. Two tears fall down my mother’s face. Tears that make me feel even more estranged from myself. I sit down on the large rug like everyone else and I realize I still know how to sit cross-legged. I cross my legs. I do not speak. I respond to questions. The welcoming and the close proximity confuse me. I say that I’m very tired and I fall asleep right there on the rug, amongst everyone. Years of work, in an environment aimed towards the future, have taught me to drown my feelings in sleep. For years now, I haven’t dreamt of anything. And even today my asleep on that rug, my sleep that has not changed in twenty years, is without dreams.

I wake up, neither light nor heavy, how I have always woken up in these twenty years, and I find them all there, in the same position. I wonder if they came back or if they have been there the whole time, in that same position. I am wondering if they just came back or if they were always there, when my mother enters the room and asks me if I want to wash up and change, before dinner.

Water has always been my element; taking a shower I realize that a thick layer of sediment makes me a stranger to myself and to my life. The struggle to cut ties prevented
my eyes from recalling the shapes of faces familiar to me, the voices in my ears and the warmth in my heart. I decide to put on the gandoura, the long loose robe that was my father’s. When I return to the sitting room, on the rug I find a ma’ida – a short, round table – laden with food from my childhood. First of all the smells, the spices, then the colors. Accustomed to Italian separate courses, presented in a specific order, and a rectangular table, here I find myself out of place in my own home. A voice says to me: “Don’t be fooled, remember Madeleine, it’s not just literature, if you give in they will all show up at your doorstep in Europe and you can kiss your hard-earned personal life goodbye.” So how can you respond to those mean voices? Especially if you are facing all of this? I don’t know the answer, but I ignore them and before ignoring them, I do something odd in the eyes of my relatives. I go over to my suitcase and take out a book, the one that I was reading on the airplane, and I read aloud knowing well that no one was going to understand me:

The human race survives only because man has the instinct of self-preservation and that of reproduction and strongly feels the need to satisfy both. The satisfaction of a need is always linked to a pleasure. The pleasure of self-preservation exists in one’s sense of taste, and that of reproduction in one’s sense of touch. If a man were to not crave food or experience sexual desire, the human race would immediately cease. Taste and touch are therefore the senses most necessary, even indispensible to the life of the individual and the species. The other senses only help, and while one can live blind and deaf, one cannot live without the functional activity of the taste organs.

I put the book down on the floor next to me, I look at my siblings one by one, my face breaks out into a smile of satisfaction and I slowly begin to drink the fragrant chorba.
“I had totally forgotten the taste and the smell of coriander,” I say, turning to my mother.

“Eat, my son, eat. It’s good for you. Bessahha. Bessaha,” my mother replies, not without a trace of fear for the mental health of her son. That would be me.

Having finished the chorba, I pick up the book again. And my mother:

“Why aren’t you eating?”

“Later, later.”

I read aloud:

How is it then that on the scale of the senses, the two senses most necessary to life and to its transmission are considered the most vile? Why does that which satisfies the other senses such as painting, music, etc., get considered to be a noble thing, while instead that which satisfies taste is considered to be less than noble? Why is it that one who enjoys admiring a beautiful painting or hearing a beautiful symphony is considered superior to one who enjoys eating excellent food? Therefore, a disparity also exists within the senses, such as he who works has one shirt, whereas he who doesn’t work has two.

My youngest siblings laugh at these strange sounds that are coming out of my mouth. My oldest siblings try to keep a straight face while my mother repeats:

“Eat, my son, eat. I made all of your favorite things. Eat.”

“Mom, man does not live by bread alone, you need something to go with it. Do you know who said that? Lorenzo Stecchetti. You don’t know who Lorenzo Stecchetti was! I’m awakening my senses.”

Now the little ones literally roar with laughter. The older ones laugh with restraint. And I find myself watching the twinkle in my eyes. I take some Lham lehlou, beef
sweetened with syrup, prunes and apples. I dip the bread and my fingers in the sauce, as I hadn’t done for a long time. I devour, as I hadn’t done for a long time. In absolute freedom. Then the chicken with olives, without following any order, then the yellow melon – not the cantaloupe that I used to call melon in Europe – then figs, then two spoonful’s of couscous, the beloved semolina of my childhood. “It’s an orgy of food!” I mumble while eating. From savory to sweet and from sweet to savory. I ask for qalb ellouz, a decadently sweet dessert, dripping with honey. Orgasmic. Luckily there is some. I swallow it greedily, daringly looking at everyone and first of all at myself. Eventually I calm down and ask for a cup of coffee.

My mother brings the coffee. I almost spit out the first sip on the rug. It’s sweet, and I have learned to drink the insolent, bitter Italian espresso. My mother becomes alarmed and makes me another coffee without sugar. She lets me drink the bitter coffee and marvels at how quickly I drink it. Piping hot. At first, she doesn’t say anything. She looks at me for a long time. She stares at me for a long time. She rests her hands in her lap. She goes back to looking at me, coughs lightly to clear her voice, then finally facing me, she starts speaking, in the total silence that had descended upon us when I began drinking the coffee. A silence that I don’t completely understand. I only know that it was because of me:

“Do you know that my son is dead?”

“But which son, mom. I don’t know of any brother that died during my absence!”

“I had a son… He went away one day, twenty years ago… They came to tell me that he had died abroad, but I did not want to believe it. Today I know it to be true.”

“But who is this son of yours that I don’t know. And, did you only find out today…?”

“You told me yourself right now!”
“What did I just tell you?”

“That my son is dead!”

I don’t immediately get this sense of tragedy, I thought it was only typical of the Greeks. I don’t understand that my mother is announcing my own death. I am unable to become alarmed. And none of my siblings come to my rescue.

“Mom, what are you talking about? But… Did I understand correctly? Are you talking about me?”

“You aren’t my son. You have taken the place of my son, I don’t know why.”

“But, mom, what makes you think that? I am your son. Your son Majid. Can’t you remember when I kept you company: you sitting on the ground, your feet covered in henna, your hair braided, kneading bread in the wooden guesâa bowl? That bread that you used to make, our matlou, and amazed at my patient waiting you used to say, you are as patient as a camel…”

“Yes, these are things I would say to my son Majid! But my son loved sweet things, there is no way he could drink bitter coffee, it’s not possible”.

“Mom, you also said that I have always reminded you of a marabout⁴. Do you remember when you told me the story of saint Sidi Chedly, who trying to find a way not to sleep, so that he could read and study, followed one of his goats, that he realized did not sleep, and saw that she ate red grapes from a plant and this is how he discovered coffee? Do you remember? Do you remember it?”

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⁴ Marabout – from Arabic, is a Muslim religious leader and teacher, typically in the Maghreb region of Northwestern Africa.
I feel like those children who panic when an adult pretends not to see them and they begin to repeat “But I’m here! I’m here!” before desperately bursting into tears. My siblings, who are helplessly witnessing the scene become equally upset.

I say:

“Mom, I am your son Majid. I learned how to drink bitter coffee, but it’s only a habit. I am me.”

“If you are you, then you cannot understand,” is her only response.

I hold her for a long time, perhaps I shed a few tears. I take in her scent and she does the same to me. I take another bitter coffee. She just smiles. All she does is smile.
Bibliography


Il caffè da Tahar Lamri

Stavo leggendo questo paragrafo:

La cucina è una bricconcella; spesso e volentieri fa disperare, ma dà anche piacere, perché quelle volte che riuscite o che avete superata un difficoltà, provate compiacimento e cantate vittoria
Quando l’altoparlante, volentieri nasale e spesso incomprensibile, annuncia che tra pochi minuti l’aereo sarebbe atterrato all’Aeroporto Houari Boumediène di Algeri.
“Vent’anni!”, penso, e, non sono in grado di pensare ad altro vedendo avvicinarsi dall’oblò la terra rossa. La mia terra rossa, di cui non ricordo quando persi il colore e certamente l’aroma. I sensi in agitazione, cerco di appiccare la fronte sul finestrino, cozzando la testa contro quella specie di stipite molto sporgente. Fisso lo sguardo e mi perdo a guardare quei tre forellini minuscoli la cui funzione mi sfugge totalmente. Forse per via della condensa. Chissà. Penso senza volerlo al cuscus e al tanto vapore che riempieva l’esigua cucina della mia infanzia. La mia terra rossa africana si fa sempre più vicina e più intenso il mio timore per questo incontro, per questi incontri che mi proveranno che anch’io so tornare in qualche porto, in qualche posto.
Penso all’atopos greco, agli studi di sociologia e alla <<doppia assenza>> di Sayad, senza farmene ragione. Le file di palme ancorate alla terra rossa ai bordi dell’autostrada laggiù
ammiccano e mi invitano con le larghe chiome e da quest’altezza immagino il fruscio dei rami al vento. Mi sento sospeso come una piuma ma fra poco avrò i piedi, finalmente, per terra.

Un camion Berliet mi fissa, mi ancora lo sguardo senza possibilità di fuga. I ricordi si fanno brucianti e insistenti. Prima della partenza mi vantavo di aver avuto la forza di tagliare i ponti con il passato ed ecco che la vista di questo mezzo meccanico freddo nella realtà, e tanto caldo nella memoria, vanifica tutte le pretese. Già parlo di uno ieri e quindi mi accorgo che c’è un oggi possibile e diverso. Faccio lo sforzo e ritorno al mio libro, anche se detesto la lettura durante l’atterraggio.

<<Due sono le funzioni principali della vita: la nutrizione e la propagazione della specie>>. Non posso andare oltre, sbircio da sopra il libro e vedo che la terra rossa è ormai ai lati dell’aereo e non più sotto di noi. Alcune parole nell’altoparlante poi lo scatto consecutivo di apertura delle cinture di sicurezza finiscono per destarmi del tutto. I passeggeri attorno a me cominciano ad alzarsi ancora prima che l’aereo sia completamente fermo. Non ho nessuna voglia di alzarmi, ma quella signora dai capelli color menopausa freme, mi vuole quasi spingere dal sedile, si alza, guarda con aria impotente e infastidita il vano bagagli sopra le nostre teste. Finalmente mi alzo anch’io, prendo il mio e le porgo il suo bagaglio. Non mi ringrazia nemmeno. L’aria che credevo soffocante è stranamente leggera. Leggerissima. Mi vedo attraversare corridoi e controlli e trovarmi in un immenso parcheggio. Le radici delle piante affondano nella terra rossa. È un’un’ossessione. Quasi.

Mio fratello, malgrado la distanza finora credevo incolmabile, mi riconosce immediatamente. Il suo viso si apre in un sorriso che non riconosco subito. Mi accompagna a casa dove, al mio arrivo, risuonano you you di benvenuto. Non sono commosso e non ne
capisco il perché. Chiedo i nomi agli altri fratelli che ho lasciato molto piccoli e i cui volti ora si confondono alla mia vista. Due lacrime rigano il volto i mia madre. Lacrime che mi rendono ancora più estraneo a me stesso. Mi siedo sull’ampio tappeto come tutti e mi accorgo di saper ancora incrociare le gambe. Incrocio le gambe. Non parlo. Rispondo alle domande. L’accoglienza, la stretta vicinanza mi confondono. Dico che sono molto stanco e mi addormento direttamente sul tappeto, in mezzo a tutti. Anni di lavoro, in un ambiente proiettato al futuro, mi hanno insegnato ad affogare i sentimenti nel sonno. È da anni che non sogno nulla. E anche oggi il mio sonno sul tappeto, uguale a se stesso da vent’anni, è senza sogni.

Mi sveglio, né leggero né pesante, come mi sono sempre svegliato in questi vent’anni, e li trovo tutti lì, nella stessa posizione. Mi sto domandando se sono tornati ora oppure sono sempre stati lì, nella stessa posizione. Mi sto domandando se sono tornati ora oppure sono sempre stati lì, quando entra mia madre nella stanza e mi chiede se voglio lavarmi e cambiarmi, prima di cena.

L’acqua è sempre stata il mio elemento, facendo la doccia mi rendo conto che una grossa coltre di sedimenti mi rende estraneo a me stesso e alla mia vita. Lo sforzo di tagliare i ponti ha impedito ai miei occhi di rammentare e forme dei volti a me familiari, le voci alle mie orecchie e il calore al mio cuore. Decido di mettere la gandoura che fu di mio padre. Quando torno nel salotto, sul tappeto c’era una maida – un tavolo basso e rotondo – imbandito con la mia infanzia. Prima gli odori, le spezie, poi i colori. Abituato al primo, al secondo, al dolce, all’ordine insomma, al tavolo rettangolare, qui mi ritrovo a casa mia spesato. Una voce mi diceva: <<Non ti far fregare, ricordati della madeleine, non è soltanto letteratura quella, se cedi te li ritrovi tutti a casa tua là in Europa e puoi dire addio alla vita privata che ti sei
costruito con tanta fatica>>. Ora cosa puoi rispondere a quelle voci stronze? Specie se ti trovi davanti a tutto questo? Non so la risposta, ma le ignoro e prima di ignorarle, faccio una cosa strana agli occhi di tutti miei familiari presenti. Vado verso la valigia e prendo il libro, quello che leggevo in aereo, e leggo ad alta voce ben sapendo che nessuno mi avrebbe compreso:

Il genere umano dura solo perché l’uomo ha l’istinto della conservazione e quello della riproduzione e sente vivissimo il bisogno di soddisfarvi. Alla soddisfazione di un bisogno va sempre unito un piacere e il piacere della conservazione si ha nel senso del gusto e quello della riproduzione nel senso del tatto. Se l’uomo non appetisse il cibo o non provasse stimoli sessuali, il genere umano finirebbe subito. Il gusto e il tatto sono quindi i sensi più necessari, anzi indispensabili alla vita dell’individuo e della specie. Gli altri aiutano soltanto e si può vivere ciechi e sordi, ma non senza l’attività funzionale degli organi del gusto.

Metto il libro accanto a me per terra, guardo i miei fratelli ad uno ad uno, il mio volto si apre in un sorriso di soddisfazione e comincio lentamente a bere la profumatissima chorba.

<<Mi ero totalmente scordato il gusto e il profumo del coriandolo>>, dico rivolgendomi a mia madre

<<Mangia, figlio mia, mangia. Tutta salute. Bessahha. Bessaha>>, replica mia madre, non senza una punta di spavento per la salute mentale di suo figlio, che sono io.

Finita la chorba, riprendo il libro. E mia madre:

<<Ma perché non mangi?>>

<<Dopo, dopo>>.

Leggo ad alta voce:
Come è dunque che nella scala dei sensi i due più necessari alla vita ed alla sua trasmissione sono reputati più vili? Perché quel che soddisfa gli altri sensi, pittura, musica, ecc., si dice arte, si ritiene cosa nobile, ed ignorable invece quel che soddisfa il gusto? Perché chi gode vedendo un bel quadro o sentendo una bella sinfonia è reputato superiore a chi gode mangiando un’eccellente vivanda? Ci sono dunque tali ineguaglianze anche tra i sensi che chi lavora ha una camicia e chi non lavora ne ha due?

I miei fratelli più piccoli ridono davanti a questi suoni strani che escono dalla mia bocca. I miei fratelli grandi cercano di rimanere seri mentre mia mamma ripete:

<<Mangia, figlio mio, mangia. Ti ho preparato tutte cose che ti piacciono. Mangia>>.

<<Mamma non si vive di solo pane, ci vuole anche il companatico. Lo sai chi l’ha detto? Lorenzo Stecchetti. Tu non sai chi era Lorenzo Stecchetti! Sto svegliando i miei sensi>>.

Mia madre porta il caffè. Quasi sputo il primo sorso sul tappeto. È dolce, ed io ho imparato a bere l’insolente espresso italiano amaro. Mia madre si allarma e mi fa un altro caffè senza zucchero. Mi lascia bere il caffè amaro e si meraviglia che io lo beva così in fretta. Bollente. All’inizio non dice nulla. Mi guarda a lungo. Mi scruta a lungo. Raccoglie le mani in grembo. Mi guarda ancora, tossisce leggermente per schiarirsi la voce, poi finalmente dice rivolta verso di me, nel silenzio totale che si era fatto da quando ho cominciato a bere il caffè. Silenzio che non capisco pienamente. So soltanto che era dovuto a me:

<<Lo sai che mio figlio è morto?>>

<<Ma quale figlio, mamma. Non so di nessun fratello morto durante la mia assenza!>>

<<Avevo un figlio… È andato via un giorno, vent’anni fa… Sono venuti a dirmi che era morto all’estero, ma non ci volevo credere. Oggi lo so con certezza>>.

<<Ma chi è questo figlio che non conosco. Poi, te l’hanno detto soltanto oggi…?>>

<<Me lo hai detto tu adesso!>>

<<Cosa ti ho detto adesso?>>

<<Che mio figlio è morto!>>


<<Mamma, cosa stai dicendo. Ma… Ho capito bene? Stai parlando di me?>>

<<Tu non sei mio figlio. Hai preso il posto di mio figlio, non so perché>>.
<<Ma, mamma, cosa ti fa creder queste cose? Sono io tuo figlio. Tuo figlio Majid. Non ti ricordi quando ti facevo compagnia: tu li seduta per terra, con i piedi dipinti di henné, i capelli intrecciati, davanti alla gass’aa di legno che avevamo e facevi il pane? Quel pane che facevi tu, il nostro matl’uu e ti meravigliavi della mia paziente attesa e dicevi sei paziente come un cammello…>>

<<Sì, queste cose le dicevo a mio figlio Majid! Ma mio figlio amava il dolce, non poteva bere il caffè amaro, non è possibile>>.

<<Mamma, lo dicevi anche tu che ho sempre avuto l’aria di un marabout. Ti ricordi quando mi raccontavi la storia di quel santo Sidi Chadli, che cercava un mezzo per non dormire per poter leggere e studiare e quando ha visto che una delle sue capre non dormiva, l’ha seguitata e ha visto che mangiava i chicchi rossi di una pianta e di come ha scoperto così il caffè? Ti ricordi? Te lo ricordi?>>

Mi sento come quei bambini che vengono presi dal panico quando una adulto fa finta di non vederli e cominciano a ripetere <<Ma sono qui! Ma sono qui!>> prima di scoppiare in un pianto disperato. Mi disperano anche i miei fratelli che assistono impotenti alla scena.

Dico:

<<Mamma, sono tuo figlio Majid. Il caffè ho imparato a berlo amaro, ma è soltanto un’abitudine. Io sono io>>.

<<Se tu sei tu, non puoi capire allora>>, è l’unica sua risposta.

L’abbraccio a lungo, lascio cadere forse qualche lacrima. La annuso e lei mi annusa.

Riprendo un altro caffè amaro. Lei si limita a sorridere