



**MIDDLE EAST STUDIES IN ACTION**

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## **Uncovered History: An Exploration of the Latin American Mahjar**

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This poster explores the formation and presence of the Lebanese community in Columbia through the framework of contemporary Mahjar literature. While there is profound scholarship surrounding the North American Mahjar, or (post) exilic, literature, there is relatively less recognition or discourse in the west surrounding Arab diasporic communities in South America. Columbia is a particularly interesting case. Its largest foreign population consists of Arab migrants, yet there is a lack of available research surrounding this community. Literary analysis of Columbian Mahjar literature can illuminate the history of these migrants and expand knowledge of an understudied variant of Lebanese diasporic literature. This analysis can supplement developing theory around diaspora and associated exilic and post-exilic literature. South American Mahjar literature may constitute its own unique sub-genre or extension of post-colonial literature. I conduct pragmatic and stylistic analysis of literary texts from prominent Colombian-Lebanese writers such as Luis Fayad (1945–), Juan Gossain (1949–), and Meira Delmar (1922–2009), paying special attention to their intertextuality and interlinguistic voices in an effort to transcend purely historical approaches to diaspora studies. I draw upon their cultural productions to analyze the hybridization of identity in conjunction with literary and historical analytical frameworks proposed by both non-Arab and Arab diasporists and postcolonial theorists, such as Edward Said and William Safran. I work with archived primary sources and periodicals in English, Spanish, and Arabic, extending the research done by Colombian historians and academics such as Pilar Vargas and Luz Marina Suaza. My research aims to offer a cohesive representation of contemporary Colombian Mahjar literature in order to contribute to a broader understanding of the ethnic collectivity of the Arab Diaspora community.

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## The Ethnography of the Lebanese Diaspora in Colombia through Post-Exilic Literature: Case Study

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### Historical Context

- Two phases Arab immigration to Colombia
  - First wave: late 19th Century to the 1930s
  - Second wave: mid 1970s and into the new millennium
- First phase characterized by predominantly Christian demographic, settlement throughout the Caribbean Coast, and integration through revolution of the economic sector
- Conflict between "hispanization" and maintaining Lebanese identity

### Literary Context

*Realismo Mágico*: Emblem of Colombian Literary Tradition

- One of Colombia's most prominent literary genres
- Presents the magical as an ordinary part of an identifiable reality
- Post-Colonial Perspective: is based in the rejection of the colonizer's dominant paradigms for the rediscovering of an uncolonized identity<sup>1</sup>
- Written from a marginal reality of "otherness" that allows these stories to be hybridized and present cultural multi-subjectivities<sup>2</sup>

**Mahjar Literature:**

- Is the Arab literary tradition established in the Americas from the first phase of migration
- Defined by the body of works, literary leagues, and specific themes and concepts produced and influenced by Arab emigrant writers and their experiences

### Author Biography: Juan Gossain

- Juan Gossain is a first generation Lebanese-Colombian, born in San Bernardo del Viento, Córdoba, Colombia in 1949, to first phase immigrant parents from Zahle<sup>3</sup>
- Named the novel after Maria Milet de Abdala (maternal grandmother) to signify it is "the story of all emigrants"<sup>4</sup>
- Gossain, as an author, is a product of both the cultural and literary heritage of a globalized Arab migrational phenomenon and that of Colombia, with the conjunction of these two influences permeating his work as an exemplar of the post-exilic Lebanese-Colombian novel

### Novel Structure & Analytical Frame

- Its hybridization stems from its multiethnic literary nature and its magical realist structure, used for identity construction and as a resistance to cultural hegemonic paradigms<sup>5</sup>
- Simultaneously underlines Arab cultural identity and Latin American national identity<sup>6</sup>
- Inclusion of auto-biographical elements by Gossain creates a personal ethnography
- Manifestation of the Lebanese-Colombian identity is based in distinct themes of "phantom nostalgia" and exilic memory of the distant homeland, the formation of a hybrid, acculturated identity, and the composition of the parental dynamic<sup>7</sup>
- The themes are examined through employment of specific identity markers/tropes such as allusions to or inclusion of Arabic, Lebanese cuisine, and presence of Lebanese native flora
- Novel is investigated through a post exilic framework, defined by an inherited cultural memory written by descendants of migrants

### Phantom Nostalgia and Exilic Memory

- Is heavily intertwined with and bred by the identity markers, and is rooted in the "family memory"
- "phantom nostalgia" was coined by poet Meira Delmar<sup>8</sup>
  - the differentiated form of nostalgia reconstructed through the words and memories imparted to children by their migrant parents, rather than being a longing derived from direct, tangible experience
- The narrator witnesses the renaissance and nostalgia of his parents for Lebanon, and internalizes it within himself and his mother-of-fact reconstruction of his parents' life story
- By this, the inherited cultural memory of the distant homeland is materialized in the new land, asserting both its general existence and presence within the family's microcosm in the new land
- Examples from his father<sup>10</sup>
  - "reconstructs in silence, with only the help of his heart, the oldest memories of his, starting with the first, that stormy morning in which he arrived from his valleys of Lebanon"
  - "suddenly, cornered by nostalgia, [he] starts whistling an Arab song learned in his adolescence"
  - "*Má f jada, má f jada, weino habibi eli*" (there is no one, there is no one, where is my heart's beloved)
- Inclusion of reference of other Arab members of the jalyeh in San Bernard del Viento
- through explicit recollections of the past, Arabic musical/poetic allusions, direct inclusions of Arabic, and the establishment of the Lebanese jalyeh, Gossain establishes an inherited contextual paradigm in which to embody the exiled Lebanese cultural memory

### Cuisine and Jasmine

- the acculturation process leads to the co-existence of the two cultural consciousnesses, and is primarily exhibited through identity markers related to food and flora
- Allusions to Lebanese gastronomy ranged from being designated in Arabic to passively connoted in Spanish within a general culinary reference
- Direct Examples
  - his mother grinding "wheat for kibbeh", making a "sweet halawa with sesame paste soaked in rose water, needing to continually stir the 'chickadee soup'"<sup>11</sup>
- Continued cultivation of jasmine in the new land represents a tie to their old homeland, while interlacing itself with the new society to form a hybrid existence
- The father's sale of jasmine perfume reflects the similar commercial ventures of the jalyeh of the first wave<sup>12</sup>
- The aroma of jasmine is used to invoke nostalgia as the "smell of the homeland", substantiates the migratory characteristic of a remaining congruence to the original culture despite assimilation into the new culture

### Parental Dynamic

- The juxtaposition of the enterprising wife Maria and the poetic husband Abraham reflect two prominent aspects of the early jalyeh: commercialism and Mahjar literary prowess
- The acceptance of the stereotypical label of "Turco/a" by Maria and its rejection by Abraham exemplifies the social battle between adhering to the erasure of identity particularities to assimilate versus forsaking such inclusion to preserve the original identity
- Maria as the figure of the mother symbolized the homeland and an attachment to it. She is the muse for husband's continued involvement with the Lebanese culture, language, and mentality
- Symbolically, with her death it is first witnessed that Spanish overtakes the poetical/lyrical side of Abraham that had been dominated by Arabic, as the new hybrid culture he created with his wife acculturated itself into his emotional psyche

### Findings and Future Investigations

- Through the paradigms of post-colonial and post-exilic writing, Gossain forms a new, authentic construction of a multi-dimensional Lebanese-Colombian identity
- This case study instituted a basis from which to analyze my future selected works, specifically through the presence of common themes, tropes, and most importantly identity markers that would signify the formation of a Lebanese-Colombian dual identity in specifically a post-exilic standpoint
- Another point of potential analysis is the investigation of the application of specifically Colombian literary trends as a spectrum through which to prescribe an explicitly post-exilic status to the work
- Prospectively, I will be investigating the anthology of poet Meira Delmar and the novel *La Casa de Los Puntos Cardinales* by author Luis Fayad, both notable descendants of Lebanese first-wave migrant

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