

## Vidas Secas, style and social critique

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the way Alagoan writer Graciliano Ramos incorporates social critique in his last novel *Vidas Secas*. The writer's intellectual trajectory reveals the essence of his concern with social inequality, the *latifundio*, and the theme of mandonism in the rural areas. In *Vidas Secas* (Dry Lives) Graciliano not only reaches the maturity of his sober literary style but also radicalizes his precise writing in accordance with the central themes of his narrative about those who live in the harsh conditions of the Brazilian Northeast. This text aims to highlight a narrative strategy created in the symbiosis between writing and reality.

**Key words:** Graciliano Ramos, social critique, Brazilian modernity.

### Introduction

The literature of Graciliano Ramos affirmed, in Brazil, the critical and austere image of the creator of the emblematic figures of Fabiano and Paulo Honório. Fifty years after the death of this writer and nearly 70 since his last novel, each year there are new theses and articles about these personalities and about the writer who gave them life. This continued interest is due to many factors, such as the original narrative experience of each of his books, the density of his personalities, the content of his plots, the complex psychology of the creatures placed in scene and other dimensions of the Graciliana *oeuvre*.

This paper uses his last novel, *Vidas Secas* (Dry Lives), to analyze how Graciliano Ramos interpreted Brazil and the country's modernization process. The choice of this fictional work as a material for analysis, and not of his memoirs or other primary documents, was made in order to reflect on how the author incorporated his vision of Brazil to the literary text, without transforming it into a pamphleteering narrative. As a novelist, Graciliano Ramos was capable of presenting the most volatile issues of his generation within the narrative economy. That is, he concentrated on a reflection on the Brazilian reality. More precisely, on the duality between the *sertão*<sup>1</sup> and the coastal and modern civilization, and used them to create his artistic material. This

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<sup>1</sup> The *sertão* is the isolated region in the Brazilian northeast characterized by a semi-arid climate and periodic droughts.

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intersection between history and literature guided this article. The Graciliana narrative occupies a special place in which literature is magnificently associated to timely social criticism. Graciliano converted the historic content into pure and rigorous literature.

### **Between the sertão and Avenida Central**

From the first moments in which Brazil sought to insert itself among the civilized nations, the issue of national identity arose as one of the central themes for our intellectuals. This identity involved, in reality, a dilemma manifest in the country's modernization process. The issue first appeared in the debates at the time of Abolition. The liberal format of the nation's institutions, established in the Constitution of 1824, and the harmonic coexistence with the practice of slavery were related predecessors of the contradiction between the legal Brazil and the real Brazil, but at this moment there was nothing essential about this form (Schwarz, 1992: 15). It would be above all with the failure of the Republic, during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that our intellectuals would consider Brazil through the contrast and confrontations between the traditional and the modern, the civilized and the barbaric, the coast and the *sertão*.

Until the 1920's the positivistic view inspired by Comte was not contested in the country. It was at this time that two Brazils appeared, that of the modern coastal civilization and that of the *sertão* separated spatially and temporarily. Euclides da Cunha would take the decisive step before the unease created by the clash of these two worlds. With his novel *Os Sertões*, a new concept of Brazil arose. It was said that a second and tragic discovery of Brazil was made (Abreu, 1998). A perplexity with the national direction emerged as a tonic among Brazilian intellectuals. While the romantics had already evoked the national peculiarities, they only achieved a nature of true tragedy with Euclides da Cunha. He presented the gaunt face of barbarism and the image of enlightened Republican ideas.

The critics of the 1870's, such as Araripe Júnior, José Veríssimo and Sílvio Romero, influenced by scienticism and highlighting the character of works such as those of José de Alencar, and concerned above all with defining a national physiognomy, saw *Os Sertões* as the magnum opus of the consecration of true Brazilian values. Published in 1902, it presented in resounding form the distinctive element of the country. Euclides da Cunha, as never before, peered within the national reality. The land and the man of the *sertão* appeared to the eyes of the cosmopolitan observers from the Rua do Ouvidor as a totally unknown world, a nation distant from "civilized" Brazil.

While an interest in the Brazilian nation first arose with the romantics after Independence and the naturalists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whether by recognizing its unique elements, or by seeking to compare its similarities with Western culture, this interest was accentuated in a crucial manner at the turn of the century at the time of the recently proclaimed Republic. Two lines of thinking entered debate over this question. On one hand, the mentioned generation of 1870, marked by the positivist and evolutionist doctrines, was concerned with defining the national essence. Anticipating themes that were consecrated in the 1930's, this group was deeply influenced by conservative trends. The other, a current with a more cosmopolitan character, typical of the *Belle Époque*, sought to integrate Brazil to Western civilization. To do so, the transformations underway in the First Republic were essential, above all in Rio de Janeiro, with the flow of foreign capital, and the adoption of the remodeling and sanitary methods of the Parisian model. This process, however, hid or cast out of its "civilized" borders, the other Brazil (Sevcenko, 1999; Oliveira, 1990).

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While in Europe at that time liberals debated the incorporation of the masses to politics and the consolidation of individual rights, Brazil, a century behind, entered the era of the Republic with problems still pending from the definition and enactment of the basic natural rights (Oliveira, 1990). The theme of national identity that modernity imposed cast the eye of our intellectuals at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on a Brazil still incipiently explored.

With *Os Sertões*, the distinction between the coast and the *sertão* arose with a symbolic force that carried at its core the dilemmas of modernity, the antagonisms of a country in which coexisted, in a single historic period, structurally distinct social orders. The work called attention to the theme of the two Brazils that permeated society and sustained the analyses of the country. The moment was dominated by a spirit of modernization and renovation that had its greatest example in the urban reform of Pereira Passos, conducted from 1903 - 1906 in Rio de Janeiro. The inspiration came from Haussmann's reform of Paris, where Pereira Passos had studied and got to know the French capital of the Second Empire, with its narrow streets transformed into great avenues with an efficient circulation system (Needell, 1993: 51).

The *sertão*, more than a geographic region, was a concept that, at that time, encompassed the notion of the distancing of government power and the abandonment of the State. Its incorporation was inserted in a project for the construction of a modern nation, and in this sense, its analysis became central to the interpretation of Brazil in the 1920's and 1930's (Trindade, 1999: 78).

The 1920's began with the dream of the construction of a modern nation. The insertion of Brazil into the pantheon of civilized countries was not realized without the counterpoint to that modernity arising to constraint the heralding of the Europeanization of the tropics. The renovative frenzy of the capital of the Republic could not hide, in its artificial modernity and rapid adherence to bourgeois enrichment, the discomfort of a country distant from the well-tailored clothes, the chic cafes and the lights that animated the nightlife on Avenida Central, the Batalha das Flores in the Campo de Santana and the British five o'clock coffee *sic* (Sevcenko, 1999: 38). The modernizing project did not escape the question: what country is this? It sought to understand the traditional standards of our social, political and economic organization, bringing together in this sense, intellectuals and scientists. From the *sertão* came the ambiguous image, constructed from the coast, of the strong and mestizo man, an inferior race, condemned to civilization, the natural course of history. The *sertão*, an unknown land as Euclides said, it was at once a space of barbarity, ruled by nature, and also that of the authentic nationality. An abandoned place resistant to progress, positive and negative factors are both part of its tradition. Through a borrowed modernity, which placed the *sertanejo*<sup>2</sup> between adhesion and disappearance, a civilizing crusade was completed.

In the international context at the end of the First World War, with the cultural and social political growth and dynamization of Brazil during the 1920's, the question of national identity and of the course to follow took on a more critical nature and shook society more deeply. The crises of the liberal values of post-war Europe accentuated the concern for national questions. The look at modernity, whether seen through a prism of ruin by the defeated, or by the victorious celebrating the new, the modern and the current, was more than ever determined by the process of industrialization and urbanization that stimulated the country to adjust to the global capitalist order.

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<sup>2</sup> A *sertanejo* is a resident of the *sertão*.

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The theme of modernity, the discussion of which accelerated after those years, continued to show the contradictory face of its design. Among the intellectuals, a concern with the real Brazil, more than with the legal Brazil, or with the gap between one and the other, deepened. In this panorama, the Modern Art Week of São Paulo of 1922 reflected the theme of the time. It involved, in the first phase, for the modernists, a movement for the immediate modernization of Brazil, toward its insertion in a universal and eminent order. Later, in 1924, with the “Manifesto da Poesia Pau-Brasil” [The Brazilwood Manifesto] by Oswald de Andrade (1970), the Modernist plan came to include an incorporation of “Brazilianness”, of the purely national aspects of reality (Moraes, 1983: 3).

The question of national identity persisted and became accentuated through the presentation of these issues (Paula, 1990: 34). The intellectuals, informed by European culture, confronted a reality not found in the traditional textbooks. The dilemma presented was how would it be possible to understand and give unity to the two Brazils? The modernity available to the few, which incorporated in a biased and fragmented form the bourgeois world, left behind another nation. The effort was now to understand this other nation that would internally reproduce the rules of order of the periphery. Through a misunderstanding this impasse, the question of race was proposed as a fundamental explanation of backwardness. The discussion of race was a hot topic in Brazil in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Influenced by European thinkers such as Gobineau, Agassiz and Le Bon - who later would feed Nazi theories about the pure race - Brazilian intellectuals and the political elite saw racial inferiority, the result of miscegenation, as the great barrier to the incorporation of the country into the civilized world. With both a positive and negative consequence, the problem of miscegenation either made inviable the modernization project, or, because of the whitening, made it possible.

Personalities such as Monteiro Lobato’s Jeca Tatu, a mestizo from the interior, crystallized the image, marked by the prejudices of the cosmopolitan elites, who saw the men of the interior as lazy and indolent, and responsible for the nation’s backwardness. This view was later modified by the emphasis on the policy of sanitation, developed in the 1910’s, and which had a strong impact on the intellectuals.

The interpretation of Brazil was highlighted by the fact that modernization was conceived, more than anything, as an immediate updating of the country, mediated by Brazilianess. In this sense, the modernists, upon conceptualizing Brazil, and its identity, do not go beyond the aesthetic question *stricto sensu*. That is, they were concerned with producing a new artistic language more to deal with the reality than to think critically of the causes of Brazil’s backwardness and its insertion in the concert of nations. Nevertheless, Brazilianness, was seen as a means for harmonic access to the modern world, as a leverage to enter modernity. Although the impasses of Brazilian modernity were already indicated in the 1920’s, substantiated in the large mass of the excluded of the nation, it would be up to the generation of the 1930’s to deepen the understanding of Brazilian modernity.

Finally, it is important to emphasize the importance that the social question, more than the legal one, took on in Brazil at this moment. This involved not only the nation’s industrialization and urban growth, but also the overcoming of the impediments to the establishment of the Republic. It was also influenced by the international situation marked by the Russian Revolution and the growth of the workers movement around the world, which made more visible the difficult social conditions of poor men and women, whether workers in the fields and cities. In Brazil, all of

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these issues called increasing attention to the contradictions of the modernist project. Above all among the intellectuals, the level of awareness in relation to the country's backwardness was accentuated. It was in this direction that went part of the national current. That is, those concerned with understanding and explaining Brazilian reality presented a critical and progressive character, distant, therefore, from the vainglorious patriotism of order and tradition

### **Are we modern?**

The 1930's and 1940's were particularly marked by a strong and profound attempt to understand Brazil. The moment served as a catalyst for a series of innovations that had given a special character to the earlier decade (Candido, 1984). Not only did the study of the social sciences become institutionalized, but a generation of thinkers of Brazilian culture was established, both inside and outside university centers.

In the 1930's, and particularly after the publication of *Casa Grande & Senzala* by Gilberto Freyre, the national question was placed on a new level. It now involved an interpretation of Brazil that took a truly new route, based not on progress, or the country's failure to integrate to the march of civilization. It did not identify race as the cause of unviability. It took a view of Brazil based on its traditional roots. Until then what mediated all the explanations of the nation's condition was the confrontation of the country with the European nations, and a persistent obsession with progress. Freyre and Sergio Buarque de Holanda inverted the argument, or that is, they analyzed how the world of the "passions" was converted into an instrument for the rationalization of life, for its adaptation to the environment.<sup>3</sup>

Three authors manifest the theoretical renovation of these years: Gilberto Freyre, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and Caio Prado Júnior. The very form of the writing of the first two was revolutionary. The essay, this stylistic form that sought to touch the essential and address the heart of the issue, was perfectly articulated with the idea of identity (Lukács, 1974; Araújo, 1994).

Gilberto Freyre, more than Sérgio Buarque, would take the radicalism of language to the final consequences. The anti-rhetoric was repeated in the form of solid proposals. Language itself would reveal the influence of the slave quarters on Brazilian life (Araújo, 1994: 186). Sérgio Buarque, distinguished not only by his form of operating, but above all by his theoretical foundation in German sociology of culture and French social history, would combine, however, in the same argument the way that the Portuguese and African elements were articulated in Brazil (Candido, 1993).

Caio Prado was found in the same innovative line. His *Evolução Política do Brasil* [Political Evolution of Brazil], of 1933 and later *Formação do Brasil contemporâneo* [Formation of Contemporary Brazil], of 1942, used Marxist thinking in a pioneer manner. The later work clearly presented the economic structure that would tie Brazil to global capitalism and the transfiguration of this economic form in Brazil.

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<sup>3</sup> The argument of the passions was presented by Ricardo Benzaquem de Araújo in the seminar "Limits of the modern", presented at the XX National Symposium of Anpuh, held in Florianópolis, in July 1999. See also, by the same author, *Guerra e paz: Casa Grande & Senzala e a obra de Gilberto Freyre nos anos 30* (1994: 30 & 59).

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This is not the place for a detailed analysis of these authors. The point is to recognize the innovative character of their work. In this sense, it can be asked, what was the scenery that allowed their appearance? The three were bearers of an evolution that had been developing for some time. With the intellectual heritage of the 1920's that analyzed national identity, and armed with new theoretical elements that were sensitive to the country's modernization, these men were able to take the essential leap that distinguished their interpretations from other visions of Brazil.

In Europe and the United States, where Sérgio Buarque and Gilberto Freyre respectively studied during the 1920's, the intellectual climate was distinguished on one hand by a deep interest in ethnography and, on the other, by a rejection of the values of progress and civilization that had led Europe to war. These trends induced these authors to reconsider the analyses of national identity conducted until then, and to set their sights on what would characterize what is unique to Brazil. On the other hand, in the national situation, the crises of hegemony of the agro-exporting group and the transformation in the country's form of accumulation would establish the elements of tension necessary to stimulate new interpretations of the social pact that configured Brazil (Paula, 1990).

This effervescent situation was also characterized by a politicalization of the discussions. There was an absolute need for definition in the ideological field. This atmosphere was best seen in literature. The formal modernization that took place in the 1920's was entirely absorbed in the following decade. Anticonventionalism would no longer be a transgression, but a well-received and broadly practiced right (Candido, 1993). It was a time to stir up the content, bringing it up-to-date with a fierce social criticism, at times in detriment to artistic quality. If in the 1920's literature was dominated by an aesthetic discussion, in the 1930's, the emphasis was primarily ideological, or that is, literature questioned its role in society and the function of the writer.

Politicalization made literature a special space for criticism, and in this sense, its changed its perspective, accompanying the course of the sociological essays. The novel was no longer adapted to the modernizing project, it moved towards a radicalization of criticism, pointing directly to the dilemmas of the country's backwardness, sought its personality in the poor worker, in the poverty-stricken *sertanejo* (Lafetá, 1974: 18). The political situation had changed, but this did not alter the structure of the national economy. The process of industrialization, based on agricultural exports, was not capable, precisely because of its ties with the older economic and political structures, of creating an independent bourgeoisie. The impasse of a country that was partially modernized and that maintained strong ties with the traditionalism that marked its history, was, in the 1930's and 1940's, the principal focus of discussions.

### ***Vidas Secas and its writing***

*Vidas Secas* was the fourth and last novel by Graciliano Ramos. Published in its entirety in 1939, the book was first written as short independent stories that were published in the press during 1938 soon after the writer got out of prison. Although the theme was not very original, that of the drought, the treatment given to it was entirely new, integrating, in the narrative structure, not only the problems of the drought, and its physical space, but also the dilemmas of simple men oppressed with hostility by nature and society.

The independence of the chapters would not remove the circular structure from the novel, which thus obeyed the natural cycle of the drought as well as of the lives of the inhabitants of the *sertão* who compose the family in highlight.

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Graciliano was concerned in this novel with accentuating the stigma of the drought through the most absolute concision of words. Among his novels, this quality would best portray the writer's obsession with precise language and narrative structure as a form of expression of a reality. The writing would be as concise and tough as the story described, and the way of life of the monosyllabic creatures who pass through the work.

Different from the writer's other novels, *Vida Seca* was narrated in the third person and would not be focused on an absorbing protagonist as Graciliano habitually used in his other works. This would also be the only book in which the process of writing would not be emphatically discussed. In his three previous novels, each of the protagonists who narrated the stories, questioned his own writing and the function of the writer. In this book the theme emerges, but it occupies a secondary position.

The placement of the problem of language in the second plane would not remove the importance of the theme. It is clear that the place occupied by it is shifted by the issue raised and the type of protagonist who guides the story. In Ramos's other stories, the protagonists were men of letters, intellectuals from the provinces, narrator-personalities who questioned their own word. In *Vida Seca*, the protagonist comes from a family of migrants with only a rudimentary command of speech. Notwithstanding these circumstances, the theme of writing, and more precisely that of the intellectual or the lettered man, arose in the figure of Seu Tomás da bolandeira. Before this issue and secondary character can be presented, it is first necessary to understand the central theme of the novel.

The writer from Alagoas, who knew the reality of the *sertão*, chose to work with the problem of drought through a small family composed of a father, Fabiano, his wife, Sinha Vitória, and their two children who did not have names, in addition to a dog named Baleia. From the small universe of these people, Graciliano brought light to the many forms of misery experienced by the poor families who wandered the *sertão*, the conflicts and the permanent oppression, as well as the fatalism of a vision marked by countless misfortunes.

Fabiano was a *vaqueiro*<sup>4</sup> who, escaping another drought, took up in a small abandoned farm when the rains returned. The first chapter would describe this passage through the sandy *sertão*. The arrival at the farm, with the family, was marked by the beginning of the rains, in an initial parallel established between the cycle of nature and the life of these small creatures. With the rains the world would appear to fill up once again with hope and Fabiano could become a *vaqueiro* once again.

But destitution marked the existence and fate of this family. The rains, by bringing life, also fed the thoughts of the *vaqueiro*. He must be a man, have the dignity of a man, live like a man. But they confronted more than just nature. When the rains returned so did the owner of the farm and Fabiano once again became a humiliated animal, accustomed, by misfortune, to obey. His stay at the farm as a *vaqueiro* was accepted as the base of an underhanded agreement:

Fabiano received in the division one quarter of the calves and one third of the baby goats. But since he did not have his own land and could only plant a few handful of beans and corn on the dried watering halls, he bought food in the market, sold the animals, did not brand one calf or mark the ear of a goat (...)

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<sup>4</sup> *Vaqueiro* is the Portuguese word for someone who tends cattle. The word won't be translated to avoid any romanticized connotation of the word cowboy in English and because of the social and cultural differences.

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Little by little the landowner's brand burned Fabiano's animals. And when he had nothing more to sell, the *sertanejo* went into debt. When the accounts were made, he was in debt, and at pay time got only a pittance. (Ramos, 1981: 92).

Fabiano was cornered between the drought, theft and the exploitation to which he was submit by the owner of the farm. Destitute, he submit himself to the situation and apologized for complaining when he realized the difference between what he should receive and what he was being paid. The humiliation and the abandonment to which he was relegated by society, which saw with scorn this poor man nearly transformed into a beast, was even supported by the State. Ramos uses the character of a "yellow soldier" as an allegoric allusion to the way in which the State makes itself present in the regions of the *sertão*, and particularly for people like Fabiano.

The first appearance of the yellow soldier is in the chapter "Cadeia", the third of the book. It is not without reason that the personality is subordinated to the episode that gives name to the chapter. This would be the only way by which the State is present for a citizen such as Fabiano and his family, in those abandoned and entirely unknown lands. The government and the law only appear to demonstrate the insignificant place in which men like Fabiano are found.

Another character that arises in a secondary manner, reinforcing, however, the idea of an arbitrary power that is exercised over or against Fabiano was that of the municipal tax collector. He appears in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter, when Fabiano goes to his bosses' house in the city to receive payment for his services. In Fabiano's memory, the collector is associated to the moment in which he complained of being swindled at the time of payment, and the humiliation he suffered for having the impertinence to disagree with his boss.

He remembered what happened years ago, before the drought, far away. On a tough day he had to turn to the skinny pig that wouldn't fatten in the sty, which was reserved for the Christmas expenses: he would kill him before his time and sell him in the city. But the municipal tax collector came with the bill and botched his plan, Fabiano pretended not to understand: to not understand anything, he was curt. Since the other explained that upon selling the pig, he would have to pay taxes, he tried to convince him that there was no pig, there were quarters of a pig, pieces of meat. The agent got angry, insulted him, and Fabiano cowered. Very well. God would free them of the situation with the government. He decided he could have his things. He didn't understand taxes. (...)

He supposed that the barley was his. Now if the town wanted a part of it, he was finished. He would go home and eat the meat. Could he eat the meat? Could he or couldn't he? (Ramos, 1981: 94)

These are the only two moments in which Fabiano entered in contact with the government. Tied to a world and a logic that he did not understand, he nevertheless felt its perverse effects. Fabiano and his family were deprived of everything, even the very means of defense, and felt they were forced to give in.

(...) the dry fields, the boss, the soldiers, and the municipal tax collectors. Everything was against him. (Ramos, 1981: 95)

Tied to this dual perverse circle: that of nature and of society, Fabiano would retreat to an animal condition. He must be tough, have the shell of an armadillo, if not he would be destined to despair (Ramos, 1981: 24). The zoomorphization conducted by the Alagoan writer clearly expressed the dehumanization to which these creatures were submit. The permanent approximation that the protagonist made between the state of being a man or an animal and the very brutish language, reduced nearly entirely to grunting, was, certainly a most truthful formula



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for representing the reality of the *sertanejo* world. The book is also highlighted by the uncommon presentation of two central characters without names. They are simply designated as the younger and older child. The two personalities described in each of the chapters with these titles reflect the degree of dehumanization in the daily lives of these individuals.

With these mechanisms, Graciliano Ramos achieved the desired effect, without falling into the exaggeration of explanation. It is the very structure of the novel that best marked the problems raised. Silence was precisely the most expressive element of the book (Candido, 1984). All the beings would be equalized as animals in a life repeated since the time of his grandfather and of his parents, determined by nature and by a power that loomed like a demiurge above all, determining all destinies. The boss, the tax collectors or the soldier were all unknown powers in an unjust society that condemned the *sertanejo* to die or to be strong like an animal.

The brutalization that reality imposed on these beings, their dehumanization, was presented through another language. By naming things man essentially appropriates reality and gives it meaning (Almeida, 1999: 304). Language, in this way, distinguishes humans from other living beings. In *Vidas Secas* this issue is presented in various forms. It arises in the zoomorphization of the characters and in the polarized approximation between animal-man and man-animal. Fabiano was nearly an animal, he felt strong like an animal, but also humiliated like an animal. The idea and the images are nearly always twofold:

He lived far from men, he only got along well with animals. His tough feet broke the thorns and didn't feel the heat of the earth. Mounted, he became one with the horse, stuck to him. He spoke a sung, monosyllabic and guttural language that this partner understood. On foot, he didn't last long. He swung from one side to the other, bowlegged, crooked and ugly. Sometimes in his relations with people, he used the same language with which he addressed the brutes – exclamations, onomatopoeias. In reality, he spoke little. He admired the long and difficult words of people of the city, tried to reproduce some, in vain, but knew that they were useless and dangerous. (Ramos, 1981: 19).

Note how in this passage there is a duplicity of meanings. They could be positive and negative. To be an animal was also to be strong, to resist the intemperate physical environment, the drought, the difficulties of survival in such a dry climate. But being an animal was in the negative sense, to not be a man, with all of his attributes of dignity. The very difficulty of language, or the complete lack of knowledge of it, also implied a lack of knowledge of his reality. The domain of language was the domain of the world, of reality, of an understanding of its mechanisms. To know words, allowed understanding why reality was the way it was, that is why he affirmed it was dangerous.

The positive sense of being an animal was precisely that of being able to resist the environment. A man could not resist. Seu Tomás da bolandeira was the example Fabiano would know of this man and because he was a man, could not survive the drought:

He remembered Seu Tomás da bolandeira. Of the men of the sertão the most punished was Seu Tomás da bolandeira. Why? Only if because he read too much. Fabiano, would often say: – ‘Seu Tomás, you have no control. Why so much paper? When the reckoning comes, Seu Tomás you'll fall just like the others.’ Well the drought came, and the poor old man, so good and well-read, lost everything, wandered around, limp. Perhaps he had already passed away. A person like him couldn't survive a tough summer.

(Ramos, 1981: 21)

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But Fabiano was also a humiliated animal, who lived dragging himself from here to there, running from corner to corner, escaping like an animal, to whom they only threw bones (Ramos, 1981: 96). Graciliano's zoomorphism worked in both directions. The only animal that accompanied Fabiano was a nearly human dog, who almost spoke, and that, unlike his sons, had a name. The centrality of the question of the dehumanization of man, which was realized in the tough conditions of the *sertão*, could be understood through this polarity of the theme man-animal, animal-man. The chapter "Baleia" was the first prepared by Graciliano, when he wrote it as a story to publish in newspapers. The others were developed from this one. This chapter, therefore, contains all the themes that would later be exposed in detail. The importance of this personality-animal could be found in his constant presence throughout the novel. Of the thirteen chapters that compose the history of the family, the writer mentioned the dog Baleia in the final phrases of nine of them (Malard, 1976: 64).

The animal-being was related to the archaic nature of Fabiano and his family's language. Words could make him a man, since they would allow him to understand his reality, understand the exploitation to which he was submit and contest it, that is, rise above the condition of animal. Fabiano understood that this reality could be improved if he had more than just the rudiments of language. He thought of the education of his children. In the dreams of Fabiano and Sinha Vitória, one day the boys would learn the "difficult and necessary things" (Ramos, 1981: 126). But this would only happen when the droughts would end.

Fabiano's vision of the world that he knew was marked by total fatalism, the result of an experience that was repeated for generations. He only knew one reality, the same as that of his ancestors, and it was as cyclical as nature, the drought and the rains. The very organization of the book would obey this cycle that began with the chapter "Change", passed through "Winter" and ended in "Escape". That is, it began with the drought, passed through the rains and returned to the drought to conclude. Note that the chapter "Winter" would be precisely the central point of convergence, preceded and followed by six chapters;

The life of the family would obey the same course, escaping a previous drought and winding up having to leave once again, to escape the drought one more time. The novel would tell of this essential moment to stop somewhere and take a break, marked by the rains, in the same way that "Winter" was the central chapter. A non-historic concept of time would be imprinted on Fabiano's perspective, cause and effect of the very process of his animalization. At no time could Fabiano understand the place that he occupied within society, but he did understand the place he occupied in nature. There existed within him an implicit symbiosis between man and nature, which strongly recalled Euclides da Cunha (Candido, 1993: 47).

From Euclides da Cunha would come the inspiration for a deterministic perspective that had a distinct connotation in Graciliano's work. For the Alagoan writer, the man of the *sertão* would never be ontologically degraded, his subhuman situation would be the fruit of fundamentally historic and social contingencies aggravated in an environment where hostility is ordinary. The determinism was thus transposed – and this is Euclides' inspiration – by the narrative structure, by the view of the protagonist.

Everything appears natural to Fabiano, everything obeys an undetermined cyclic process, similar to the processes of nature. In fact it would be nature that would determine their lives. Both his change as well as his escape were imposed by climatic events. Life on the farm was also a consequence of a natural process marked by the rains. The monotonous cycle of their lives

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followed the circularity of time in the *sertão*, the continuous return of the same natural events - drought-rain-drought. In the same way, life for Fabiano was stuck in this eternal process. Everything seemed natural to him and he accepted his destiny passively.

In the chapter dedicated to Fabiano, when he reached the farm and installs himself there, an interior monologue of the protagonist is developed. Various passages can be extracted that shed light on his deeply rooted fatalism. In this chapter, Fabiano, recently arrived and with the promise of rain, sought to reflect on his condition as a *vaqueiro* and *sertanejo* escaping the drought. The reader becomes aware not only of his condition before the difficulties of nature, already presented in the first and previous chapter, but also of his social condition as farm hand. In this interior monologue, four passages, presented below, reveal Fabiano's determinism.

His head inclined, spine curved spine, he shook his arms to the right and left. These movements were useless, but the *vaqueiro*, the father of the *vaqueiro*, the grandfather and other older ancestors were accustomed to roaming the trail, pushing back the brush with their hands. The children have already begun to reproduce this inherited gesture. (...)

His fate was to roam the world, ramble aimlessly from here to there, like a wandering Jew. A tramp pushed by the drought. (...)

The cattle increased, the work went well, but the boss abused the *vaqueiro*. This was natural. Abused him because he could. (...)

If the drought arrives, there would be no green plants. He shivered. It would arrive, naturally. It had always been this way, as long as he could recall. And before he could recall, since before he was born, it went on like that, good years mixed with bad years. (Ramos, 1981: 17, 19, 22, 23)

For Fabiano, his human gestures and reactions or the exploitation of the boss, like the drought or the rain, were all natural and necessary processes that obeyed a superior and undecipherable order. Only the secular fate of men like he and his father and grandfather were repeated. As the lives of his children would be, all born to be *vaqueiros* and work on other peoples' farms, or to roam the *sertão* when the drought came. This destiny would be marked for generations. The younger boy, in his dreams, admired Fabiano and imitated him. Dreamed of being big like his father and mounting the back of a fierce horse.

### **Brazilian modernity in Graciliano Ramos**

This novel by Graciliano Ramos presents a general concept of Brazil that is interesting to highlight here. In the first place, it is necessary to recall that the writer was a man with clear political convictions who had a purpose for his literature. What precisely were these proposals?

Graciliano was a man and above all a writer who belonged to a generation marked by engagement. There was no doubt that his was a literature that not only spoke of a region, but above all one that offered a social criticism of Brazil. Graciliano's mastery was the way that he realized this purpose, while maintaining an unequalled literary quality.

A number of Ramos' articles make clear his intentions, as well as the view that he had of Brazilian society. Before becoming a novelist known in Brazil and abroad during the 1930's and 1940's, the Alagoan writer would publish articles in which he analyzed Brazil's political culture and the type of society developing, particularly in the Northeast. In reports written in 1929-1930, when he was mayor of Palmeira dos Índios, he mentioned his difficulties, nearly all related to the power of the local bosses. With these references, Graciliano Ramos' concerns were clear as well

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as his view of the government sphere, its relations with private power, as well as the criticism that he had of the type of society that in the Northeast appeared to be well defined.

In the articles written in 1921, Graciliano spoke of the feudalism, the authoritarianism and the relations of dependence and favors that made public jobs a highly valued currency. In turn, the colonels (as the land owners were known) demonstrated powerful influence with politicians at the highest levels. At this early date, the Alagoan writer already proved to be a critic familiar with the network of this game of influence and of its consequences for the interior of the country.

His reports as mayor also present the writer's view of Brazil. He wrote of the obstacles to eliminating the countless useless hangers-on that disrupted municipal administration; from the local bosses that controlled municipal government; to deviation of funds; the high prices and graft that were conducted through the municipal contracts and electrical suppliers, the extortion, etc. As mayor, Graciliano, had difficulty terminating this favoritism. His attitude manifest a concept of public service that was not common in the region at that time, indicated by tremendous integrity and a notion of the public good distinct from the self-interest and manipulation of influence that negotiated jobs and positions in the State machinery.

In this phase of his life, before he began writing novels, he revealed, through his actions at the head of municipal government or the other public posts he held, a radical nonconformity with the political habits and organization of Brazilian society. His ideals and reasoning towards the problems that he confronted, went beyond the local backwardness and the routine practices of favoritism. These would be frequent themes once he began writing fiction. Yet Graciliano Ramos' literary production was highlighted not only by its social content and criticism of the predominant injustice and poverty in the Northeast, but also by its research and analysis of the contradictions of Brazilian society. In fact, these two themes were part of a single focus: the first was a consequence of the second, the result of Brazil's development process.

This focus was repeated various times in his work. By striving to create literature that would represent the Northeast and particularly the *sertão*, Graciliano emphasized the idea of a real Brazil opposed to another modern and caricatured one. For this Alagoan writer, the modern Brazil did not go beyond a poorly organized imitation of European countries. The issue was presented in various manners. The insistence on fine literature would be one of the writer's favorite formulas, since with it he debated the marked presence in the country, and in particular in the interior, of an artificial educated culture that saw in the cult of letters an obligatory fashion for those who intended to remain at the top of the social pyramid. Characters representing this trend were present in *Caetés*, *São Bernardo*, *Angústia* and *Vidas Secas* although, in the latter, in a secondary manner, through the personality of Seu Tomás da bolandeira.

The scenes that raise the problem of the contradiction of Brazilian modernity are emphatic. An analysis of the articles he wrote as a youth, reveals the explicit presence of this issue, notable for their forceful language. The expressions "macaquear" [to ape] and "papagaiar" [to parrot], were common to his writing, depicting the disarray of Brazilian society, which made great efforts to associate the national reality to practices and discourses that were completely artificial and foreign, particularly to the local universe.

The words *papagaiar* and *macaquear* refer to imitating or speaking without association or meaning. In the case of Graciliano's literature, they refer to the distance between the discourse and reality discussed. This distance, as well as the imitation, reappear in his chronicles, stories

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and memoirs. The insistence on the theme leaves no doubt of the writer's thinking. Ramos questioned not only the fate of his characters, but unequivocally the fate of the country. His literature, committed to being a study of reality and a method for understanding it, strove to conduct, with each literary experience, a study of Brazilian modernity and its most grave and profound consequences for daily life.

Ramos' novels transported to the interior of the character the drama of an existence lived between humiliation and misery, as well as the mechanisms of survival of a society divided between the horror of progress and the shame of backwardness (Schwarz, 1992: 23). Speaking particularly of a region where poverty and backwardness were a constant norm, Graciliano would highlight the way that this progress and modernity overlapped a radically constructed reality and was built on the foundation of the latifundio and slavery. It is important to remember that the writer spoke precisely of the 1930's, when the country's modernization intensified. Graciliano watched the march of events with a radical and distrusting inquisitive eye.

His work "peeled the facts", to examine them carefully and look for meaning in them. His goal as a writer was to interpret the world that he knew and call attention to its incoherency, as did Paulo Honório, a character in *São Bernardo*, who through an attempt at writing, sought to understand his life. This was the understanding that Graciliano had of writing. It was a form of knowing and analyzing the reality of man. The intransigence that would mark his political activity as mayor and director of public education would be the same that marked his writing and the vision that he presented through it. Dryness and intransigence were part of a behavior and a way of perceiving reality that would confront the so-called culture of *malandragem*<sup>5</sup> (Candido, 1970).

The colonial inheritance, by stigmatizing the Brazilian social structure with slavery, created a space for interaction among those who were not slaves and the large land owners, which was realized through countless mediations and subterfuges. Sustained on the basis of favors in their various configurations, this type of social relationship had as one of its principal expressions a mode of being and acting in society, marked by a personal standard, which essentially sought individual gain and benefit, by avoiding the law or the impersonal rules.

Graciliano Ramos would critically resist the culture of *malandragem*. The dryness intensely reflected in his writing was, in fact the expression of this intransigence toward the accepted rules. When he was mayor and director of public education, he stood rigorously before a society completely inured to the practices of favors.

It is interesting to note that the most perverse manifestation of the favor was highlighted in *Vidas Secas*, as well as in *São Bernardo*, *Angústia* or *Caetés*. The yellow soldier would enforce the power of law against the weakest and most unprotected. In *São Bernardo* justice was always upheld in favor of the farm owner and protagonist Paulo Honório. In *Angústia* and *Caetés* it would be the element of dependence expressed by the hired gun, which would define the course of life of each of the characters who circulated through the scenery of the two novels.

The perspective on Brazil was always distinguished by an intransigence expressed through irony. An understanding of the ideas that guide the writer can also be obtained through the chronicles

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<sup>5</sup> *Malandragem*: is a term commonly used in Brazil to refer to shrewd behavior and ruses used to obtain advantage.

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that he wrote for the magazine *Cultura Política*, published by the administration of the Estado Novo[New Government], or through his children's book *Pequena História da República* (Brief History of the Republic). These texts, written in the 1940's, reveal with great strength the critical and acrimonious perspective of the writer of *Vidas Secas*.

Even collaborating with a magazine distributed by the Estado Novo government, Graciliano would maintain his autonomy, although in a less explicit manner. The question – what country is this? – was repeatedly raised in a persistent although raw situation, which indicated a current concern, dragging along with it contradiction and nonsense. For Graciliano it was not a proud presentation of the *sertão*. His emaciated view hovers between melancholy and a rude pessimism, refusing to romanticize the *sertanejo*. It pointed toward the backwardness and poverty of the men that lived like animals. The criticism of the modern, which appeared to be an obstinate search for the national roots in the *sertão*, was nothing more than a criticism of the artificial nature of the modernizing project that Brazil had known since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This small “fundamentally carnivalesque” Republic as he described it in one of the chronicles written at the age of 29 while he was still in Palmeira dos Índios, “imitated, adapted and reproduced” the modern formulas (Ramos, 1989: 58-60). Graciliano's writings were consistently marked by acerbic and insistent criticism, attentive to the social and economic transformations that steered the country, and through which the Northeast moved in slow steps.

The theme of this out-of-tune modernization in his novels is expressed by the composition of his characters which explore the common man, annihilated by the environment, forced to live like and become similar to animals. Insidiously, the theme becomes denser and more deeply carved in *Vidas Secas*. The social insertion of the personality composes the plot in high relief. Luís da Silva, Paulo Honório and Fabiano have their fates imprisoned. Graciliano takes this insertion to the limit, exploring its effects with strength and internal consistency, without sacrificing the aesthetic material. The infernal, fatalism would defeat all possibility of resurrection.

In his literature is present the residual Brazil formed by a world that was not included in the modern project. A world that could not even be an alternative or opposition to the other. The writer's disenchanting view would reveal a melancholic empathy for those barbaric beings who were simply spectators to the march of progress when they were not defeated by it.

The allegory of the contradiction between this modern Brazil and the *sertão*, or the backwardness, is found in clear detail in *Vidas Secas*. In this his final work of fiction, the chapter “The party”, reveals to the reader the fractures that separate these two worlds and the disproportionate and artificial imposition of the modern. Fabiano, Sinha Vitória and the boys go to a Christmas party in the city. Their clothes and shoes are tight and poorly fit. These creatures accustomed to walking barefoot and nearly naked compose the very caricature of the project of Brazilian modernity. Their clothes, like those of the city people, were “short, tight and full of patches”. Nevertheless, it was necessary to wear them at all cost to appear civilized, even if it was nothing more than an uncomfortable arrangement.

Between the last romance, *Vidas Secas*, and the writing of his memoirs, Graciliano wrote *Pequena História da República* and chronicles for the magazine *Cultura Política* in which disorder was expressed with irreverence. In his history of the Republic, the dislocation of the situations and personalities, as well as of the language, would report the characteristics of the country and its distinctive traits, establishing the absurd, the disparate and the contradiction. Rigorously adept at irony, he expressed himself not only with antiphrasis, but in a somber and

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impassive tone. This gave a degree of artificiality to facts or ideas whose importance demanded stronger terms. In the chronicles, the lean and bitter sobriety converted the panegyric discourse of the Estado Novo government, into an out-of-tune character.

Finally, the analysis and the recording of this time, the interlacing of the historic context and Graciliano's experience, revealed this exercise of abuse and provocation to be the talented method for the author's survival. His links to a government agency of the Estado Novo, as was the magazine *Cultura Política*, could not be realized without sharpening the sense of contradiction and absurdity explored in the *Pequena História da República*. For this reason it was decisive that he use irreverent tones of irony and debauchery to express a rejection of the arrogant and acritical project of the Estado Novo government.

Graciliano Ramos called attention to how far the national reality was distinct from the model that it insisted in applying. The modern vestment never appeared to adapt to the disjointed body of the country. The phantasmagory of *Angústia* revealed itself to be an allegory of Brazil's phantasmagoric reality. Note that the writer sought the Brazilian element, the man, nearly transformed into an animal, persecuted by the extraordinary hardships of nature and an unjust society. It was necessary to circumscribe the entire universe and the adjoining circumstances of this reality. Graciliano insisted precisely, through the presentation of his characters and dramas, on the real specificity of the Brazil of the *sertão*, highlighting the objective conflicts between these two Brazils.

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