

## Semite Groups in Amazonian Literature

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Since the opening of its ports to friendly nations, the Amazon region has received a myriad of foreign groups who, attracted by promises of religious freedom and economic gains, especially during the *Belle Époque*, contributed to the social, cultural, and economic formation of the region.

Literature about the Amazon region attests to the presence of foreigners, echoing ‘types’ in their diversity. In the novel *Certos caminhos do mundo* (1937) [Certain Paths of the World], Abguar Bastos speaks of characters who help to outline aspects of a region: "Out of types, characters are born and will appear as incidents of certain lives or as an environmental totality" (Bastos, 1937, p. 6. Our translation). These types will appear in Amazonian narratives either as protagonists or as decorative figures to serve the environmental totality, as seen in the novel *Terra de Icamiaba* (1934) [Land of Icamiaba], by Abguar Bastos:

From dawn onwards, the workers' traffic begins. Turkish street vendors, with tick tock on the wrist and boxes on their backs, carry textiles and trinkets. Portuguese fishmongers, with trays, and national fishmongers, with handcarts, offer the product of sea and lake fishing to customers. Italian shoemakers carry *paús* on their shoulders; at the ends are short hangers, where shoes, boots, slippers, sandals, and clogs hang. Shoeshiners, also Italian, on street corners, carry their service boxes slung over their shoulders. Spanish farmers push carts with vegetables and fruits. Obese tinsmiths shake their *telécos*. Itinerant Japanese vendors go from house to house showing toys, curtains, fans with pheasant prints, belts with inscriptions, and walking sticks from Tokyo schools. Somber Russians buy gold, silver, and precious stones. French and Belgian people offer ready-made clothes, of linen or silk, carpets, bedspreads, towels. Chinese men open the doors of taverns and iron clothes for men. Barbadian stonecutters work on the tram lines and slender Barbadian women serve as nannies or go to the markets with baskets in their arms and wide-brimmed hats on their heads (Bastos, 1934, pp. 23-24. Our translation).

The reference to the plurality of cultures – regarding the list of incomer features or ‘types’ as referred by the narrator to describe the space –, will find three other non-national representatives: a Moroccan Jew, an Arab, and a Dutchman, figures who will prove to be antagonistic to the character Bepe. Samuel Benchimol, in *Amazônia*:

*formação social e cultural* [Amazonia: social and cultural formation], attests to the multidiversity of the peoples who composed the Amazon:

Living and doing in the Equatorial and Tropical Amazon was initially a predominantly indigenous process. To these values and cultures, new institutions, instruments, techniques, incentives, and motivations transplanted by its colonizers and settlers were incorporated, through adaptation, assimilation, competition, and diffusion. Among them: Portuguese, Spaniards, particularly Europeans, with some African, Semite, and Asian contributions, in addition to new values brought here by migrants from the Northeast and other regions of Brazil (Benchimol, 2009, p. 17. Our translation).

Novelists like Bastos and several others have represented, in the literary field, only the foreign types who were attracted to the region by the rubber trade. Márcio Souza (2019, p. 188. Our translation), in *História da Amazônia: do período pré-colombiano aos desafios do século XXI* [History of the Amazon: from the pre-Columbian period to the challenges of the 21st century], reinforces the conception of the Amazon as a multicultural melting pot, welcoming “diverse (...) labor recruited for rubber tapping: in addition to Brazilians from the Northeast, young foreigners, North Americans, Europeans, and Asians came in search of wealth”. These ascertainments lead us to ponder over who these Semite types represented in Amazonian Literature are. In this article, we present some themes collected from literary texts by various authors who deal with the Amazon issue. We begin with those who spoke about the Syrian-Lebanese presence and then about the Jewish-Moroccan presence.

In respect to the first group, we highlight three themes: a) Intercultural relations with the new land and its people; b) Nostalgia for the tradition and geography of their territory of origin; and c) Courtship. Regarding the second group, the Moroccan Jews, we present three other themes: a) The merchants; b) The monsters (physical and/or moral); c) The encounter between indigenous people and Jews and friendship with other semite groups.

Semite groups, formed by Moroccan and Syrian-Lebanese Jews, stood out in the region's trade, acting as peddlers and later as established merchants both in inland cities and capitals, carrying out export and import activities in the industries of the North.

Similar, in some respects, to what prompted the arrival of Moroccan Jews of Sephardic origin to the Amazon, the history of the Syrian-Lebanese, reterritorialized in the lands of Northern Brazil, reveals that the emigrants sought to escape wars, poverty in

their territories of origin and aspired to better living conditions. The Jews also had to deal with diseases, extreme penury, and the antisemitism prevalent in Morocco, a place where their presence was tolerated for more than three centuries. In the Amazon, this Semite group found solace from the tragedies and fears from which they had fled. Samuel Benchimol classifies Jews and Syrian-Lebanese (Maronites and Muslims) as cousins, attesting to affective and respectful ties between them: “The relationships of the Jews with their Syrian-Lebanese ‘cousins’ in the Amazon were always cordial and, even competing for the same market of street vending, they were friends and allies, as both faced the prejudice of the ruling oligarchy in Europe. Jews and Syrian-Lebanese were generally welcomed in the Amazon despite prejudice against foreigners, despite the assumption of possible conflicts triggered by trade relations and in dealing with other migrants. We should not leave behind, of course, some episodes of antisemitism that reached some Jewish groups in the Amazon, encouraged by religious or economic pretexts.

Intercultural relations in the new land and with its people are evoked in literary texts such as *Vila Rica das Queimadas* [Vila Rica of Fires], by Paulo Jacob (1976), *E Deus chorou sobre o rio* [And God cried over the river], by Elizabeth Azize (2019), *Relato de um certo Oriente* (2008) [Story of a certain Orient], by Milton Hatoum, for example.

In Azize's novel, the narrator contextualizes the scene by referencing other foreign groups in the Amazon: “Arabs and Jews, brothers from the same side of the sun, though with different faiths and languages each one more difficult than the last, here, practiced their skills, transposing to the tropical climate of the jungle the atavism of doing business and skillfully performing profitable trades” (Azize, 2019, p. 27. Our translation). In *Vila Rica das Queimadas*, Jamil, nicknamed the Turk – a popular way used by local people to refer to Arab people – acts cordially with those who cursed his customs and his trade, spreading laughter and joy: “while teased by others, the Turk in the most joyful mood. No swear words, no offensive language. Calm conversations in sales making. People joking. Jamil smiling joyfully, despite the slanderers” (Jacob, 1976, p.16. Our translation).

The cordial interactions with the people of the land turns into a recurring theme in many narratives. Local culture and nature enchant many foreign characters, captivated by

the Amazonian imagery and the medicinal uses of local plants. This is the case of Emilie, of Lebanese origin, a character in Milton Hatoum's "*Relato de um certo oriente*”:

Emilie marveled at the description of the creeper that frees from envy, of the mottled leaves of a taro plant that reproduces a man's fortune, of the recipes of healers who see in certain forest leaves the enigma of the most fearsome diseases, with the blood-colored infusions recommended to alleviate thirty-six pains of the human body. [...] Anastácia spoke for hours on end, always gesturing, trying to imitate with her fingers, with her hands, with her body, the movement of an animal, the pounce of a feline, the shape of a fish in the air searching for food, the delicate flight of a bird. [...] visions of a mysterious world (Hatoum, 2008, p. 81. Our translation).

The enchantment caused by the culture and nature of the new place of territorialization did not erase memories or break bonds with the land of origin. Nostalgia for the tradition and the geography of the homeland is another recurrent theme in narratives that tell stories of immigrants in the Amazon, as seen, for example, in the short story *O cedro do Líbano* [The cedar of Lebanon], by Alberto Rangel *Sombras n'água* [Shadows n' water] from 1913, in novels by Milton Hatoum *Dois irmãos* and *Relato de um certo Oriente* [Two Brothers and Story of a Certain Orient], and in the poem *Retrato de mãe* [Portrait of a Mother] by Jorge Tufic (2012).

In Alberto Rangel's short story, Jacob, the Syrian, settled in Amazonian lands, becoming a farmer after years working as a river trader. One day, feeling melancholic about his homeland, he makes for it in search of appeasing his longing. He decided to transplant a sampling of the cedar of Lebanon to the tropical territory that welcomed him: “(...) where the plant from the land of the Patriarchs, once transferred, would serve as a link between the emigrant and the Fatherland (...)” (Rangel, 1913, p. 296. Our translation).

The longing for homeland can be invoked in the feeling of loss for one's mother, a Lebanese immigrant. This is what the lyrical voice in the poem, *Retrato de mãe* by Tufic evokes: "Let the wheat from Lebanon come, the apple / of which you spoke so much; let the breeze come / to weave this Mediterranean longing / that comes from you when I rejoice for you" (Tufic quoted by Rangel 2012, p. 7. Our translation). It is the geography of the homeland, its climate and its fruits that cradle the painful longing of the son. The homeland needs to be sung, remembered, in order to evoke the maternal presence, as in a metonymic procedure.

Recollecting images in a foreign land leads the melancholic immigrant to revisit the place of his childhood. Two geographies bring forth affections in Zana, a character in *Dois irmãos*, by Hatoum:

ZANA HAD TO LEAVE EVERYTHING: the port district in Manaus, the sloping street shaded by centuries-old mango trees, the place that was almost as vital to her as the Byblos of her childhood: the small city in Lebanon that she recalled in loud voice, wandering through the dusty rooms until she got lost in the backyard, where the canopy of the old rubber tree shaded the palm trees and the orchard cultivated for more than half a century” (Hatoum, 2006, p. 9. Our translation).

Supported by the vegetal beings she cultivated for over fifty years, Zana finds solace in the local nature. The memories of her childhood have not faded. They are revisited in Zana’s new home, soon to be recovered by new images. The nature that evokes absence and longing also evokes consolation.

Comfort is sometimes found in female arms. In the Amazonian context, Samuel Benchimol refers to the migrant contribution to the social and cultural formation of the Amazon, which added to the original indigenous population: “Portuguese, Spanish, Italians, blacks, Jews, Syrian-Lebanese, Northeasterners and Southerners generated, in this process of miscegenation, an enormous portion of the population [...]: an endless variety of ethnicities crossing, which settled here” (Benchimol, 2009, p. 117. Our translation).

Jamil from *Vila Rica das Queimadas*, by Paulo Jacob (1976), Marmud from *E Deus chorou sobre o rio*, by Elizabeth Azize (2019) and Yaqub from *Dois irmãos* (2006) by Milton Hatoum (2000), for example, embody the womanizing type. Local ladies’ heart seducers. For women unable to pay for goods they usually sold along the Amazonian rivers, Jamil and Marmud would unashamedly suggest: “*Baga com bariquita num tem bariquita?* And they did so” (Azize, 2019, p. 39); or “*Não tem bariquita, então paga com a bariquita*” (Jacob, 1976, p. 53)<sup>1</sup>.

Yaqub, one of the twins in Milton Hatoum's *Dois irmãos*, is an attractive flirtatious guy. His mother and the other women noticed this distinctive trait of the young man's character in contrast to the circumspect behavior of his twin brother Omar. Yaqub is

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<sup>1</sup> Bariquita refers to the woman’s sexual organ, so “*baga com bariquita*” meant a sexual intercourse would work as much as money.

compared to the boto (river dolphin) which transforms into a man and its alluring power. The boto is a seductive figure in the Amazonian imagination: “At home, Zana was the first to notice her son’s inclination towards flirtation. Domingas was also charmed by that look. She would say: ‘That twin has the eyes of a boto; if you let him, he’ll take everyone to the bottom of the river’” (Hatoum, 2006, p. 24. Our translation).

Regarding the group of Moroccan Jews, it is necessary to consider the tragic and barbaric way Jews have been treated throughout history, with negative repercussions worldwide including in the Amazon. According to Rocha (2017), in *Shakespearean Cultures: Mimetic Theory and the Challenges of Mimesis in Non-Hegemonic Circumstances*,

the Latin American social formation was based on the systematic exploitation of a significant portion of the people that I call "the other other." This refers to the enslaved Black person, treated as if they were a stubborn Caliban. The first thing taken from them was their dignity, through the denial of the most basic rights. Finally, they were attributed an ethnically "scientifically" demonstrated inferiority. The image of an "other other" was forged, one that is sought to be made "invisible," because looking at them directly would lead to the discovery of an undesirable mimetic double (Rocha, 2017, p. 320. Our translation).

Historically relegated to the category of enemies of humanity in many eras and cultures, Jews have been barbarously represented in literature, culture, and the arts in general. In such portrayals, they have often been stereotyped, which, according to Rocha's concept, allows them to be placed in the category of "other other," that is, as inferior subjects from an ethnic, religious, and cultural perspective.

Thus, likewise Black groups, Indigenous people and other ethnic and social minorities, Jewish were silenced or became caricatured figures, enduring a process of "social invisibility" or "weak visibility." The indifference to "other others" is a hallmark of "weak visibility [which] is the precise way of not seeing what is before one's eyes: it is the ignorance that fuels victimizing contempt in relation to the 'other other'" (Rocha, 2017, p. 335. Our translation).

Jewish merchants were often portrayed stereotypically. Salomão Farah, from Paulo Jacob's *Um pedaço de lua caía na mata* (1990) [A piece of moon would fall over the woods], Jacob Benathar, from Leão Pacífico Esaguy's *Enxuga as lágrimas e segue o caminho que te determinaste* (1999) [Dry your tears and follow the path you have chosen

for yourself], and Bensabá, from Dalcídio Jurandir's *Ribanceira* (2020) [Shore], are all labeled as greedy merchants. Any quarrel or disagreement of a Jewish with a local resident would bring up the stigmatized image of the Jewish heritage and raise accusations of corruption and theft, leading the accused one to reflect on their place of origin and the freedom they had achieved in their new land, as explored in Paulo Jacob's *Um pedaço de lua caía na mata*.

Good living in Parintins. The peace of Adonai found so far away. [...] Here, salvation, freedom to live. Eager to experience the new language. People laughing at Solomon's nonsense. The *regatão* going up, down, conquering rivers. Giving up eating mutton, goat, foods of their native land. Fish for lunch, fish for dinner. Speeding along the river with the strength of the oar. *Bejucica*, tapioca, cassava, yam, sweet potato, breadfruit, breakfast. Getting used to the new way of life. Solomon loved, cried his longing" (Jacob, 1990, p. 25. Our translation).

The economic growth experienced by the Jewish merchants brought them to prominence in society, earning them hatred, but also disinterested or self-serving friendships. Jacob Benathar, from *Enxuga as lágrimas e segue o caminho que te determinaste* by Esaguy, is personified as a wealthy merchant: "Jacob Benathar made a lot of money trading on the Amazonian rivers. He bought rubber, Brazil nuts, wild hides and other local goods to sell to exporters in Manaus" (Esaguy, 1999, p. 21. Our translation).

Like Solomon in Paulo Jacob's novel, the Jewish man Bensabá, from *Ribanceira*, in Dalcídio Jurandir's work, is a friend of the town's priest, contributing to the local church activities. The priest and the local mayor pass by old Bensabá's house and, greeting him joyfully, the clergyman declares that he is praying for an increase in the price of rubber, whose trade was in sharp decline, leaving the merchant in melancholic sadness. Bensabá invites them for coffee, agreeing to the priest's subsequent proposal:

As they pass by, Bensabá, the merchant – *wait for the coffee!* – drags himself from his rocking chair to the door.

- *One of these days I'll play a game of checkers with you, and look, I'm already praying for the prices of your rubber [...]*

- *Bi-liv mi! Bi-liv mi!* (Jurandir, 2020, p. 338. Our translation).

The relationships involving Jewish merchants were not always friendly in the Amazonian region. Although literature portrays Jewish characters as well-liked by

society, the smallest disagreement was enough to bring forth old religious and cultural accusations of ‘murderer’ and ‘usurious’. Episodes of pillaging and looting of commercial establishments were known in inland cities in the Amazon (Benchimol, 2009).

In some narratives, the representation of Jews is clearly antisemite, being portrayed as moral and /or physical monsters, as seen, for example, in the short story “O baile do judeu”, [The Jew's Ball], by Inglês de Sousa, published in *Contos Amazônicos* [Amazonian Tales], in 1893.

Jeffrey Cohen in “*A cultura dos monstros: sete teses*” (2000), [The Culture of Monsters: Seven Theses] (2000), published in “*Pedagogia dos monstros*” [Pedagogy of Monsters], proposes "understanding cultures through the monsters they generate" (Cohen, 2000, p. 26. Our translation). The Amazon also spawned its monsters. In Sousa's narrative, two monsters emerge: the boto – a creature that straddles the line between human and inhuman – and the Jew:

Well, one day, the Jew decided to throw a ball and dared to invite the locals [...] There they were, in the heart of the *judiaria*, for that is what one might call the house of a wicked Jew [...] everyone was there, feigning a desperate curiosity to know if, in fact, the Jew worshipped a horse's head (Souza, 2004, p. 103. Our translation).

Under accusations of being audacious, wicked, and having devilish connections, the Jew, due to the age-old wickedness placed upon him, supports the emergence of another monstrous figure. According to Miranda, Machado, and Conde (2024, p. 161),

the traces of antisemitism [...] make it possible to perceive how, in different spaces and times, the image of the Jew has been overlaid with negative social and cultural attributes that have been imputed to them as a result of their ethnic and religious origin, which are used as justification to accuse them of any and all disorder that arises in the environments they are inserted (Our translation).

Not even children have been spared from the aggression of antisemite acts. In *Uma pequena mancha de sol* (1951) [A small spot of sun], by Sultana Levy Rosenblatt, the narrator describes scenes of moral and physical cruelty against children: the blame that falls on them is Judaism, an ancestral sin, so a stone thrown to the forehead of a frightened boy, that leaves his clothes all bloody reveals, in fact, the stone in the hand of the real monster.

Other recurring themes in Amazonian literature is the encounter between Jews and indigenous people; and their friendship with other Semite groups;

In *Na sombra do mundo perdido* (2018) [In the shadow of the lost world], by Ilko Minev, the encounter of the indigenous chief Genival with Alice Melul is narrated. She had lost her baby and, knowing this, the indigenous man goes to her:

Without saying a single word, the Indian handed Alice the small bundle he held in his arms, wrapped in a rather worn-out t-shirt. Completely bewildered, she observed its contents: a tiny being that moved and murmured softly; a minuscule newborn baby with its face marked by bites from mosquitoes, ants, and other insects (Minev, 2018, p.43. Our translation).

In the interior of Roraima, within the Raposa Serra do Sol reserve, Alice, Genival, and the small baby meet, evoking affective bonds and intercultural relationships. To preserve the life of his grandson, since the other twin brother remained with their mother in the village, the indigenous man from Macuxi people, entrusts to the Jewish woman, the child who will be named Benjamin and raised with the recognition of his two ancestral roots: Jewish and indigenous:

"Your little one died, Mrs. Alice, and your house is gloomy. There's not even a cry to suck a breast, nothing. I brought this little one for you and my niece, Araci, who is full of milk. The little one is yours! Take care of him; he's weak and tiny. [...] The child began to whimper. Alice unwrapped him from her shirt and examined the small being with sting marks all over his body. His eyes, of undefined color, could not yet see. When she held him, the little one felt Alice's warmth and calmed down." It seemed as if some strange force had brought the two bodies together, and I noticed that Alice was trembling uncontrollably" (Minev, 2018, p. 43. Our translation).

This convergence of affection and respect for cultural diversity is not the only revelation of the contact between indigenous people and Jews. In *Cenas da vida minúscula* (1991) [Scenes from tiny life]; in *A Majestade do Xingu* (2009) [The Majesty of the Xingu]; and in *A estranha nação de Rafael Mendes* (1983) [Rafael Mendes' strange nation], by Moacyr Scliar, there are references to the lost tribes of Israel and their association with the indigenous peoples of the New World. In *Cenas da vida minúscula*, everything begins with King Solomon and his order to find an Amazona<sup>2</sup>. Only one

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<sup>2</sup> It refers to a female warrior (from Greek myth), a woman who rides a horse.

descendant of the king manages to fulfill his father's desire in the 16th century, finding the Amazona and forming a group of young indigenous Jews in the Amazon. The myth underpinning the novel is rooted in the biblical-literary tradition concerning the sending of ships by Hiram to the territories of Ophir, Parvaim, and Tarshish, by order of King Solomon, according to Melahim (1 Kings) 9:27-28, as discussed in the study *A herança de Salomão na Amazônia em Cenas da vida minúscula, de Moacyr Scliar* [Solomon's Legacy in the Amazon in Scenes from Cenas da vida minúscula by Moacyr Scliar] (2024), by Alessandra Conde. Some accept the Amazonian geography as the location of Ophir, although Africa and India have also been considered as possible locations for the biblical Ophir.

According to Reuven Faingold (1997, p. 22), in *Amazônia judaica: história, lendas e mitos* [Jewish Amazon: history, legends and myths], the 19th-century ethnologist Dom Henrique Onffroy de Thoron has contributed with etymological studies that prove the toponyms Ofir, Társhish, and Parvaim refer to the names of the Japurá River (Ofir), the region of the Upper Amazon abundant in gold (Tarshish-Társis), and the names of the Paru and Apu-Paru rivers: “The two rivers named Paru, in the plural form, make up the Paruim of the Hebrews”. For Faingold (1997, p. 22. Our translation),

Onffroy de Thoron strives to demonstrate that the peoples of the most remote antiquity knew the Americas. The Mesopotamian peoples possessed fleets sailing the Atlantic Ocean. Not content with generalizations, this author goes on to show three biblical locations, Paruim, Ofir, and Tarshish, which, according to him, are located in Brazil.

In any case, Amazonian Literature has made use of these myths to compose narratives that show the encounter between Jews and indigenous people, as seen in *A majestade do Xingu*: "it will say that the Indians may be our patrician, it is said that they are the lost tribes of Israel who came to America" (Scliar, 2009, p. 179. Our translation). In some cases, the contact is affectionate and in others it evokes ancestral mythical ties.

The relationship between the Semite groups is affable and friendly. The Benemou are friends of the Syrian-Lebanese families in *Dois irmãos*. In *Relato de um certo Oriente*, also by Milton Hatoum, this amiability between families is evoked:

These encounters continued in the new house, but it was at the *Parisiense* that I realized about their existence. The conversation was exclusively in Arabic, except for greetings from some known passerby, or at the visit of one or another neighbor, some of them foreigners, such as the family of Américo from Póvoa de Varzim, the Benemou family from Morocco, and Gustav Dörner, the

young man from Hamburg; all very close friends of Emilie” (Hatoum, 2008, p. 52. Our translation).

This passage reinforces Benchimol's (2009) thought on the cordiality between Semite cousins. Hatoum, a Syrian-Lebanese descent, did not dismiss the Jewish presence in the region, setting up the spaces of his novels with Jewish characters. The same pattern was observed in Paulo Jacob's work, author of Jewish ancestry and writer of the novel about the Syrian-Lebanese presence in the Amazon: *Vila Rica das Queimadas*.

The six themes referenced here, which can be further developed into other themes, reveal a brief overview of how Amazonian Literature represented Jews and Syrian-Lebanese people in the Amazon. United in joy and sorrow, the two Semite groups shared similar histories. The condition of being a foreigner and its hardships affected them all. The translation of another culture within the Amazonian geography presented aspects of similarity. In a foreign land, one must be wise, one must adapt to the culture that receives the foreigner. The laughter of Jamil, in Paulo Jacob's *Vila Rica das Queimadas*, reinforces this understanding. Cordiality is the social capital that well translates the intentions of those who are reterritorialized. Similarly, affective relationships, in general, also show the immigrant's attempt to emotionally adjust to the new land. Sometimes, relationships escape notions of interculturality, causing culturally established labels and stereotypes to be taken again as accusations against the other. This marks the emergence of the "other other," as Rocha defines. The other person whom one dislikes, whose customs do not conform to socially accepted behavior. They are subjected to invisibility, indifference, and various negative stereotypes, as seen in many episodes against Jews. Hatred is translated into the construction of monstrous figures. All evil must occur in the house of an evil Jew; therefore, the seductive monster can only emerge in the house of another culturally and historically accepted monster: the Jew. However, the good relationship between the people of the land – natives and migrants – promotes adaptations and cultural exchanges. It is in the encounter with the other that prejudices and hatreds are dissolved. When experiences are shared one realizes that trajectories and life stories are so kindred.

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