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Services

Lady of Arabic letters

The Lebanese-born Safa Jubran came to Brazil when her country was in a civil war. Here, she built a career which transformed her into a bridge between Arab literature and Brazilians.

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São Paulo – She set her foot in Brazil in the 1980s while her country, Lebanon, was in a civil war. She travelled still young, to visit relatives, and her story could have been similar to those of many Arab immigrants who arrived here, got married, raised their families and that was it. But Safa Jubran was born for more. She came with a desire to study and had language in her soul and, little over three years later, she was already a Language and Literature student at the University of São Paulo (USP), one of the best universities in Brazil, despite not mastering the Portuguese language well.

Immersed in the academic environment, learning and researching linguistics, phonetics, phonology and history of science, over the years she built a career that became a bridge between Arab authors and Brazilian readers, as well as a bridge for verbal communication between Arabs and Brazilians. Safa has translated more than ten books from Arabic into Portuguese and teaches the secrets of the language and its literature to graduate and post-graduate students at USP. Translation earn her the laurels, but it is teaching that puts the gleam into her eyes.



Release

At her apartment in the West Side of São Paulo, she told ANBA about students who went on trips to the Arab world and back, how much they learnt, how they improved with each day and how much she enjoys teaching, even to those with scant knowledge of the language. "I make a point of teaching to the freshmen," she said, referring to the beginners in the USP Arabic course. It was Safa who helped reformulate the university's postgraduate course in Arabic Language, Literature and Culture, and to unify it with the postgraduate programme in Hebrew Language and Literature and Jewish Culture.

She started on the path to where she is now as soon as she graduated in Language and passed a public contest to become assistant Arabic professor at the USP. Safa has stuck with the books and research ever since. She took a master's in Linguistics in which she analysed the contrast between the Arabic and Portuguese phonological systems in the teaching of Arabic, pursued a doctoral degree to further her studies in the area, and a postdoctoral degree for which she translated and analysed a 11th century Arabic manuscript on the history of science. In 2010, she became a full professor in Arabic language at the USP.

Translation and analysis of ancient manuscripts, by the way, was one of Safa's first jobs, as soon as she started teaching at the USP. "I started out with the toughest part," she says. For ten years, she worked on a 9th century manuscript on alchemy, alongside professor Ana Maria Alfonso-Goldfarb, which wound up turning to a publication. She also translated an Arabic grammar book from English into Portuguese, wrote a book on phonological contrast, and her translation and studies on the 11th century Arabic science history manuscript also became a book.

And in the midst of all that she found time to translate Arabic literature? She did. The secret to this ability to take in almost everything becomes clear to whoever speaks with Safa for a few minutes and notices her practical, near-electrical ways, with energy for lots of things. Because of her profile, she decided to take on the mission to translate a book by one of the best-known contemporary Brazilian writers into Arabic: "Two Brothers" (Dois Irmãos), by Milton Hatoum, a writer of Lebanese ascent. "Now I think back and wonder: how did I accept it!?" she says, laughing in her slight Arabic accent.

Safa claims that Hatoum's book was one of the jobs she suffered the most with. It was her only literary translation from Portuguese into Arabic. The big challenge, says the linguist, was to convey all the information about the Amazonian environment, where the story is set. The translation took a few months and many hours' worth of thoughts from Safa, brooded over how to make the Arabs understand what this or that was. For several terms, the solution was a glossary, and many footnotes.

Safa also did the technical revision of the Arabic-to-Portuguese translation of poems by a leading Arab poet, the Syrian Adonis. Her USP colleague, professor and poet Michel Sleiman did the translation, selected the poems and published a book through the Companhia das Letras publishing house. Regarding all the titles and jobs she has under her belt, she says "I did it to the best of my ability; there is nothing I am ashamed of."

Currently, Safa has other translation projects in the oven and celebrates the growing interest in Arabic literature in Brazil, as well as the stronger demand for the USP Arabic course. She claims that students are arriving better prepared at the university, with a greater wealth of information on the Arab world. Much of that interest, she claims, emerged after the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. In addition to her academic and translation work, Safa is a member of the Institute of Arab Culture (Icarabe), an organization established by scholars which promotes cultural activities focusing on the Arab world.

Safa from Lebanon and Safa from home

Married for 30 years now to a man she met and fell in love with as soon as she arrived in Brazil, Safa doesn't consider moving back to Lebanon. By the way, she never returned after she moved to São Paulo. Marjayoun, her home town in southern Lebanon, by the Israeli border, is just a part of her memories. "My Lebanon is the Lebanon which lives in my recollections," she says, not willing to accept the fact that political balance has not been reached between the factions in the country, even after the learning process that years and years of civil war entails.

From her country she keeps the good memories, of family life and a quiet town, but also of sad images such as the death of her father, while she was still a child, and of war, in her adolescence. "I didn't have quite the regular adolescence," she says of the deprivation she suffered because of the war. "We would wake up in the morning and thank God we were alive, thinking only of how to survive another day," she says. Still, Safa graduated from a good middle school, and that helped open doors later on.

Safa might visit her country one day, but she is not sure. The circumstances haven't taken her there thus far, she says. She is not the type of immigrant who interacts only with the Arab colony, eats only typical dishes or is great at belly dancing. She does cook some Arab food every once in a while, exchanges a couple of Arabic words with her husband, who is a descendent, but she also spends a

lot of time around Brazilians and their culture. Her husband is a biology professor and a researcher of Brazilian Popular Music. And even though she is a lady of Arabic letters, Safa is practically a Brazilian.

***Translated by Gabriel Pomerancblum and Mark Ament**

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