

Analyses on the Sertão region from “Vidas Secas”.

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Abstract

The present work entangles Literature and Geography as a way of interpreting the polysemic social space, exploring the possibility of taking a different look at the same object, by the multiplicity of sources. From this view, we aim to make a geographic-historical analysis of the Northeastern Sertão, taking as its starting point the novel “Vidas Secas”, by Graciliano Ramos, and to characterize the territorial dynamics of the Sertão in two moments: the beginning and the end of the 20th century, from the identification of the main public policies that affected the region throughout that period and its transformations/permanencies in that locality. That analysis revealed that unequal power relations in the Sertão link economic to political power and condition public policies aimed at mitigating the scourge of drought in the region, which lead us to conclude that, despite the recent modernization in Brazil, several socio-spatial relationships have remained largely unchanged.

Keywords: Historical Geography; Literature; Public policies; “Vidas Secas”; Graciliano Ramos; Brazilian Sertão.

1. Introduction

In the last decades, there has been a significant growth in studies related to Historical Geography, although many of them carry this title while sticking only to monographic descriptions of spaces in later times. Anyway, either by the dissemination of courses with lines of research related to this area, or by the multiplication of publications and scientific events, the greater volume also brought more accurate and careful production that casts qualitative views on past territorial dynamics (Costa, 2019 and Andrade, 2021). In this context, many authors have sought to link unorthodox sources to historical geographic research, such as orality and the use of fictional texts.

It is in this context that the defended article is inserted. Literature and Geography¹ are enmeshed, as diverse ways of interpreting the polysemic social space, since, with the multiplicity of sources, it is possible to focus on the same object with different glances, updating it or showing it from different perspectives.

It is a challenge to launch interpretative arrows that allow critical analysis on the historical production of the regional territory. To identify agents and think about possibilities for transforming social life from a comprehensive view, with multiple sources. This establishes a historical analysis of habits, practices, and regional identities and power games that have an impact on the production of space from unequal forces. Based on this approach, the intention here is to give visibility to groups that are subalternized in the historical process, observing public policies based on their demands for agendas and, thus, enabling new voices in the relationship between State, society, and territorial dynamics.

In the light of this understanding, the aim of this text is to make a Geographic-Historical analysis of the Northeastern Sertão, taking as its starting point the novel “Vidas Secas” by Graciliano Ramos. Also, to characterize the territorial dynamics of the Sertão in two distinct moments: the beginning and the end of the 20th century.

¹ Following the path of other authors such as the ones that appears in Pinheiro e Silva's compilation (2004 and 2007) or in Grossmann's *et all* work (1993).

It seeks to identify the public policies that affected the region throughout this time frame and what are the transformations and permanencies in this geographic space. In short, from a critical perspective, the objective is to discuss historical issues of the territory on a regional scale and think about the current context in the search for emancipatory actions.

The starting point of the study is the Northeastern Sertão from the 20th century. The literary text of Graciliano Ramos, in a regionalist language, linked to the 2nd modernist phase of the national literature, brings a non-linear story written in the third person singular: the author himself telling the story of Fabiano and his family. Each chapter assembled by a family member, in addition to “Festa”, “Contas”, “Inverno”, the arrival at the place where the plot takes place (“Mudança”) and the departure from that locality (“Fuga”), at the end of the novel. In the context of the family saga, chapters for the “Cadeia”, the “Soldado amarelo” and the dog “Baleia” still appear, in addition to the emblematic “Um mundo coberto de penas”².

The book covers the migratory movement of sertanejo³ Fabiano’s family that travels through the severe caatinga in search of landing/work and ends with the departure of the same family in search of new landings (perhaps the city) in the face of a new droughts cycle. In addition to presenting the physiographic and socioeconomic determinants that induce migratory flows in the main repulsive region of the Brazilian territory, it presents behavioral nuances and ingrained social themes that reveal the unequal forces that affect the power relations in the region.

The reading of the novel generates interpretative possibilities about the sociospatial dynamics of the Sertões and leads to questions about the topicality of its text after, practically, a century of its writing.

Based on this problematic, documental research was taken as a methodological support to identify which public policies affected the region throughout the 20th century and, applying a methodology already used by Andrade (2004) and based on the parameters of Historical Geography (Vasconcelos, 1999 and 2016), to analyze the territorial dynamics in two distinct moments (beginning and end of the time frame) characterizing the main permanencies and spatial transformations.

With this goal, the text is divided in three interior sections: the first, with the territorial characterization of the vast sertões of northeastern Brazil; the second, with a presentation of the main federal public policies that affected the region in contrast to the socioeconomic data available throughout the 20th century; the third, where the novel “Vidas Secas” is resumed and, based on fragments of the text, the main transformations and permanencies in the Sertão space characterized by Graciliano Ramos is analyzed.

Certain, that this writing is added to others already published on the work of Graciliano Ramos and also on the sertões, under various perspectives, such as the books of Castro (1946), Aguiar (1985), Graziano Neto (1991). We believe, presumably, that there is a contribution in presenting an innovative approach that updates the author’s work in a methodological advance for related research linked to Historical Geography. The limitation of a text exposed in a scientific article is understood, however, this is an attempt to go beyond a mere description and contribute to the constructs of the studies that use literary texts as a research source.

2. Ser... tã...⁴

Sertão. This is a term that holds a myriad of meanings and possible approaches. It is conceivable to cover the sertões as the unreachable, widely used in the colonial period, or the sertão of the Brazilian drought polygon, also the sertões of Minas Gerais in the Jequitinhonha valley, modern terms address the sertões west of the São Francisco river, also the sertões of Ceará and Piauí as clear spatial references of northeastern sub-regions. A general line that associates them is the idea of the inhospitable, inaccessible, “ser tã” distant as opposed to the populated, busy, modern coastline.

In a classic text from the beginning of the 18th century, Father Raphael Bluteau (1720, p.613) indicates the following definition for the Sertão vernacular: “Region, separated from the sea, and everywhere, between lands. *Mediterranea Regio*”. More recently, Castro (1992, p.179) treats sub-regions of the hinterland area as “agreste, caatinga and alto-sertão”, that is, differentiating them internally. Referring to the etymology of the name, in a brief essay that covers the polysemy associated with the “sertão”, Amado (1995, p.4) writes that:

² The option was made to maintain the original version of the text from the book “Vidas Secas” at all times when fragments of it were used in direct quotation. That because we understand that in the linguistic expression of a literary work there are inapprehensive feelings and regional manifestations to a direct translation.

³ Person from sertão.

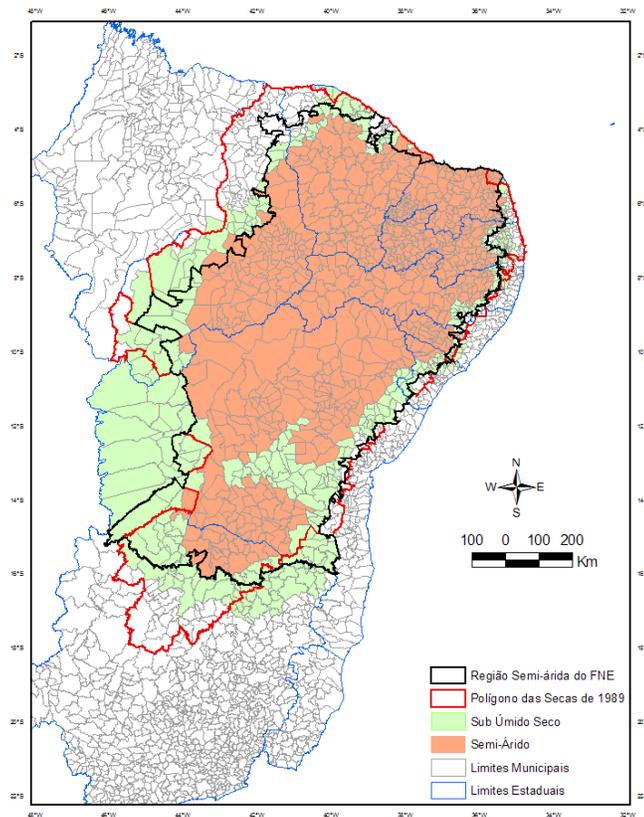
⁴ Literal translation: to be so.

Segundo alguns estudiosos (Nunes, 1784, p.428), “sertão” ou “certão” seria corruptela de “desertão”; segundo outros (Teles, 1991), proviria do latim clássico *serere*, *sertanum* (trançado, entrelaçado, embrulhado), *desertum* (desertor, aquele que sai da fileira e da ordem) e *desertanum* (lugar desconhecido para onde foi o desertor). Desde o século XVI, as duas grafias foram empregadas por numerosos viajantes e cronistas do nascente império português [...] de grandes espaços interiores, pouco ou nada conhecidos.

The same author recalls that currently the uses are still diverse, both dealing with a specific region in the Brazilian territory (northeastern sertão) and with different spatial references in the immense national territory, such as the “sertão de dentro”⁵, in the State of Amazonas, together to the border with Venezuela, or “sertão de fora”⁶, in Rio Grande do Sul, referring to the border with Uruguay (Amado, 1995). In the approach that is used in this article, Moraes (2003) teaches that the Sertão is not exactly an empirical type of place. More than a spatial cut-out unit, what we have is a symbolic sertão, full of idiosyncrasies, heterogeneities, yet part of a dynamic and interwoven network of specialized relationships that keep a strong symbolic meaning and demarcate a geographical region.

Understanding the polysemy of the term and the consequent difficulty in establishing a rigid regional spatial profile, in this article the option was to work with the vast areas of imprecise limits of the recognized northeastern sertão, that predominantly is included in the drought polygon (Figure 01), delimited in public policies since 1936 and regulated in 2005 with the determination of the inclusion of municipalities based on very objective criteria such as the average rainfall index below 1,000 mm/year.

Figure 01. Drought Polygon and the semiarid region of FNE (Constitutional Fund for the Financing of the Northeastern region).



Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Regiao-Nordeste-Poligono-das-Secas-e-Regiao-Semi-arida-do-FNE_fig1_321264578

Elaboration: Jémisson Mattos dos Santos

⁵ The interior sertão.

⁶ The outside sertão.

This generic Sertão, used here, despite its territorial vastness, has very typical physiographic characteristics, despite the obvious nuances of its sub-regions. With shallow, sandy or stony soils, litholic neossols, as a result of severe physical weathering, xerophytic vegetation predominates with low savanna areas and, mainly, caatinga (Conti; Furlan, 1995, p. 173). Adapted to low humidity, the vegetation has inalienable marks such as accifused deciduous foliage, deep roots and sap reservoirs. On the relation between the sertanejo and this vegetation in the quest to mitigate hunger, Castro (1992, 277) writes that:

O homem esgota tudo em torno para nutrir-se: o cardo, o xique-xique, em beijus; a batata da macambira em farinha; a maniçoba como se fora mandioca; as sementes da mucunã torradas, pisadas, lavadas, relavadas em nove águas, em goma; carnaúba em sopa; o umbu é um agrado da providência... O palmito da carnaúba, a palmeira providencial, até ela, último recurso... Que extrair desta parca e até, as vezes, nociva alimentação?

The semiarid tropical climate with rainfall concentrated in the summer and early autumn months (December to April) determines the experience of the annual life cycle with relative water scarcity (maximum threshold of up to 700mm per year, but poorly distributed) imposing dry winters and springs, sometimes intensified with the decrease of rainy cycles in the years of the El Niño phenomenon. Castro (1992, p. 218 and 228), without naming El Niño, empirically reports that

A seca generalizada, cujo período parece ser de 10 ou 11 anos, e a seca excepcional, que parece obedecer ao ciclo de 50 anos [...] secas de excepcionais proporções, como as de 1744, de 1790, de 1877, de 1846, de 1915 e de 1932, encontram-se instantâneos [imagens, fotografias] destes retirantes em todos os graus e formas de penúria orgânica, caindo de fome à beira das estradas.

Despite being the most populated semiarid region in the world, with about 12 million Brazilians living in its imprecise limits, the northeastern sertão is also the main demographic-repelling region in the history of internal migration in Brazil. The continuous emigration flows that leave from there, precisely presented by Graciliano Ramos in “Vidas Secas”, for example, are the result of the perverse binomial: the difficulties of living in the face of natural rigors and the political-economic use of wealthy land groups that exploit the neediest, the infamous policy or “drought industry” (Andrighetti, 1998, p. 41).

This brief exercise in demarcating the northeastern sertão, as well as its physical configuration and repercussions on regional social dynamics, is fundamental for the immersion in the object studied here, as well as for understanding the content of public policies that affected that space throughout the 20th century (thematic of the section that follows) and for the dialogue between the sertão put by “Vidas Secas” and the current situation (focus of the last section).

3. Analysis of public actions selected for the northeastern sertão

The characterization of the sertão as an area of poverty propagation in which the end of the population that seeks to work with the land is migration is a scene that constitutes the Brazilian imagination about the region, often as a definitive perception generated especially, if not completely, by the climatic conditions in the semiarid region. Thus, public policies aimed at maintaining the population in the sertão usually involves actions that aim at making water and other resources related to the climate available, without necessarily even mentioning the alteration of the power structures that have wide responsibility for the maintenance of misery foci in the region.

In this context, the main public policies created during the 20th century in order to mitigate the effects of the drought in this region are addressed here. Initially, it should be noted that, due to the evident limitations of the text, this writing covers only some public policies, that is, government initiatives aimed at aspects that affect the life of the population of a national location, selected amongst the initiatives of the federal government aimed at reducing the effects caused by the drought, created during the late 20th century, executed and financed with mostly federal resources and the main aspects of each one, as well as the direct impacts on the region's population.

One of the first relevant actions of the public authorities aiming to mitigate the impacts of the drought was the creation, in 1909, of the Inspectorate of Works Against the Drought, IOCS, renamed as the Federal Inspectorate of Works Against the Drought, IFOCS, in 1919, culminating finally in National Department of Works Against the Drought, DNOCS, in 1945.

DNOCS is the oldest federal agency still in existence and had, at the time of its creation, a series of objectives related especially to the execution of works to mitigate the effects of the drought, such as the construction of wells and dams and the use of groundwater, in addition to carrying out joint actions with other entities for the development of fish farming, agricultural and pastoral culture linked to technological development⁷.

In order to make DNOCS's activities feasible, the government defined that the agency's actions would be aimed at the region known as "Drought Polygon", with an area initially delimited by Law no. 175, January 7th, 1936⁸, and later modified by a series of decrees and, currently, according to the law that governs the DNOCS, its area of operation covers municipalities of the States of Piauí, Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Alagoas, Sergipe, Bahia and Minas Gerais, in addition to the hydrographic basins of the Parnaíba (State of Maranhão) and Jequitinhonha (State of Minas Gerais) rivers⁹.

The performance of DNOCS, despite having very appropriate guidelines that denote the government's concern with the sertão's population, during the 20th century, in fact, was especially focused on the construction of wells and weirs, which in itself is not enough to maintain the work of the sertanejos. In addition, an even more problematic action was the installation of these wells and weirs especially in private areas, belonging to the landowners in the region, without in fact generating the indiscriminate access of workers to water and the possible feeding resulting from the fish farming previously developed in them. In this sense, it is still worth mentioning that a series of installed wells was not even installed in the sertão but in private spaces on the coast, such as clubs and condominiums (Andrighetti, 1998, p. 25).

The current legislation establishes objectives similar to those originally determined in addition to the forecast of promoting the expropriation of land destined for the implementation of projects¹⁰ and the carrying out of credit and financing operations¹¹, which seems to denote a understanding regarding the centrality of the power structures in the region, characterized by the collision of the landowners with the landless sertanejos and without resources in general, in the maintenance of arid conditions faced by the sertanejos in the region, and the need to combat the drought industry so that it is possible for them to remain in the sertão, developing mainly agricultural and pastoral activities aimed at subsistence and the internal market.

In this sense, the structure of the DNOCS brings specific entities aimed respectively at studies, projects and works related to the region's water infrastructure and the development of technology for agricultural, fishing and aquaculture operations¹².

However, in the budget forecast of the agency for the year 2021¹³, of the approximately BRL 161 million destined to DNOCS expenses, only about BRL 165 thousand, that is, approximately 0.1% will be turned to water resources, about 90 thousand to research and agricultural innovation and about 45 thousand to regional, territorial, and urban development. The small amount of resources aimed at regional, territorial, and urban development is certainly the most worrying, considering that investment in water resources, at least in the way it has been done, has not generated corresponding results, despite continuing to be the focus of DNOCS's activities in the area, as indicated by the budget forecast data.

A second government response to the effects of drought in the region, and perhaps the most relevant to date, was the creation of the Northeast Development Superintendence, the Sudene, in 1950, an entity created not specifically with a view of combating the drought, but of the development of the Northeast as a whole,

⁷ Brazil, 01jun1963, article 2nd.

⁸ Brazil, 07jan1936, article 2nd: "A área dos Estados do Norte, a considerar no plano referido no art. 1º, é limitada pela polygonal, cujos vertices são os seguintes: cidades de Aracaty, Acarahú e Camocim no Ceará; intersecção do meridiano de 44º W. G., com o paralelo de 9º; intersecção do mesmo meridiano, com o paralelo de 11º e cidade de Amargosa, no Estado da Bahia; cidade de Traipú no Estado de Alagoas; cidade de Caruarú, no Estado de Pernambuco; cidade de Campina Grande, no Estado da Parahyba; e cidade de Natal, no Estado do Rio Grande do Norte".

⁹ Brazil, 01jun1963, article 2nd, XVIII, § 3rd.

¹⁰ Brazil, 01jun1963, article 2nd, X, according to the wording given by Law 10,204, of 2001: "promover, na forma da legislação em vigor, a desapropriação de terras destinadas à implantação de projetos e proceder à concessão ou à alienação das glebas em que forem divididas".

¹¹ Brazil, 01jun1963, article 2nd, XVI, according to the wording given by Law 10,204, of 2001: "realizar operações de crédito e financiamento, internas e externas, na forma da lei".

¹² DNOCS, 10jan2021.

¹³ Brazil, 02apr2021.

which involves the socioeconomic development necessary to alter the power structures that sustain the drought industry and amplify the effects of the climatic phenomenon.

Under the command of Celso Furtado, Sudene aimed at a series of structural reforms that would allow the population the possibility of living with the drought without the need to escape from the region in the most arid moments, but of permanence in there by the maintenance of the basic activities even during these periods.

In other words, this new body brought a proposal for integrated regional development that went through infrastructure works as usual, but that was also aimed at basic areas whose development would boost the region's continuous progress, such as investments in the area of basic education.

However, the break in the status quo of regional investments much more focused on works and theoretically mitigating the consequences brought about by the drought, that is, a confrontation geared to combat, not coexistence, which brings the connivance with the regional oligarchic power structure at its ground, was not seen positively by conservative politicians in the region and Sudene's innovative projects fell apart, causing it to become a new entity with well-known policies, continuing the infrastructure works that, as usual, did not favor workers who actually suffer from the effects of the drought (Andrighetti, 1998, p. 28-31).

Currently, Sudene's objective is to "stimulate the development of territories, cities and regions, expanding the productive and urban structuring, and the provision of public services for the reduction of socioeconomic inequalities, on multiple scales", which is done especially from the installation of industries in the region, attracted by the relevant tax incentives provided by the agency, which, in the form of consideration, seek the development of technology and cultural projects in the region. As an example, of the approximately BRL 33 million earmarked for the agency, only about BRL 340 thousand, that is, approximately 1% of Sudene's budget, will be converted into investments in science and technology¹⁴.

Finally, a third government action in the region was the creation of so-called emergency fronts, job opportunities offered after long periods of drought to workers who lost their crops during the drought. The remuneration paid to workers is about half a minimum wage, a contribution financed mainly by the federal government (Andrighetti, 1998, p. 39-41).

These work fronts have an emergency nature, hence the name "emergency fronts" and are temporary, lasting a few months. In fact, the fronts provide conditions for the sertanejos to remain in the region, instead of risking looking for work in large cities, however, it is undeniable that the amount paid for the sertanejos' work, which is often used to build infrastructure for the large estates and for the disposal of production, is not enough to guarantee a dignified life for these workers.

However, the fronts do not always cover workers who actually lost their sources of livelihood during the dry season and it is common for workers including the ones with other sources of income, or originals from municipalities that do not suffer directly from the drought, to be included in the fronts and use it in order to earn an extra income (Bernardino, 1998). Still, the works made available by the fronts are not enough in some states to help the entire population that is in a situation of misery in the period after the long droughts (Buarim Júnior, 1998).

Today, we have a regional policy still very much focused on the development of major works, among which, with reservations, the recent crossing of the São Francisco river is inserted, since, despite notably favoring the creation of jobs in the region and bringing benefits, in this sense, for local workers, it is still an initiative that does not aim to effectively change the socioeconomic and land tenure structure of the region. Thus, the Drought Polygon continues to be one of the areas that most repels its population in Brazil, either to other regions of the country or to regional centralities, in search of basic conditions for survival.

4. Transformations and permanencies in the sertões of "Vidas Secas"

In light of the characterization of the northeastern sertões, as well as the main public policies that affected the region at the turn of the 20th century, it is envisaged, in summary, to identify the main transformations and permanencies in the regional socio-spatial dynamics, having as a starting point the referred work scored by Graciliano Ramos.

¹⁴Brazil, 20feb2021.

Over the last century, the Brazilian territory has undergone an industrialization and urbanization process, the former structuring in economic archipelagos has become a relatively dense national urban network with regard to material and immaterial flows. The territorialization of techniques in space, however, is selective, which has led to heterogeneity in the insertion of different regions of the country in the most modern circuits¹⁵.

It is in this broad context that, in a synthesis exercise, we try to highlight fragments of the book “Vidas Secas” that express different territorial realities of the northeastern sertão in 1939 and update them with analyzes based on sources of current times.

The first group of selected passages mentions the “rough” sertão, little humanized and mainly inferiorized by the notion of modernity that Graciliano Ramos (1938) present in fragments such as:

Vivia longe dos homens, só se dava bem com animais [p.55].

Admirava as palavras compridas e difíceis da gente da cidade, tentava reproduzir algumas, em vão, mas sabia que elas eram inúteis e talvez perigosas [p.55].

Fabiano dava-se bem com a ignorância [p.57].

Se aprendesse qualquer coisa, necessitaria aprender mais, e nunca ficaria satisfeito [p.57].

Na caatinga ele às vezes cantava de galo, mas na rua encolhia-se [65].

Havia muitas coisas. Ele não podia explicá-las, mas havia [p.71].

Por isso [dificuldade de falar com os outros] não conseguia defender-se, botar as coisas nos seus lugares [p.73].

In this same sense, Euclides da Cunha (1903, p.77) had already given the verdict that “The sertanejo is, above all, a strong one”.

In addition to the marks, sometimes stereotyped, of a group that lives in a situation of scarcity and with little social contact, given the predominance of widely spaced rural occupation, notably in the first half of the 20th century, there is in the affirmations and in this way understanding a clear value judgment that undermines the sertanejo who works in the countryside in relation to the knowledge of urban individuals, even in the interior of the region. This perspective remains present at the end of that century. There are two levels of prejudice related to this social group: internally, in relation to those who continue to live by means of subsistence in the countryside, externally, towards groups of immigrants who arrive in other regions, as highlighted by Andrighetti (1998, p. 124-126).

The second group of excerpts from the book “Vidas Secas” concerns the visibility of unequal power relations. They appear in fragments such as:

Os outros brancos eram diferentes. O patrão atual, por exemplo, berrava sem precisão [p.58].

Fabiano, uma coisa da fazenda, um traste, seria despedido quando menos esperasse [p.59].

Qualquer dia o patrão botaria fora, e eles ganhariam o mundo, sem rumo, nem teriam meio de conduzir os cacarecos [p.59].

Os meninos eram uns brutos, como o pai. Quando crescessem, guardariam as reses de um patrão invisível, seriam pisados, maltratados, machucados por um soldado amarelo [p.75].

Iam vivendo, na graça de Deus, o patrão confiava neles – e eram quase felizes. Só faltava uma cama [de couro]. [p.82].

Os negociantes furtavam na medida, no preço e na conta. O patrão realizava com pena e tinta cálculos incompreensíveis. Da última vez que se tinham encontrado houvera uma confusão de números, e Fabiano, com os miolos ardendo, deixara indignado o escritório do banco, certo que fora enganado. Todos lhe davam prejuízo. Os caixeiros, os comerciantes e o proprietário tiravam-lhe o couro, e os que não tinham negócio com ele riam vendo-o passar nas ruas tropeçando [p.117].

Ele era bruto, sim senhor, via-se perfeitamente que era bruto, mas a mulher tinha miolo. Com certeza havia um erro no papel do branco. [...] Passar a vida inteira assim no toco, entregando o que era dele de mão beijada! Estava direito aquilo? Trabalhar como negro e nunca arranjar carta de alforria! [...] Um cabra. Ia lá puxar questão com gente rica? [p.136].

Desejaria imaginar o que ia fazer para o futuro. Não ia fazer nada. Matar-se-ia no serviço e moraria numa casa alheia, enquanto o deixassem ficar. Depois sairia pelo mundo, iria morrer de fome na caatinga seca [p.142].

Coronelismo¹⁶, exploitation of the worker, land concentration, illiteracy, religiosity and welfare are some terms that express the unequal power relations that are established in the northeastern sertão.

¹⁵According to Santos and Silveira (2001, p. 27).

¹⁶“Rule of the coronels”

Present in the subordinate form in which Fabiano behaves in front of the owner of the land (“boss”, “sir”) and the prospects for his personal and his children’s future.

Even considering the significant changes regarding access to the interior territory of the sertões and the patches of modernity that are also present there, it can be said that the relations between groups of political and economic power so distinct, still remain relatively plastered.

Authors such as Milton Santos and María Silveira (2001, p. 213) report that conflicts in the countryside had the highest absolute number in Brazil in the Northeast in 1997. In line with this information, the IBGE¹⁷ agricultural census (20Apr2020) attests that it is from the Northeast the worst Gini land tenure index (demarcating the strong concentration of land/power) and less mechanization compared to the other political macro-regions of the country (use of cheap labor). The lowest rate of urbanization in Brazil is also found in the Northeast and socioeconomic indicators (life expectancy, sanitation, infant mortality, for example) in values below the national average. These data are in line with the idea of social relations that remain as legacies of the past, even though they coexist, in some cases, with a technical modernity in production.

The third highlight is in fragments of the book that reveal the almost organic knowledge of the sertanejo about the natural domains: “Olhou a caatinga amarela” (p. 59) and “A seca devia estar longe” (p. 82) showing a knowledge based on empiricism, quite different from the alleged technicized production that appears in some parts of the region today.

It is curious that when mentioning winter (p.102), the author, giving speeches to the protagonists, links the season to the beginning of the rains in the sertão (November to April), when, astronomically, this period is summer in the southern hemisphere. This perspective remains in the northeastern sertão, since the dominant semi-dryness makes the expected rainy season create an idea of freshness and temperature reduction, when, in fact, the annual thermal amplitude oscillates less than two degrees Celsius. The same goes for the induction that summer / hot happens in the middle of the year, as it is present in the fragment in which Fabiano announces the pressing drought after the rainy season: “O mulungu do bebedouro cobria-se de arribações. Mau sinal, provavelmente o sertão ia pegar fogo” (p.153).

Addressing this relationship between man and the land in the quest to mitigate the spectrum of hunger. Always associated with annual periods of drought, Castro (1992, p.193) indicates a sertanejo’s food based on cattle and goats (meat and milk), in corn and in the “coisas da terra”, notably cassava. It also indicates that this “constitui um bom exemplo de como pode um grupo humano retirar de um meio pobre recursos adequados às necessidades básicas de sua vida”.

With all the risks present in any generalization, this image of the sertanejo is absolutely open to question with the opposition of several other frames that present themselves in the region, like the wage labor of former country men who today occupy the peripheries of small towns; specialized and mechanized work in some land units (especially those focused on extra regional rationality and market).

However, the present of the sertanejo small farmer or typical and traditional country man is still alive in the 21st century in the northeastern sertões and this empirical knowledge deeply accompanies this individual.

The fourth group of excerpts from the book “Vidas Secas” establishes a dialogue with the second section of this article, when it presents elements that nuance the presence of the State in regional relations, especially in the figure of the “soldado amarelo”, who holds the might authority:

Enfim apanhar do governo não é desfeita, e Fabiano até sentiria orgulho ao recordar-se da aventura. Mas aquilo... Soltou uns grunidos. Por que motivo o governo aproveitava gente assim? [p.149].

Apanhar do governo não é desfeita [p.70].

Governo, coisa distante e perfeita, não podia errar [p.70].

Imaginou o soldado amarelo atirando-se a um cangaceiro na caatinga [p.71].

Entraria num bando de cangaceiros e faria estrago nos homens que dirigiam o soldado amarelo [p.75].

These fragments show the omnipresent role of the State, even though the presence of the Law remains, both in “Vidas Secas” and nowadays, associated with the interests of hegemonic groups (political and economic) in the use of the territory of the sertões. Milton Santos and María Silveira (2001, p. 275) corroborate this understanding when they report “uma estrutura fundiária desde cedo hostil a uma melhor distribuição de renda” [...]

¹⁷Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics.

“Um antigo povoamento, assentado sobre estruturas sociais arcaicas, atua como freio às mudanças sociais e econômicas, acarreta o retardamento da evolução técnica e material e desacelera o processo de urbanização”.

In the same sense, the return to the data and arguments presented in the second section of this article makes it possible to conclude that the presence of the State did not resolve the deep inequalities that still persist in the Northeast of Brazil.

The fifth highlight is in the excerpts that present the asymmetric relations between the countryside (barbarian, backward) and city (civilized, modern):

aquele momento Fabiano lhe causava grande admiração. Metido nos couros, de perneiras, gibão e guarda-peito, era a criatura mais importante do mundo [p.85].

Todos os lugares conhecidos eram bons: o chiqueiro das cabras, o curral, o barreiro, o pátio, o bebedouro – mundo onde existiam seres reais, a família do vaqueiro e os bichos da fazenda [p.97].

Como podia haver tantas casas e tanta gente? [p.114].

A multidão apertava-o mais que a roupa, embaraçava-o. De perneiras, gibão e guarda-peito, andava metido numa caixa, como tatu, mas saltava no lombo de um bicho e voava na caatinga. Agora não podia virar-se: mãos e braços roçavam-lhe o corpo [p.115].

Evidentemente as criaturas que se juntavam ali não o viam, mas Fabiano sentia-se rodeado de inimigos [p.115].

Comparando-se aos tipos da cidade, Fabiano reconhecia-se inferior. Por isso desconfiava que os outros mangavam dele [p.116].

Se não fosse tão fraco, teria entrado no cangaço e feito misérias. Depois levaria um tiro de emboscada ou envelheceria na cadeia, cumprindo sentença, mas isto não era melhor que acabar-se numa beira de caminho, assando no calor, a mulher e os filhos acabando-se também [p.156].

The author presents an inaccessible, inhibiting and relatively distant from the protagonists of the novel “mundo urbano”. As we wrote elsewhere, this reality still persists, despite the “encurtamento” of the space based on techniques and is easily observable in street markets that swarm in the small towns of the northeastern sertão, where the weekly event attracts small producers to a ritual similar to barter and the submission, in that temporality, to the dictates of the urban domain.

When dealing with the Northeast, Santos and Silveira (2001, p. 217), are emphatic when informing that in the region “a constituição do meio mecanizado se deu de forma pontual e pouco densa e onde a circulação de pessoas, produtos, informações, ordens e dinheiro era precária, tanto em razão do tipo e da natureza das atividades (sobretudo uma agricultura pouco intensiva) como em virtude da estrutura da propriedade”.

The last of the aspects discussed here deals with the theme of the beginning and end of the story of Fabiano and his family. The migratory movement in the quest for survival in the northeastern sertão. Graciliano Ramos makes several references to the rigor of the movement in the caatingas, among them:

[A triste partida] E Fabiano resistia, pedindo a Deus um milagre [...] matou o bezerro morrinhento que possuíam, salgou a carne, largou-se com a família, sem se despedir do amo [p.161].

– O mundo é grande. Realmente para eles era bem pequeno, mas afirmavam que era grande – e marchavam, meio confiados, meio inquietos [p.167].

[chegando na cidade] Não voltariam nunca mais, resistiriam à saudade que ataca os sertanejos na mata [p.168].

Para lá dos montes afastados havia outro mundo, um mundo temeroso; mas para cá, na planície, tinha de cor plantas e animais, buracos e pedras [p.169].

E andavam para o Sul, metidos naquele sonho. Uma cidade grande, cheia de pessoas fortes. Os meninos em escolas, aprendendo coisas difíceis e necessárias [p.172].

Castro (1992, p. 288) gives light to the volume of people who were walking, walking and dying, through the sertões towards a port or a road that would take them to the supposed Eldorado of a less suffered life. The author reports that São sombrias caravanas de espectros caminhando centenas de léguas em busca das serras e dos brejos, das terras da promessa. Com os seus alforjes quase vazios, contendo quando muito um punhado de farinha, um pedaço de rapadura; a rede e a filharada miúda grudada às costas, o sertanejo dispara através da vastidão dos tabuleiros e chapadões descampados, disposto a todos os martírios. Sem recursos de nenhuma espécie, atravessando zonas de penúria absoluta, gastando na áspera caminhada o resto de suas energias comburidas, os retirantes acentuam no seu êxodo as consequências funestas desta fome.

The Northeast continues to be the main demographic-repelling region in Brazil, although the profile of migratory movements has changed significantly over the 20th century due to factors such as: the greater integration of the urban network, especially by road; the prospect of intraregional flows to regional capitals that have also been industrialized; to a return flow attracted by the phenomenon of deindustrialization (companies in the Southeast that sought locational attractions in the Northeast) and even by the significant decrease in ruralization rates. In 1995, the Northeast was the Brazilian region with the highest percentage of natural population (93%)¹⁸.

The aspects discussed here portray several permanencies of spatialized relations in the northeastern sertão, despite the passage of almost a century between the work of Graciliano Ramos and our present day, which, in a first apprehension, leads us to conclude that, despite public policies imposed in order to mitigate regional problems, the perverse socioeconomic structure, sustained mainly in an unequal land distribution, keeps the colonial inheritances ingrained in those localities.

5. Conclusion

The historical geography researcher axiom that there are no consolidated truths is here alerted. The produced text expresses “a” truth, however it also derives from selections, intentions and, mainly, interpretations. Thus, the criticism of the imprecision of the literary text, since it is fictional or derived from the author’s imagery character, on some scale, is also reflected in the interpretative reading that is made from historical sources that, usually, takes a possibility before a myriad of omitted others. Thus, following Andrade (Mar2021), it is believed that “não se trata de descartar as fontes primárias ou secundárias, mas de relativizar o seu uso e, quando possível, confrontar com outras fontes”. This was the exercise developed in this article.

Notwithstanding the gaps highlighted here in the “contact” between Geography, History and Literature, and the risks of absences in the analysis of a reference work of Brazilian literature, the challenge of making cross-analysis between Literature and Geography and, mainly, presenting methodological clues for the use of literary texts as a source for the study of Historical Geography was carried out in a stimulating exercise in thinking about the transformations and permanencies in the sertão region of Northeast Brazil.

It is a synthesis of our apprehension that, despite presenting niches of modernity, relations in the northeastern sertão remain unequal, as illustrated by Andrighetti (1988, p. 161) when she affirms that

Na área conhecida como sub-médio São Francisco, situada entre Pernambuco e Bahia, existiam 120 mil hectares de terras irrigadas, em 1992. Desse total, 60% foram beneficiadas pela iniciativa privada e o restante pelo governo federal, o mesmo que abandonou vários outros projetos na região, pois não se destinavam à exportação e sim ao atendimento da população local.

This dichotomy is revealed, in other instances, when we observe that there was no lack of political projects and even public policies aimed at tackling inequalities in the sertão and facing the scourge of periodic droughts.

As developed in this text, many of these policies destined significant values of the treasury for the region, however, they did not propose, and consequently did not generate, changes in the socioeconomic structure of the locality, keeping the power relations between the agents of production of the space unequal and conditioning vast part of the population hegemonized to poverty and subjection.

In this sense, as an instrument of analysis and understanding of territorial dynamics, often as “screams” that emanate from the harsh realities experienced in that region, literary texts such as “Vidas Secas” by Graciliano Ramos and the set of works by authors such as Ariano Suassuna, Jorge Amado, Rachel de Queiroz, Guimarães Rosa, enable a wide and frank dialogue with academic production in the search for the revelation of the sertanejo universe and, above all, for overcoming the stated secular perversities that take over the region.

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¹⁸ According to Santos and Silveira (2001, p. 214).

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