Cintia Moscovich's Brazilian View on Jewish Literary Themes

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Abstract

This article focuses on the work of Cintia Moscovich, author of four books, and one of the very few Brazilian writers dealing with Jewish subjects. Her writings concentrate on the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, where Jewish immigration began 100 years ago. Unlike Jewish immigrants' literature in Yiddish or in Portuguese, or that produced by their children in Portuguese—when identity confrontation and cultural clashes were unavoidable—her writing is representative of a generation whose clashes and conflicts are attenuated and presented as a register or commentary only. In this article, two of Moscovich's stories are explored in order to highlight some of the main trends in literature on Jews written in Brazil. They are from her third book, *Anotações durante o incêndio*,[1] where Jewish subjects are at the centre. "Fire" in these stories begins with ordinary family sparks and conflicts which become almost catastrophic. Light humour, irony, and mild yearning pervade these stories and soothe old problems.

Since the arrival of European explorers in Brazil in 1500, local culture has been subjected mainly to the influence brought by Portuguese navigators and their descendants. These included many Jews, newly converted to Christianity, but who continued to profess their Jewish religion or, at least, keep some Jewish practices. Even though there are still Indian tribes who speak their own languages, as well as evidence of the cultural influence of African slaves in some regions of the country, Portuguese was—and is—the only language predominant in literature. Short periods of Spanish, Dutch and French domination during the

colonial period have not left obvious traces in the language, culture or literature of Brazil. During the second half of the 19th century, Brazil began opening its ports and received immigrants from various European and Asiatic countries. Intermixing with local inhabitants soon resulted in the disappearance of languages spoken by immigrants. Although most of the first generation immigrants did not produce literature, it was not uncommon for Jewish immigrants to write in Yiddish. However, very soon, Portuguese became the literary language for their descendants. Interestingly, a particular partiality for the ethnic and cultural themes of their ancestors is apparent amongst second, third or even fourth generation writers. The same can be said of writers of Arab descent. As for writers of other ethnic origins, however, this tendency is almost imperceptible.

Thinking about minority literature, I turned to the writings of Cintia Moscovich, born in 1958: writer, translator, journalist and literary consultant.[2] As stressed above, minority literature in Brazil does not refer to literature in the language of a minority, since today there is no expressive literature being produced in the country in languages other than Portuguese. Minority literature may be linked to ethnic or gender literature—in any event, it is considered fully Brazilian literature without evident connections to any current foreign language, or the foreign languages of authors' ancestors. Prize-winner writer Moscovich, was born and lives in Porto Alegre in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul which borders Argentina and Uruguay—both Spanish-speaking countries, with a strong influence on southern Brazilian culture and habits. She is the author of four books, published and republished since 1996.[3] At this point, I could also stress a direct relationship between gender and literary style, but that is something I have chosen not to do, although it was only in the 1960s that literature by women began to acquire significant status in Brazil. At the time, it was necessary to establish a gender divide in relation to male control in order to survive and ensure visibility. This changed in the 1970s when a strategic struggle opened space for dialogue between minorities. From then on, women's literature has been viewed in the same way as the discourse of any other minority. It is noteworthy that in her southern state, Moscovich, herself a Jewess, ensured prominence for the most representative of a number of writers of Jewish origin writing in Portuguese—at least fifteen. Consequently, my emphasis will be on the position of the Jewish writer. However, since Moscovich is one of the very rare Brazilian female writers of Jewish origin, her being a woman could also be borne in mind.

Jewish immigration to that part of Brazil began more than 100 years ago. Most of the Jewish population there, as all the other Brazilian states today have Portuguese as the one and only language. Most of the prominent writers mentioned above used, as background for their books, rural life in the agricultural colonies of the Jewish Colonization Association—a unique Jewish South American, and particularly Brazilian—experience. People of Italian and German de-

scent have also had important agricultural experiences in that state. While these immigrants' descendants still live in the countryside, however, Jews became urban people. Most of the writers, then, are urban. (One could also mention some old Yiddish publishing, now almost completely obliterated.) That the prolific literary output from Rio Grande do Sul may be due to a broader range of experience, in that part of the country, is a subject for analysis.

One of the most important Brazilian writers is Moacyr Scliar[4]—Jewish, born and living in the same state as Moscovich—he has written several books that deal with Jewish subjects. In an interview some years ago,[5] he considered the history of "ethnic literature", one of the species of minority literature. In his opinion, immigration literature has a natural history of three "moments" or stages. The first is the arrival in the country: there is no room for literature in this stage—immigrants do not have a command of the language and, furthermore, their priority is survival. Then comes a generation (generation in a generic sense) that speaks the local language and even excels in it, and which has social and psychological bases for writing: experiences in local life or conflict with the older generation. These are people who, mainly in childhood, have had one way of living at home (listening to a different language; eating different kinds of food; taking part in various kinds of religious or cultural celebrations), which contrasts with another kind of life in the street or at school; hence the conflict which becomes an unleashing factor or even raw material for literature—and there are many examples of excellent books produced in this stage. Then come generations who have adapted to the country's way of life and, if they have the will to write, will do so for some other reason. Minority writing on ethnic subjects, then, follows a particular cycle—although, of course, former stages may well reappear in the recent ones.

According to the above-mentioned stages, I consider Moscovich to be situated roughly in the third segment of younger writers where identity conflict—an unleashing factor at a certain stage of the literature—is only an attenuated register or a review of the past, and supplies very rich material for an imaginative author. To quote poet and journalist Fabricio Carpinejar [6]:

> Moscovich cannot be reduced to the category of new—woman—gaucha (southern) Jewish writer, once her voice, one of the most provocative of Brazilian fiction, and the courage that she holds, do not limit her writing to Jewish experience themes or to any other of these segments: either female or the gauchos. (2001)

An example of this is her novel *Duas iguais - Manual de amores e equivocos assemelhados*[7] (1998) which approaches, in an expressive way, love between two adolescent girls, one of them Jewish (although being Jewish is not the main

theme of the book), and evaluates homosexuality as a sequence of true friendship. Secondary themes in this book are loss—conveyed by the death of the Jewish narrator's father and subsequently, her partner—and unsustainable marriage. I shall linger, however, on two short stories from Moscovich's third book. Four of the eleven short stories in *Anotações durante o incêndi* (2000) are on Jewish subjects. The book itself is divided into two parts: "Smoke", and "Fire". It should be noted that, with one only exception, it does not deal with fire or arson but registers the explosive state of the characters involved—jottings as if in the middle of the fire. Carpinejar again stresses the fact that the "fire" begins from the most trivial sparks and family conflicts. Bearing in mind the title, *Jottings During the Great Fire*, one or other of these "hot" moments occur when a spark menaces everything, as in the apparent contrast in the story: "The man that went back to the cold". The frantic rhythm of the narration in this story goes along with the dizzying sequence of events that culminates in a catastrophe for Ethel, the main character who, at the beginning of the plot, is seventeen years old.

The arrival of a telegram—the first spark that opens the story—frightens the protagonist. She feels completely lost, not knowing what to do. On the other hand, perhaps it is not a catastrophe at all, since it is not an announcement of war, crime or arson. It is Edward who announces himself—a Finnish man, who worked with Ethel as a volunteer on a kibbutz in Israel, a common venture for many Brazilian Jewish youth. He does not know that Ethel's very Brazilian: "Come, drop in sometime" does not mean what these same words represent in most languages. It is not necessarily an invitation; sometimes it is merely an addition to a vague "good-bye". And Edward, who did not succeed in converting to Judaism in Israel—his great dream and aim— arrives in Brazil with his ugliness and courage, no money or job, to marry Ethel so that his children, at least, will be Jews.

Had this been written during an earlier stage of "ethnic" literature, be it in Yiddish or in the first stories written in Portuguese in the mid 1950s, surely the tone would be tragic. An inadmissible prospect in the immigrants' generation—marriage to a non-Jew—receives, in Moscovich's work, a gentle tone through various devices, some of which deserve attention. In an apparent allusion to John Le Carré's *The Spy who Came in From the Cold* (1963), the suitor who disembarks in the Brazilian south is also someone who will be cast aside as was the famous spy who did not manage to come out of the cold. He is white and pale as if he were ill, is ugly, wears thick glasses and an exaggerated fur coat. He is presented with the insipidness of a stranger, a foreigner, and is described as having the appearance of an insect with his unusual big body, small pale head, straight and sparse hair—traits which are more than sufficient to present a caricature who does not pose any risk of becoming a candidate for marriage to the Brazilian girl. Although the girl tries to be kind to the young man lost in the tropics, there is no way of escaping the mixture of disdain and rejection. While Ethel, at the airport, feels repulsion, her father (whose help she had asked) shows

a faint smile of scorn. In this atmosphere, the young protagonist is well aware of her position in the circumstances: "But I kept on standing, returning to the smiles, in a surprised and wicked happiness" (Moscovich 2000: 31). Happiness, of course, is never absolute.

The Jewish girl, from whose viewpoint the story is told, feels no attraction to the non-Jew, and of course, no love, as could have been expected in a book belonging to a former period where attraction of opposites—forbidden opposites—could cause a "fire". On the contrary, the unwelcome relationship becomes somehow hateful by means of a series of very obvious intertextual elements from well-known texts and contexts which the writer uses to help describe sensations and feelings. Beyond the title of the story, there is, in rising sequence, the Kafkean comparison of the young man to an insect: the uncommonly big body, the similarity to an insect because of the fur coat; the Kafkean feeling of being unwanted: he did not manage even a foothold at the "castle" (if one could metaphorically consider Ethel's home a castle and his desire to marry her as an "entrance to the castle"); and his not knowing why he could not do it, as compared to Kafka's character; and other elements to which I will come back later.

In this story Moscovich shows a particular talent for using various devices to treat the well-worn topic of mixed marriage. The parody she uses—a post-modern parody, according to Linda Hutcheon's concept, and an efficient strategy for promoting a settling of accounts and a reaction by means of a critical and creative handling of predominant cultural elements—allows for a dialogical relation "with identification and distance"(Hutcheon 1988: 22–36). Moscovich is well acquainted with the theme of the unwanted non-Jewish marriage candidate used by a variety of writers from Brazil and elsewhere. She, however, distances herself from the approach that might have been common in the past—an approach which already had a well known rejection model in the work of the Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem, be it in *The Fiddler on the Roof* or the book that inspired it, *Tevie, the Milkman*. The Brazilian interpretation we are considering here lessens the heavy burden that this theme has always carried, even when the discomfort it causes is very intense, maintained by humanitarian sensations but not by love. The girl does not feel passion or desire, or even curiosity. Her expectations for herself are different, typical of young people of her generation: university studies and a marriage according to the trends among her peers. At the same time, Ethel cannot be accused of indifference. She feels and deplores the young man's blunder in relation to a reality that is so far away from his expectations. In playful counterpoint to the spy who came in from the cold, Edward, who does not have any of the attributes that pertain to the category of spy, has to return to the cold—to the Finnish refrigerator of his life. In order to stress this, the rejection project and the consequent removal of the man is narrated by means of a series of similes that belong to the genocide of the Second World War, particularly those pertaining to the Nazi atrocities. As Ethel conceives of it, her father behaves like an extermination camp

commander by taking control of the luggage trolley at the airport—an apparently childish attitude but one which actually demonstrates that he is the master in this situation. Ethel, lost, not knowing how to act, having assigned to her father the prerogative for deciding what to do,

> ….felt under a shower that instead of releasing water, menaced to suffocate her with lethal gas….The short walk to the parking place is performed in a constrained silence—he silence of a crematorium furnace….Father's big Ford was a private Auschwitz…And again she felt she was an evil person because she caused him to fall into an ambush; gas came out from the shower. (Moscovich 2000: 32-33)

And, again, a little further Ethel "felt as the accursed that had conducted a man to the concentration camp… Some four months already passed since Edward was deported"; something that if taken literally, is almost true (ibid: 38). The ideological context presented by the author, the perspective that "allows the artist to speak to the discourse from within it" (Hutcheon 1988: 35)—here the subject of marriage to a poor, ugly non-Jew—combined with short phrases reminiscent of the concentration camp which express the vision as if from the other side: that of the greater victim, the Finnish suitor, point to a well constructed example of today's writing. It is writing that manages to grapple with an old Jewish theme namely, a catastrophe in the past but today not much more than a little nuisance, with light cynicism that insinuates itself into the receptive reader's mind; a cynicism that covenants with traces of gaiety almost bordering on bad taste. Saved from the fire, but with scars caused by the "sparks", Ethel continues her distant contact with the despised suitor for some time until she is informed of his death—a definitive end to the connection, a bitter relief as a solution to the complex situation.

Moscovich's almost lighthearted and playful tone changes dramatically in the section of the book entitled "Fire" in which a fire literally takes place. The light irony which was used to deal with the near catastrophe, is replaced by a convenient dramatic and evocative approach which suits a perennial post-catastrophe situation. The dialogical relation between identification and distance of post-modern parody becomes, here, an unconditional identification with the Jewish heritage, its maintenance and primordial role in Jewish survival. The story *No beginning, No ending*[8], which writer Moacyr Scliar (2000b) qualified as worthy of a Bashevis Singer has, as its first incident, a fire in a *shtetl*, the small Eastern European Jewish settlement, during Purim, the Jewish carnival celebration. Little Shmil is rescued by his mother, and while she's running full-tilt to escape the flames, he gets hold of a *grager*, the clapper used in the celebration every time the evildoer Haman's name is mentioned.[9] In a Dantean scene of extermination that begins to delineate itself, images reminiscent of Chagall con-

stitute the background of this story and appear in dizzying sequence: the little boy imagining dead Haman hanging by his neck with his tongue lolling out; women running with their "oy-oy-oy" cries; children in the sooty smoke; men in their ritual prayer shawls; an old man repeating the *Shma Israel* prayer; the cantor of the synagogue declaring that devils have set fire to the ghetto. In the midst all this, the *grager*'s spontaneous clatter is heard while the boy and his mother run away from that world, the child still waving the *grager* to a man who, incongruously in that hell, smiled at him with his blue eyes.

In this story, Moscovich does not specifically identify her character's current environment. Samuel, formerly Shmil—one can imagine him in Brazil, in his ascetic life bound to tradition—is the owner of an antique shop where he himself seems to be one of the objects on display in the dusty place. He is as old as his people's history. There are no identifying marks to define him. There is nothing that stands out in owner or objects, except for the old *grager*, carefully kept. As a link to the tradition, a symbol of survival, the clapper is unique in it's meaning for him—no more than merely a sign of Jewish being, perhaps, but a major factor in incomprehensible survival. Shmil and the *grager* form an indissoluble unity. In her search for meaning and for an answer to this, Moscovich turns to the wizard in this story who tries, by his writings, to impose some order on the worlds he touches: Jorge Luiz Borges. It is well known that for this purpose of imposing some order on the worlds, Borges used several subjects and devices: luck; violence; the presence of the Other; the nature of language; imagined worlds; meta-fiction; labyrinths; dreams. And his kinship with various Jewish themes is very well known. The Brazilian writer made her choice and took advantage of one of Borges' complex texts, *The Book of Sand*, published in 1975.

In one of his greatest moments of creative fantasy Borges' character is the owner of a sacred book, "The Book of Sand", and wants to sell it. The narrator sees the book and is unable to distinguish its first or last pages, because the number of pages is infinite; not only does the book not have a beginning or end but its reading changes from time to time. Fascinated, the narrator acquires it, becomes obsessed and can think of nothing else it. In the end, he leaves it aside, stacked with many others on his basement floor. In telling this story, Borges deals with the infinite in the shape of the mysterious book, symbolizing the constant human search for existence. From Borges' text one realizes that this search has no end and therefore, no purpose. I think that it should be considered at the same time and in contrast to another book that accords with Moscovich's story, although it is not mentioned. It is a story from the biblical book of *Esther* in which King Ahasuerus, during a sleepless night, asks one of his aides to read from his kingdom memory book. It is not his own or his ministers' accomplishments that emerge from the book, but one of Mordechai's redeeming acts—Mordechai, one of the agents of the people's future survival (*Esther* 6: 1-3). A minor, although not insignificant point, is that books that pertain to redemption, or at least the

search for life's meaning, come together in an impelling combination: Moscovich's expedient solution for maintaining tradition in the face of the present time, as represented by the clapper and its pictorial representation, is nothing less than fantastic and ingenious. Borges' Latin American (somehow Jewish?) solution is unique.

Moscovich slightly alters the direction indicated by Borges. The foreigner with blue eyes who enters Shmil's shop (Shmil, who, in that city, could be called Samuel but never wanted that and will always continue to be Shmil) proposes to exchange *The Book of Sand* for the *grager*, which is almost as old as its owner. After completing the exchange, Shmil is attacked by the same obsession as that of Borges' narrator. He discerns in the book, among incomprehensible texts, scenes that belonged to his distant past, to his people: the story of Purim; the image of dead Haman, hanging and still; *Shma* prayers; parts of the *Kadish;* the prayer for the deceased. He understands that the book is monstrous, as he himself is, once he can perceive through his eyes and by means of his hands that touch the book, the obscenity proposed by the book. It is the obscenity that vilified and corrupted humanity—the attempt to know more and to be more powerful than the Creator himself. As in Borges' story, he cannot burn the book because he is afraid its ignition will also be infinite and suffocate the planet in smoke. However, in Moscovich's narrative, Shmil's anguish comes to an end. Seeing on one of the pages an image of a *grager* similar to the one he possessed, he feels safe, murmurs the same *Baruch hashem*—blessed be (God's) name—that his mother pronounced in his childhood to calm him, repeating that Haman – evil, destruction—was dead. Shmil regains the *grager*, tearing the page with its image out of the book. His world is safe, he will not look for the infinite: the "key" for continuity is symbolically in his hands, it is inside him, as is his mother's *Baruch hashem*, as is the *Shma Israel*—transmission from generation to generation, trust in victory, unquestionable faith; he does not need the object itself. Soon after this, the book is thrown away, into the garbage collector's wagon which providentially passes in the street at that moment. He does this after kissing the *mezuzah*, the Jewish symbol fixed on the doorpost, when he goes out of the shop. Perhaps some day readers will not need books for studying and keeping their traditions: symbols will suffice. It is the last story that has a Jewish theme as its subject and background in this book. The simplicity of a symbol that cannot even be defined as Jewish—the clapper—is representative of the received heritage, that evil has been eliminated and that what is important is faith in the heritage; even though Shmil did not even remember why he had kept the instrument or that now it was not anything more than a piece of paper. The search for unlikely answers and ways out is what distinctly characterizes Moscovich's work.

Finally, some words about women's writing, even if we do not perceive a familiar and expected tendency to dialogue with prominently male literary traditions to subvert their norms. In these two stories, Moscovich travels a curious

path: the first text is a discourse that startles through the use of the woman's narrating voice in the face of a theme formerly the preserve of the prevailing authoritarian male voice – the voice of the one in charge of ensuring the fulfillment of the law. This kind of voice is not dispensed with here. It goes on fulfilling its task. But women's position is at the fore in that narration is transmitted by the feminine voice of the perplexed protagonist-narrator in the presence of an undesired situation. There is no collision between her and the masculine side/task because the topic is not the possibility of a mixed marriage, but exactly the opposite, the intention of not getting involved, of not getting married. As for the second story, it is a known fact that the book of *Esther*, which tells about Purim, is essentially feminist, particularly with reference to Queen Vashti's attitude. However, Queen Esther, in several of the scenes where she plays the central role, does not lag behind. Even by choosing a male character for her story, it seems to me that Moscovich did not need to dispense with the antecedents of the original story. Indeed, one can see them reinforced by two very brief allusions to the protective mother, a *yiddishe mame*, appeaser and saviour in Shmil's distant past; and when he becomes the owner of *The Book of Sand* he interweaves the mother image in his dream with an imprecise noise that seems to lead to the destroyer-saviour celebration-memory of Purim and the extraordinary book he possesses, representing past and future. Moscovich's strong woman's voice is the security of confrontation and continuity; it does not deconstruct cultural models, it shows its own line.

While in most places minority literature refers to a literature written in a language that is not predominant in a particular culture or country, Moscovich's short stories, referring to Jewish themes in Brazil, is proof that ethnic or gender subjects in literature are as important as definitions based on languages. Furthermore, by performing symbiosis with other literatures and cultures through some kind of intertextuality, she manages to create a very particular model.

Notes

1 Translation: *Jottings During the Great Fire*.

2 Moscovich teaches creative writing. She has worked for the *Zero Hora* newspaper as book editor and was also director of *Instituto Estadual do Livro* (Rio Grande do Sul State's Book Institute). A member of the so- called "Generation of the 90s", she was influenced mainly by Clarice Lispector, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Jorge Luis Borges, among others.

3 Her works include: *Oreino das cebolas – contos e narrativas* (1996), Porto Alegre. Prefeitura Municipal de Porto Alegre: Fumproarte & Mercado Aberto, nominated for Jabuti Prize; *Duas iguais – Manual de amores e equivocos assemelhados* (1998), Porto Alegre: L&PM which was the Açorianos de Literatura prizewinner and was republished in 2004, Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record; *Anotações durante o incêndio* (2000;

2001 2nd edition) winning, the Aorianos de Literatura, Porto Alegre: L&PM; *Arquitetura do arco-íris* (2004), Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record. Portugal Telecom de Literatura Brasileira prizewinner. Apart from her second book, all are comprised of short stories, some of which were included in these anthologies: Oliveira, Nelson (ed.). 2001. *Geração 90 – Manuscritos de computador.* S. Paulo: Boitempo; *Putas: Novo conto português e brasileiro*. Vila Nova da Famaliação – Portugal. Quasi, 2002; Ruffato, Luiz (ed.).2003. *25 mulheres que estão fazendo a nova literatura brasileira*. Rio de Janeiro: Record; Strauz, Rosa Amand (ed.). 2003. *13 melhores contos de amor da literatura brasileira*. Rio de Janeiro: Ediouro; *Hunger and Appetite* (2002) a Brazilian television film was based on her homonym story. In 1995 she was also awarded the prize in Guimarães Rosa Stories Contest at the Iberian Languages Department – Radio France Internationale, Paris.

4 Born in 1937, Scliar, a prolific writer, has authored more than 30 books. He began publishing in the 60s. Several of his books have been translated into various languages; several films and TV stories were based on them.

5 In *Revista Vox,* 3, 2000 accessed online at All the translations in the text are mine (N.R.).

6 Poet Fabrício Carpinejar (Fabrício Carpi Nejar) was born in Caxias do Sul, Rio Grande do Sul in 1972. He has published ten books of poetry.

7 Translation: *Two Equals – Handbook for Loves and Similar Errors*.

8 Original translation: *Aquilo que não principia e nem acaba*.

9 In the biblical story of Esther, Haman was the Persian minister whose purpose was to exterminate the Jewish people.

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