THE USES OF A CERTAIN ORIENT: ON WAÏL HASSAN'S *ARAB BRAZIL: FICTIONS OF TERNARY ORIENTALISM*

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ALI KULEZ

BOSTON COLLEGE

In Arab Brazil: Fictions of Ternary Orientalism, Waïl Hassan addresses a question that has perplexed scholars of postcolonial studies since Edward Said's momentous inauguration of the field: what happens to Orientalism when it is transplanted to other parts of the world, regions where its three principal modalities—an academic field of study, a style of thought, and an apparatus of domination—are mostly inoperative? Through an analysis of Brazilian literary and visual culture from the 1920s to the present, Arab Brazil formulates an answer of elegant simplicity: unlike the binary mode of thinking in British, French, and US American Orientalisms (e.g. self/Other, West/East), which Hassan dubs "colonial" for convenience, Orientalism in Brazil exhibits a ternary, or triangular, structure: for Brazilian authors wielding its tropes, Orientalism becomes a means of negotiating not only the nation's historical, demographic, and cultural ties with the East, but also its geopolitical position vis-à-vis the Global North, that is, Europe and the United States. Consequently, Brazilian Orientalism achieves effects uncommon in its colonial formulation. At times, it indeed denigrates Islam and the so-called turcos (a Latin American misnomer for Arab immigrants), yet at others it may praise "Oriental" wisdom, spirituality, and tolerance; imbue Orientalist tropes such as belly-dancing with feminist agenda; or use the supposedly tradition-bound East as a foil for the industrializing nation. Hassan reveals how this ambiguous discourse reveals fissures within the ideology of mistura (privileged in the book over more racially-determined terms Gilberto Freyre used to describe and celebrate Brazil's cultural amalgamation), which became official ideology during the Estado Novo years and the last dictatorship, only to be questioned after the transition to democracy in 1984.

With its ambitious scope and attentive readings, *Arab Brazil* makes a solid intervention in scholarship examining the representation of "Oriental" cultures and peoples in Latin America. This interdisciplinary field emerged thanks to critical collections edited by Ignácio López-Calvo

(2007, 2009, 2012) and Erik Camayd-Freixas (2013), which played a key role in gathering together scholars from diverse disciplines, institutions, and parts of the world. López-Calvo also authored pioneering monographs on the references to Chinese and Japanese cultures, as well as art, fiction, and performance by authors of Asian descent, in Peru, Mexico, and Brazil. Ana Paulina Lee (2018) analyzed the Chinese exclusion as a crucial process of Brazilian nation-building and, more recently, Rosario Hubert (2023) studied Latin American engagements with China at the intersections of the literary market, cultural diplomacy, and commerce. On the literary representation of Middle Eastern peoples and cultures, Christina Civantos (2006) and Axel Gasquet (2020) provided two valuable studies of the Argentine case. Before Hassan's book, we lacked a monograph that systematically explored the literary and filmic representations of Middle Eastern peoples and cultures in Brazil, even though there existed a corpus of articles and books on the history of Arab immigration to Brazil.

Hassan's comprehensive study is organized into 11 chapters, which chronologically trace Brazilian Orientalism through case studies. It begins by analyzing the contrasting uses of "sabedoria oriental" in the works of Júlio César de Mello e Souza (who used the pseudonym Malba Tahan) and Humberto Campos, non-Arab authors active in the 1920s and 30s. Whereas Mello e Souza's tales of mathematical puzzles emphasize the contributions of Arab Islamic civilization during the medieval period, Campos's satire paradoxically juxtaposes this aura of ancient wisdom with contemporary stereotypes against the *turcos*, reflecting the rise of xenophobic and anti-immigrant attitudes during the period. The second chapter examines how the first Arab-Brazilian novelists Cecílio Carneiro and Permínio Asfora sought to counter these stereotypes in the 1940s. They did this by foregrounding the contributions of immigrants to agriculture, to the social order, and, most importantly, to *mistura*; yet whereas Carneiro appeals to the readers' racial and ethnic bias (his hard-working protagonist is lighter skinned than his siblings and distinguished from the other "lazy" and "dirty" immigrants), Asfora acutely signals class privilege as a key obstacle before progress. The third chapter is dedicated to the characters of Arab descent in Jorge Amado's oeuvre from the late 1950s to his last novel *A descoberta da América pelos turcos* (1994), reading this humorous representation in connection with the author's call for further studies of non-Western cultures with direct ties to Brazil (e.g. that of Syria, Lebanon, West African nations), as well as his advocacy of *mistura* as a cultural and political ideal.

Arab Brazil continues with chapters on Raduan Nassar and Milton Hatoum, second-generation Lebanese-Brazilian authors whose fiction stages the intergenerational conflicts within

immigrant communities. The fourth chapter examines Nassar's celebrated novel *Lavoura arcaica* (1975), often read as a political allegory of the 1964-85 dictatorship. Using immigration as his point of entry, Hassan demonstrates how the novel posits isolation as the very antithesis of *mistura*, staging the dangers of protectionist reflexes in diasporic communities. The fifth chapter turns to Hatoum's *Relato de um certo Oriente* (1989), exploring how the Manaus-born author of Lebanese descent creates "dilution plots" that de-essentialize the Middle East while reaffirming the singularity of Brazilian identity; as in the novels of Nassar, resistance to *mistura* here brings the demise of immigrant families.

Moving away from the theme of immigration, the next three chapters look at literary and cultural works with a feminist agenda. The sixth chapter offers a multimedial reading of Ana Miranda's *Amrik* (1997), a novel with a belly-dancer of Lebanese descent as the protagonist. Focusing on both the text and the zoomorphic illustrations by the author, Hassan carefully dissects the contradictory nature of the novel, which caters to the masculinist gaze but presents a feminist tale of self-liberation, as it deals in tropes of colonial Orientalism tropes but defies certain Arab stereotypes. The seventh chapter explores the paradoxical representation of Morocco in the popular TV series *O Clone* (2001), which uses the North African country as a foil: rendered as a site of tradition outside modernity and as a locus of spirituality long lost in Brazil, Morocco helps construct the latter as a developed nation with leading scientists and technology. Hassan's analysis shows how the telenovela, which set out to combat Islamophobia in the wake of the September 11th attacks, nonetheless reproduces the commonplaces of French and British Orientalism. The eighth chapter focuses on Nélida Piñon's *Vozes de deserto* (2005), commenting how this feminist rewrite of *A Thousand and One Nights* rehashes colonial tropes such as patriarchal despotism and masculinist sexual violence. Hassan details how Piñon hollows out the protagonist Scheherazade and misrepresents the Islamic tradition.

The next two chapters focus on novels that engage with earlier periods of Arab history. The ninth chapter examines Alberto Mussa's *O enigma de Qaf* (2004), analyzing how the author of Lebanese and Indigenous descent gathers, among others, pre-Islamic and Tupi cosmogonies to articulate a broader, more inclusive version of *mistura*. Hassan argues that identity here becomes a self-translational process, a devouring of the Other, and an active myth-making that paradoxically achieves authenticity through forgery. The tenth chapter explores the uses of *al-Andalus* (Muslim Spain) in two novels from the mid-2010s: Gilberto Abrão's *O escriba de Granada* (2014) and João Alminio's *Enigmas da primavera* (2015). Hassan scrupulously unveils the self-

contradictory ideologies at work in both novels. While Abrão's novel promotes the much-idealized tolerance of Muslim Iberia as an antidote to xenophobia in Brazil, it is ridden with errors in its representation of Islam and the historical period. Almino's novel, on the other hand, engages with Muslim Spain in the context of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. Despite the dialectical effort to portray the connectedness of idealism and radicalism in the Arab world, the novel begins with an epigraph from Claude Levi-Strauss's *Tristes tropiques*, where the French anthropologist makes a reductionist and transhistorical generalization about Islam. Finally, the eleventh chapter analyzes in detail the Brazilian soap opera *Órfãos da terra*'s (2019) Islamophobe refusal of xenophobia. Intended as a progressive espousal of *mistura* in the wake of Jair Bolsonaro's divisive politics, the series nonetheless cannot escape the legacy of colonial Orientalism, representing Islam as an inherently violent religion monstrously stuck between tradition and modernity. Pertinently, Hassan shows how the telenovela carefully erases Palestine, despite the promising connection it establishes between the exappropriation of refugees and Indigenous peoples.

Arab Brazil concludes with a reflection on its own genealogy as a book "that was not supposed to be written" since, until very recently, modern Arabic literature was studied only in relation to English, French, and US American literatures (299). The author here echoes the position of author Jorge Amado, who repeatedly criticized the provinciality and coloniality of knowledge in Brazil and called for a renewed engagement with cultures of the Global South: "Why should we know everything about France and nothing about Syria or Lebanon? Why be so cultured when it comes to Italy yet ignorant about Egypt and the new African nations to which we have blood ties?" (qtd. in Hassan 297). As *Arab Brazil* makes clear, however, such South-South contact is always already mediated by the North and its colonial legacy. What we need, then, are attentive analyses like Hassan's that explore the ways in which South-South encounters at once critique, refract, and reproduce the colonial matrix.