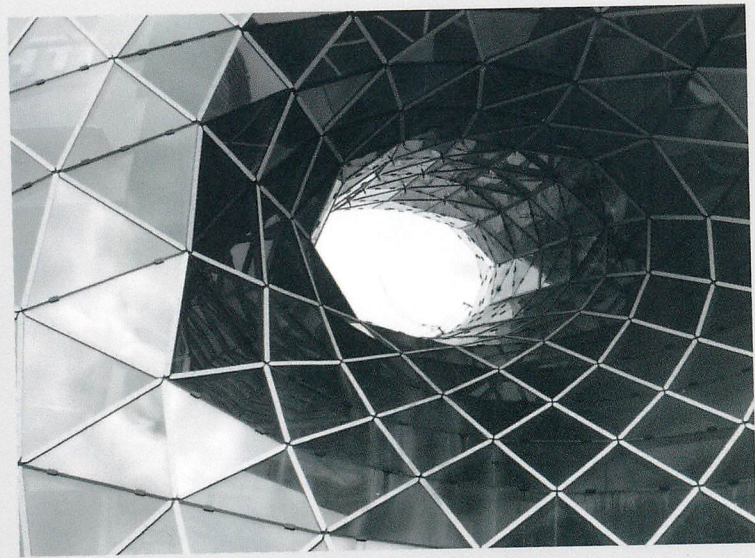


# Intercultural Crossings

Conflict, Memory and Identity

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## Stories of Lebanese Migration in Brazilian Literature

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The roots of around five per cent of the Brazilian population are in the Middle East, particularly in what is called “Greater Syria”, a region which includes modern Lebanon, Syria and part of Jordan, and from where the first Arab immigrants came at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Syrian-Lebanese immigration to Brazil started to gather force around 1880, and one of the probable reasons for this was the good impression made by King Pedro II (who spoke Arabic fluently) on his visit to the East in 1876. It is said that during that trip, the Brazilian emperor never missed an opportunity to encourage the population to immigrate, thereby ensuring a warm welcome.

At the beginning, this diaspora, called *Al-Mahjar* in Arabic (an expression that means the country to where migrants go), was caused more by urgent need, mostly related to instability and poverty in the countries of origin and to Turkish-Ottoman oppression, than by ethnic and religious disagreements. Occupation by the French and the British between 1918 and 1945, and the civil war that took place in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990, were other later causes of this migration, which continued throughout time. The very situation of the country defies the notion that difference implies hostility. At the crossroads between three continents and civilisations – Europe, Asia and Africa – Lebanon brings together two spiritual universes and is marked by the universalistic trait of Maronitism. This spiritual, cultural and Catholic movement was initiated by Saint Maroun, who was born and lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and marked the singularity of a church which is over 1600 years old. This beginning, linked to a person who was an anchorite and who did not hold the high position of an ecclesiastical leader, was the first sign of the identity of this church to be based on personal offering and asceticism, which was atypical and parted from the common model for the construction of churches as it was founded on the individual merit of

a man who was recognised as the spiritual leader of the northern region of Syria and later of Lebanon.

Mass migration began in the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, after the destruction of the monastery founded by Saint Maroun, where a community of ascetics had been brought together. Thenceforth, Lebanon became the refuge of the Maronites, diluting the separation between church and state. The patriarch was the civil and religious chief, national leader and spiritual head. The theological orientation of Lebanon is centered on the relationship of the religions with one another, particularly the encounter and dialogue between Christianity and Islam. This gave Lebanon a special feature and made it unique in the Arab world. It is also significant that the chosen liberal democratic system facilitates the practice of freedom of thought and expression. As a way of challenging the dictatorships around it, the country has adopted democracy and has based its system of government on human dignity, not favouring the diffusion of totalitarian, nationalistic, religious and racist doctrinal forces. The spiritual space is understood to be the true homeland and Maronitism declares itself to be a project for liberating humans. It uses Lebanon as its symbol, and seeks to fulfill the destiny of the suffering, the marginalised, those who have been expelled from their homelands and those whose freedoms are attacked. Today, fifteen centuries later, Lebanon continues to be the symbol of Maronites' singularity and destiny, despite the fact that Maronitism was not born there and that most of its followers have emigrated.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of culture, the dialogue between Islam and Christianity and an appreciation of various different worlds are what make the Lebanese people unique, and it is common in Lebanon for the Christian and Muslim religions to live and come together, sometimes within the same family. Hence that Milton Hatoum, a contemporary Brazilian writer of Lebanese origin, says that "Lebanon is very Brazilian and Brazil is very Arabian",<sup>2</sup> since Brazilian culture also assumes eclecticism as a feature of its identity (Hatoum, 2006: 1).

Cultural diversity *per se* has been said to be a feature which characterises Brazilian identity. There is a general recognition of the mixed race amalgam, the result of three main features which have been accepted and which have blended with one another in Brazilian society: the native indigenous culture, the culture resulting from the Portuguese colonisation – which imposed a common language and religion

<sup>1</sup> The year 2010 was a jubilee year for the Maronite Church, for it was the 1600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Saint Maroun.

<sup>2</sup> All quotes from documents in Portuguese translated into English are the author's own.

(Christianity), to which were added the migratory flow to Brazil from various places – and finally the African culture of the black slaves at the time of the transatlantic slave trade. Though not traditionally valued during colonial times and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, aspects of Brazilian culture which originated in Africa began to be recognised in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a process which continues today.<sup>3</sup>

Due to the two rubber booms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the immigrants from the mountains and rural areas of Syria and Lebanon continued to come to regions such as the Amazon and port cities as for instance Manaus and Belém, arriving in the *exotic* and distant American land without any support structure, contrary to the Italians, for example, who form another significant immigrant community in Brazil. Their survival and integration was made possible only by mutual support, a fact they are proud of. Isaac Nigri, a Jewish trader and son of Lebanese parents, explains how things were done: "People helped one another within the community. When the ships arrived, each family would take one or two immigrants home. No one had much, but there was always room for one more. It didn't have to be a relative, just an immigrant" (qtd in Techima, 2005: 52).

The first immigrants to Brazil started their lives as peddlers or hawkers, continuing the civilisation of the vendors of ancient Phoenicia, which corresponds to the region of modern Lebanon today. Later on, they were to improve their social and economic situation by running family-owned stores. In the novel *Nur na Escuridão* [Nur in the Darkness] (2004),<sup>4</sup> Salim Miguel mentions this almost inevitable destiny. Yussef, one of the characters in his book, dreams of opening a school, but will always be a trader. He reluctantly starts trading across the hidden regions of Brazil with his *trouxa* on his back, like many other Lebanese, as yet unaware of the second meaning of the word "trouxa":<sup>5</sup>

Yussef started peddling [...]. The same process: goods received from relatives and compatriots, settling the accounts after some time, returning what he had not been able to sell, bringing in various orders and requests (Miguel, 2004: 97).

<sup>3</sup> Examples of this acceptance are the martial art of Capoeira, initially forbidden by the authorities but in 1953 considered by President Vargas to be the only truly national sport, and also Samba, which was one of the first expressions of Afro-Brazilian culture to be admired when it assumed an important position in popular Brazilian music.

<sup>4</sup> "Nur" means light in Arabic.

<sup>5</sup> "Trouxa" means both a bundle to carry things and "sucker", i.e. "dupe", in Portuguese.

It is probably thanks to this business, which involved establishing relationships with other groups, that the Lebanese community in Brazil has been receptive to external influence. It also gave rise to multicultural literature in Portuguese that acted in a similar manner to synecdoche, in which the personal level is simultaneously both historical and political, sharing some features of what Linda Hutcheon (1987) has called historiographic metafiction. This notion aspires to deconstruct some concept of *truth* and to ask whose *truth* is being told: "Historiographic metafiction appears willing to draw upon any signifying practices it can find operative in a society. It wants to challenge those discourses and yet to milk them for all they are worth" (Hutcheon, 1987: 16). According to Hutcheon (1987, 1988a, 1988b), postmodernist fiction thus complicates the issue of references in two ways: in this ontological confusion (text or experience) and in its overdetermination of the entire notion of reference (mainly autoreferentiality, intertextuality, historiographic reference). There is a "tension then, not only between the real and the textualized, but also among a number of kinds of references" (Hutcheon, 1988b: 153). The novels of the Lebanese diaspora combine a clear self-awareness (metafiction) with a questioning of the historic facts which they recreate (historiography). The self-reference is also manifested in these texts by constant references to writings and even to readings which may be keys to the interpretation of the works themselves.

Perhaps the character Mundo (meaning "World") in the novel *Cinzas do Norte* [*Ashes of the Amazon*] (2005) by Milton Hatoum, would be a better example of this correspondence with a general destiny that is self-evident in name and in its course of action, in the "rootless life he fearlessly embraced" (Hatoum, 2005: 11).

The trips and travels inherent in the immigrant experience are essential for an understanding of the experience and culture of the Other and have both an individual and a collective dimension regarding plurality and the encounter between civilisations. We may understand the comparison Oswaldo Truzzi makes between the figures of the peddlers and the "bandeirantes" (pioneers), who disseminated news by going from place to place (Truzzi, 2000: 334). In fact, the peddlers were narrators in transit, telling stories that were distant in space and time, either of eastern origin or brought from their travels to the farthest flung villages of the Amazon. This region, the name of which is derived directly from the Amazon warrior women with only one breast, is extremely rich in fables and tales and constitutes an *exotic* universe in itself, "a misty and unknown place for almost every Brazilian" (Hatoum, 2004: 71). For this reason it has always attracted writers fascinated by its otherness.

The novels of the Lebanese diaspora tend to be postmodern texts and, as such, have the discursive and plural nature of narratives and are a reflection on the way fiction is experienced. Furthermore, these travel novels show the tension between geographical or cultural proximity and distance, creating a time that plays with remembrance and oblivion. It is through this tension that stories of different spaces gain greater importance, and encapsulate the "advantage of having as tradition something that is somewhere else" (Hatoum, 2007: 12). Distance diminishes the impact of the present, and also allows a more emotional relationship with a memory and a reality that may have never existed at an individual level. In this sense, our memories may be mingled with the memories of others. This is what happens to old Adam, the freed African slave, when he tries to remember his mother:

he recalled old events once again, sometimes losing himself, though he did not want to admit it, his mother was after all, like so many others, the boss's lover [...]; he did not even see the contradiction, how could he be the son of the master since he had arrived in the country as a boy, but does this invalidate his narrative? (Miguel, 2004: 203)

In the book *Relato de um certo oriente* [Tale of a Certain Orient] (1989) by Milton Hatoum we encounter the dreamlike atmosphere of a time constructed by the narrators, who remember what they know or suppose they know and imagine what they do not know. The narrators move swiftly between one world and another, making spaces shift between symbolic and real worlds.

In the sense that the narratives of other cultural universes provide a space which is an alternative to the geographical space where the characters are located, it is mainly the dialogic nature of literature that is stressed and transforms places in *topoi*, i.e., in sets of references and characteristics, as mentioned by Edward Said (1997) regarding the East. These narratives have the power to transform real and geographical space into a psychological space that goes beyond it. One example is the scene in *Relato* where the vision of a tree at early dawn in the Amazon forest, after a long trip and the fear of a possible ambush, transports the immigrant to a known imaginary entity, the symbol of supreme happiness for the Muslims, the Sidrah tree located in the West: "I saw an immense tree expanding its roots and top towards the clouds and the waters, and I felt comforted, imagining that it was the tree of the seventh heaven" (Hatoum, 2005: 73).

It is through literature that one may re-examine domains that are not exclusive to an individual, but also not exclusive to a people in imaginary crossed references: "Literature tells us that we do not belong to a single place and are from many places" (Hatoum, 2007: 12).

The narrative of these novels is often constructed by shared authorship, and it is possible to create the rhapsody model in reflections on fiction and reality. This extract of *Relato* provides a good example:

Living with my father led me to read the *Arabian Nights*, translated by Henning. Slow and careful reading of that book made our friendship closer; for a long time I believed what he told me, but then came to realize that there were certain allusions to that book, and episodes of his life were adulterated transcripts of some of the nights, it was as if the voice of the narrator would echo in the words of my friend. [...] What made me think of this was that the coincidence between certain episodes of the life of other people, which he would incorporate into his own life mixed with eastern texts. It was as if he were to make up a doubtful truth that belonged to him and the others. I was surprised at these coincidences. But after all, time ends up by blurring the differences between life and a book (Hatoum, 2004: 79-80).

Thus, portions of different memories, from either the Amazon or Arabia, are blended and give rise to a relativisation of *truth* and an acknowledgement of the impossibility of gaining access to the untouched source.

The creative energy that stimulated culture in these permanently mutating communities arose from indigenous, miscegenated elements, and from several migratory flows. That energy influences not only the development and re-adaptation of idioms, but also a literature where language and perspectives fluctuate when setting words and symbols that refer to a universe characterised by the flow between languages and cultures and also by the emergence, or rather the transformation resulting from the cultural mix and the composite culture being totally accepted and valued. In the construction of the Brazilian national identity, this path has not always been valued, contrary to what had happened when Lebanon came to be.

The shape of nationality and national identity had an important place in Brazil's cultural production since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This production includes literature, with its complex solutions, and the historical-sociological essayist's discourse which also has its contradictions. The syllabuses and educational books which emphasise the creation of a national identity and the way the nation's heroes are treated demonstrate the importance of this subject.

In addition to the geographical unit constructed by the Portuguese conquerors in different regions of the coastal area at different moments and by the pioneers who took Portuguese colonial power to the inland regions, there is a diverse, composite, mixed-race population. In the search for the origins of the Brazilian people, indigenous matters, taken as ethnographic studies, were part of both literature and informative

books on the history of Brazil. Books dedicated little attention to the black people dominated by the coloniser as an object of ethnography or anthropology, and literature did not treat them as heroes as it did the indigenous peoples. In the Brazilian context of the 1800s, Brazil was seen as a mixed race, hybrid nation and for this very reason degenerate. The impressions left by different travellers and naturalists in their stories, which were welcomed and disseminated among Brazil's own intellectuals, contrasted the exuberance of nature with the insignificance of humankind. The absence of a "pure race" and the existence of miscegenation produced a people composed of sub-races which would be responsible for the country's underdevelopment. During this period, a way of thinking was created which was influenced by European theoretical models – positivism, evolutionism and social Darwinism – giving scientific prestige to the voice of the common people. One example of this in literature is *O cortiço* [The Slum] (1890) by Aluísio Azevedo who, influenced by the novel *L'Assommoir* by Emile Zola, was in perfect harmony with the naturalist doctrine of the time. Both works are based on the theoretical principle of the degradation caused by the mixture of races.

It was only from the time of Brazilian modernism that national culture was rethought and represented in terms of the appreciation of the mixed-race heritage (the Afro-Amerindian legacy), as clearly shown in the works of De Cavalcanti in which the figure of the *mulatto* assumes special relevance.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most representative works of Brazilian literature, which seeks to embrace the link of the past with the future while it simultaneously refuses the unitary and harmonious totality of the modernist novel is *Macunaíma* (1928) by Mário de Andrade. In this work we have a protagonist, a child of Amerindian parents who, for that reason, is viewed as black and then undergoes a whitening metamorphosis along with various other surrealist transformations which take place according to the circumstances.

In this sense, Milton Hatoum's approximation of Lebanon to Brazil and Stefania Techima's comparison of *Relato* and *Macunaíma* can be understood in so far that in them we find a rhapsodic form and a union of fragments from different sources. These elements may be differentiated individually, but also go through a process of metamorphosis due to their contact with one another.

This proliferation of perspectives, of narrators and narratives from different cultures and the consequent transformations, goes hand in hand

<sup>6</sup> This painter, who was an exponent of Brazilian painting, was one of the organisers of the *Semana de Arte Moderna* (Week of Modern Art) of 1922 in the city of São Paulo.

in the novels of Lebanese diaspora with a language that produces a fusion of idioms.

Already in the title, the novel *Nur na Escuridão* by Salim Miguel juxtaposes Arabic and Portuguese, reproducing the gibberish of idioms experienced in the different communities:

that mix of German, Arabic, Portuguese, worked. But the truth is that Arabic was the minority, just a pinch. Children would come and say *mutter* to ask, give me a litre of *milch* and three *brot*; a little later an adult would come in and add to the conversation a *kifak*, instead of a how are you doing? (Miguel, 2004: 98)

Lebanese immigrants would speak Arabic, the language of the country they came from, while their children would speak Portuguese, the language of the country they were born in. Parents would not teach them Arabic, wishing to make it easier for them to integrate. In an interview, Milton Hatoum mentions the curious fact that for a long time he thought that Arabic was a language for adults and Portuguese was one for children.

The different levels of inclusivity, which give us a hint of what are usually hidden purposes in Brazilian society, are also related to language. Lebanese immigrants, as part of the larger group of immigrants, suffer the exclusion of being called “turco” or “gringo”. In fact, Lebanese people who were fleeing from the Turkish-Ottoman oppression which only ended in 1920 (Treaty of Sèvres) arrived in Brazil with Turkish passports, and ironically became known as *turcos* [Turks]. The Arab, Nacib, a character from the novel by Jorge Amado, *Gabriela, Cravo e Canela*, which was adapted for television and became the first success of the soap opera phenomenon in Portugal, was very annoyed when he was called “turco”.

But the name *gringo* (meaning “foreigner” in general in Brazil), which was inexplicable to the Lebanese, was yet another stigma that would place them in the margins of a margin. Integration was not always easy, even in heterogeneous and multicultural communities, contrary to the official images portraying this reality: the stamp celebrating the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lebanese immigration to Brazil, issued in 2005, bears an intentional, symbolic representation of a warm welcome, with images of a cedar and an ipê amarelo [*tabebuia alba*], typical trees of the flora of the two countries, and the two flags entwining in the wind, with the Lebanese flag slightly overlapping.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The image of the stamp can be viewed at <<http://www.girafamania.com.br/asiatico/libano.html>>.

Contrasting with the harmony suggested by the stamp, the novel *Nur na Escuridão* tells of an episode of rejection, when the Miguel family is forced to move from the community where it had an auspicious future because of a boycott to its trade store, encouraged by the German local priest:

they started calling Dad turco and gringo. They unremembered they were called galegos. The boycott started. The grief was even greater, followed by disillusionment when he learned about the priest’s sermons at Sunday mass, and even at the novenas. The customers disappeared, intimidated, the priest criticized them for choosing the gringo store instead of those of their compatriots. And yes, for the first time Dad became aware of the term, he was called by that name (Miguel, 2004: 99).

The notion of the foreigner, which would be superfluous in this family, is confronted by an otherness conceived as a state of inferiority related to the religious arena and to a notion of national purity which seeks to protect itself from the threats from the east at all cost, as with this first group of German colonisers in Santa Catarina: “Of the inhabitants of the city, if not all, at least 90% were of German origin. Very few spoke Portuguese. It was a devoted, sincere people who were full of faith and of a blind obedience to their religious leader” (Miguel 2004: 97). Ironically, the father had helped financially and the uncle had worked on the construction of the church that was the community’s dream, and from which they were now excluded by the names “foreigner”, “Turk” and *gringo*.

These narratives often speak from the marginal positions felt by immigrants. The most paradigmatic situation is the one in the second novel by Milton Hatoum, *Dois Irmãos* [*Two Brothers*] (2000). Here the narrator tries to find out, from the facts he had witnessed or stories he had heard from his room at the end of the garden, which of the two sons of the house is his father. Thus, being on the threshold of the house and of the family, the situation reproduces the circumstances of the immigrant, who is simultaneously *in* and *out*.

The descendants of the first Lebanese immigrants, who presently number over six million in Brazil, have brought a literature that is doubly valuable in contemporary literature written in Portuguese: the value of original and robust literature, which transcends the classifications of “eastern” and “western” types of writing by combining several traditions from the separation and intersection of boundaries, and from linguistic and narrative pluralism; and the value of texts that are testimonies of individual and collective experiences of migrations and journeys, in which the capacity for renewal and the quest for internal consistency is always present along the experienced distance and the attempt to compose the “melody of a sequestered song”

(Hatoum, 2005: 166). It is in this aspect that the preservation of memory proves to be essential, though it recognises what is discontinuous and somehow impossible to achieve and even illusory in this process, but which creates aesthetic sublimation and the creation of narratives: "We have to work with what we have, what we have left [...] it is necessary to weave the web of patience, with pertinent monotony, in search of an illusory efficiency, to slowly join the threads – harmoniously if possible" (Miguel, 2004: 166).

It is this characteristic which allows us to say that the literature of the Lebanese diaspora has a connection with the Brazilian literary tradition in the same way of Machado de Assis, in so far as reflection on the paradoxical nature of the mechanisms of memory assumes an essential role.<sup>8</sup> Similarly to what happens in some of this Brazilian author's novels, Lebanese stories are also incomplete and discontinuous narratives in which events do not follow a calendar logic, but work more with images, following real movements of awareness.

Aesthetic work on memory is based either on the appreciation of distance or the recognition of a rupture, as a result of which literary creation is placed in the area between the approximation and distancing of cultural heritage. Distance and rupture to which, in the Brazilian literature of the Lebanese diaspora, is added the "sandy pain of the desert", the expression used by Raduan Nassar in *Lavoura Arcaica* [Archaic Farming] (2006: 192).

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<sup>8</sup> *Dom Casmurro* (1899) by Machado de Assis may be the novel in which memory plays the most crucial role in the reinvention of history: a jealous husband who presents his version of the alleged adultery of his wife with his best friend by narrating in the first person and at some distance in time. Another of the author's novels, *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881) is a fantastic narrative in which Brás Cubas reinvents his story from a memory liberated by death and not so much by life, but as a product of literary creation.

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