

TESTIMONIAL LITERATURE AGAINST THE GRAIN OF HISTORY: PEASANT MEMORY IN GRACILIANO RAMOS'S VIDAS SECAS

LITERATURA DE TESTEMUNHO A CONTRAPELO DA HISTÓRIA: MEMÓRIA CAMPESINA EM VIDAS SECAS, DE GRACILIANO RAMOS

LITERATURA TESTIMONIAL A CONTRACORRIENTE DE LA HISTORIA: LA MEMORIA CAMPESINA EN VIDAS SECAS DE GRACILIANO RAMOS



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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the representation of the peasantry in *Vidas Secas*, examining how the characters' memories and testimonies configure a narrative that challenges bourgeois and progressive historiography. It is grounded in the understanding that official history is constituted through hegemonic narratives that relegate certain groups to oblivion or marginalization, producing distorted and stereotyped representations within the social imaginary, disseminated through the media, textbooks, and dominant literary traditions. In opposition to this logic, Testimonial Literature emerges as an aesthetic practice committed to inscribing subaltern voices within historical memory. The theoretical framework articulates philosophy and testimonial literature based on the reflections of Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), taking *On the Concept of History* as a central reference, along with studies dedicated to the theme. Methodologically, this qualitative research adopts a bibliographical approach guided by the hermeneutic method. It argues that *Vidas Secas* presents characteristics of Testimonial Literature by constructing a social representation of the peasantry that reinscribes the experience of the defeated into the field of memory and disrupts the linearity of dominant historical narratives.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin. Testimonial Literature. Memory. Literary Representation of the Peasantry. *Vidas Secas*.

RESUMO

Este trabalho buscou analisar a representação do campesinato na obra *Vidas Secas*, examinando de que modo os relatos e as memórias das personagens configuram uma narrativa que tensiona a historiografia burguesa e progressista. Parte-se da compreensão de que a história oficial se constitui por meio de narrativas hegemônicas que relegam determinados grupos ao esquecimento ou à marginalização, produzindo representações distorcidas e estereotipadas no imaginário social, difundidas pelos meios de comunicação, pelos livros didáticos e pela tradição literária dominante. Em contraposição a essa lógica, a Literatura de Testemunho afirma-se como prática estética comprometida com a inscrição das vozes subalternizadas na memória histórica. A fundamentação teórica articula filosofia e

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literatura de testemunho a partir das reflexões de Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), tomando como referência central o texto *Sobre o conceito de história*, além de estudos dedicados ao tema. Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa, de caráter bibliográfico, orientada pelo método hermenêutico. Sustenta-se que *Vidas Secas* apresenta traços da Literatura de Testemunho ao elaborar uma representação social do campesinato que reinscreve a experiência dos vencidos no campo da memória e desloca a linearidade da narrativa histórica dominante.

Palavras-chave: Walter Benjamin. Literatura de Testemunho. Memória. Representação Literária do Campesinato. *Vidas Secas*.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo buscó analizar la representación del campesinado en la novela *Vidas Secas*, examinando cómo los relatos y recuerdos de los personajes configuran una narrativa que desafía la historiografía burguesa y progresista. Parte de la comprensión de que la historia oficial se constituye a través de narrativas hegemónicas que relegan a ciertos grupos al olvido o la marginación, produciendo representaciones distorsionadas y estereotipadas en el imaginario social, difundidas por los medios de comunicación, los libros de texto y la tradición literaria dominante. En contraste con esta lógica, la Literatura Testimonial se afirma como una práctica estética comprometida con la inscripción de voces subalternas en la memoria histórica. La base teórica articula la filosofía y la literatura testimonial a partir de las reflexiones de Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), tomando como referencia central el texto *Sobre el concepto de historia*, además de estudios dedicados al tema. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa, bibliográfica, guiada por el método hermenéutico. Se argumenta que *Vidas Secas* exhibe rasgos de la literatura testimonial al elaborar una representación social del campesinado que reinscribe la experiencia de los vencidos en el ámbito de la memoria y altera la linealidad de la narrativa histórica dominante.

Palabras clave: Walter Benjamin. Literatura Testimonial. Memoria. Representación Literaria del Campesinado. *Vidas Secas*.

1 INTRODUCTION

Official historiography became the object of systematic criticism from the middle of the twentieth century, when different fields of thought — Philosophy, History, Sociology, and Psychology — began to question the assumptions of the dominant historical account. Several intellectuals have demonstrated that the records of the past privileged the perspective of the dominant class, consolidating a narrative that naturalizes power relations and erases the experiences of subalternized groups. In his famous text entitled *On the Concept of History* (1987), Walter Benjamin stated that the tradition of the oppressed was systematically silenced by a historiography structured according to the logic of the "winners", insofar as "Benjamin criticized the idea of linear progress, associating it with the catastrophes and historical defeats of the oppressed" (Löwy, 2019, p. 83).

This observation shifts the historiographical problem to the field of memory and narrative. If official history presents itself as linear continuity and progress, what remains buried are the traumatic experiences, the ruptures and the forms of resistance that do not fit the triumphal logic of capital. Native peoples, blacks, women, the LGBTQIA+ community, northeasterners, and rural peoples continue to be represented based on categories that are imposed on them, often shaped by dominant economic and political interests. The control of the means of symbolic production — textbooks, the press, cinema, literature and other cultural expressions — that is, hegemonic culture, as a rule, contributes to crystallizing such representations in the collective imagination.

In the specific case of rural peoples, the figure of Jeca Tatu, created by Monteiro Lobato in *Urupês*, became an archetype of this hierarchical representation. The peasantry was associated with backwardness, ignorance and unproductivity, an image that was sedimented in Brazilian culture. As Caldart pointed out, it has become necessary to "foster reflections that accumulate strength and space in order to contribute to the deconstruction of the collective imagination about the hierarchical relationship that exists between the countryside and the city; on the traditional view of Jeca Tatu, of the countryside as the place of backwardness" (Caldart, 2004, p. 40). The aesthetic construction of the peasant as a passive and incapable subject is not only a literary resource, but a symbolic operation that legitimizes historical inequalities.

However, if the dominant historiography operates through exclusion, there are artistic productions that tension this logic. Art, when detached from the ideological reproduction of progress, can become a space of narrative insurgency. In this horizon, the so-called Literature of Testimony emerges as an aesthetic form that shifts the center of the narrative to the

experience of historically silenced subjects. More than a factual report, it is a literary practice that re-inscribes memory within history, producing fissures in official linearity.

It is in this terrain of confluence between philosophy and literature that this article is inscribed. Starting from the work *Vidas Secas* (1980), by Graciliano Ramos, it is intended to investigate how the representation of the peasantry in the novel can be understood in the light of the Literature of Testimony and the criticism of progressive historiography formulated by the German thinker. The hypothesis that guides this analysis maintains that *Vidas Secas* does not reproduce the stereotyped image of the peasant as social backwardness, but elaborates a narrative that, by giving centrality to the experience of the characters, operates against the grain of history, re-inscribing the testimony of the defeated in the literary space.

The questions that guide the study are: how is the peasantry represented through the memories and accounts of the characters in *Vidas Secas*? Does this representation reaffirm the perspective of the "winners" or shift the focus to the testimony of those who remain on the margins of the official narrative? To answer these questions, it is necessary to define and characterize the Testimony Literature, articulating it with the reflections developed in the theses on the concept of history, in which the notion of progress was problematized and the categories of memory and narrative were sought to be rehabilitated as forms of historical reinterpretation. The base text mobilized is *On the concept of history*, in addition to contributions from commentators who deepened this theoretical perspective.

Methodologically, the research adopts the hermeneutic method, in a qualitative approach. It is not an investigation guided by quantitative data, but an analysis focused on the universe of meanings, values and experiences that structure literary representation (Minayo, 2009). In this sense, as Gadamer pointed out, "hermeneutics is not a method of the sciences of the spirit in the sense of a set of technical rules, but the explicitness of understanding as man's own way of being" (Gadamer, 1999, p. 386). It is, therefore, a theoretical research, of a bibliographic nature, which articulates literary analysis and philosophical reflection.

The article is organized in two moments. In the first, the origin, definition and characterization of Testimony Literature are discussed, establishing its link with the critique of bourgeois and progressive historiography. It seeks to demonstrate how this literary perspective shifts the axis of the historical narrative by giving centrality to the experience of traditionally silenced subjects, tensioning the linearity and the alleged neutrality of official accounts. By articulating this approach to the reflections developed in the theses on the concept of history, it seeks to show to what extent literature can operate as a space for the critical elaboration of memory. In the second moment, the analysis of *Vidas Secas* (1938) is

carried out, highlighting the formal and narrative elements that allow us to understand it in the light of the Literature of Testimony. It examines how the construction of the characters, the fragmentary structure of the novel and the treatment of language contribute to re-inscribe the peasant experience within the story, not as a marginal datum, but as a significant nucleus of the narrative.

Finally, in the final considerations, we seek to examine whether the representation of the peasantry in *Vidas Secas* reaffirms the historically crystallized image of the peasant as a figure of backwardness or whether the novel produces an interpretative displacement that re-inscribes his experience within history. What is at stake is not only the presence of marginalized characters, but the way their experiences are narrated and signified. It is interesting to verify whether the work tensions the progressive logic that guides a large part of historical accounts and whether, in doing so, it converts literature into a space for the critical elaboration of social memory. Thus, it is intended to demonstrate to what extent Graciliano Ramos' novel goes beyond the reproduction of stereotypes and constitutes itself as a narrative form capable of giving historical density to the peasant experience.

2 LITERATURE ON THE PRISM OF THE "VANQUISHED": RETHINKING HISTORY FROM THE TESTIMONIES

Throughout history, literary productions have been important forms of access to the culture of certain peoples and communities. Through its contexts, settings, characters and narratives, literature makes it possible, even within a fictional universe, to reflect on existential and social dimensions of human life. Every literary work carries a worldview and is inscribed in a specific historical horizon. Literature, however, did not develop in a homogeneous or neutral way. At various times, aesthetic productions were linked to the interests and sensibilities of the dominant classes, contributing to the consolidation of values and representations aligned with the current social order. Art not only expresses a reality, but actively participates in the symbolic construction of the hierarchies that structure the social world.

The political, economic and social transformations intensified from the end of the nineteenth century significantly altered this scenario. Artistic and intellectual currents began to recognize literature as a field of symbolic dispute, capable of problematizing hegemonic narratives and bringing to the fore historically marginalized experiences. The literary narrative then began to be conceived as a possibility of re-inscribing the silenced voices within history. Although their definition requires a more detailed examination, it is important to point out that these works introduce an inflection in the way of narrating the past, by giving centrality to the

lived experience and memory of subalternized subjects. This movement constitutes the starting point for the following subtopics, in which the relationship between literature, testimony and criticism of history will be deepened.

2.1 TESTIMONY LITERATURE

Testimony Literature had its origin in the twentieth century, a period marked by profound political, economic and social transformations, but also by historical experiences of extreme violence. It is a century crossed by dreadful and undignified events experienced by humanity. Among them, the First World War (1914-1918), the Second World War (1939-1945), the massacres that took place in Hiroshima and *Auschwitz*, Japan's wars against China (1937-1939) and Korea's (1950-1953) stand out, to mention only events on a global scale. Following this line of reasoning, Maciel pointed out that

The twentieth century was marked by great technological advances and great economic development; However, it was also a period characterized by major traumatic events in human history. Over time, in literature, narratives have been produced, arising from reports of victims of these great events. In this way, the term "testimony literature" gained emphasis in literary studies, generating discussions and reflections on the subject (Maciel, 2016, p.75).

The emergence of Testimony Literature was directly linked to one of these tragic episodes. As Maciel (2016) pointed out, when it comes to these aesthetic productions, one cannot lose sight of the fact that the term originated from the concept of "Holocaust Literature". The first historiographical and literary productions had their roots in the accounts of the subjects who experienced and suffered from the Nazi regime during World War II. Its origin was therefore associated with the Holocaust, known as the "massacre of the Jews"³.

Although the context of the wars is fundamental to understand the emergence of this literary approach, his productions did not remain circumscribed to this period. Testimony Literature expands historically, since contemporary dynamics continue to produce forms of exclusion and violence — against blacks, people with disabilities, homeless workers, illiterates, rural populations, among other groups — that also become narrative material.

³ Although reflection on the literature of testimony was largely driven by the memory of the Shoah and the centrality of Jewish extermination in the public elaboration of the historical trauma of the twentieth century, the Nazi concentration system was not restricted to the persecution of Jews. As Hannah Arendt pointed out, the Hitler regime instituted a persecution machine that affected "Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, the mentally ill, political opponents and other groups considered 'undesirable'" (Arendt, 1989, p. 447). In this way, the historical image of the Holocaust is not limited exclusively to the Jewish people, but refers to a political project of systematic elimination of multiple forms of social, ethnic and political otherness.

Testimony literature is characterized by productions that bring reports of subjects or collectivities who have experienced situations of extreme suffering. These narratives are crossed by the memory of trauma, by experiences that resist oblivion and require symbolic elaboration. It is not only a matter of remembering past facts, but of re-inscribing in the present events whose violence continues to produce effects on subjectivity and social life. It seeks, through words, to bring such experiences to the surface, so that they are not erased from the collective memory and so that they can acquire historical recognition. Testimony, in this sense, becomes an ethical and political gesture, as it transforms remembrance into shared responsibility. According to Maciel, in his text "Literature of testimony: comparative readings of Primo Levi, Anne Frank, Immaculée Ilibagiza and Michel Laub":

Testimony literature can be understood as a form of recreation of worlds based on memorialistic experiences of subjects who witnessed, in some way, a historical event. Testimonial narratives are reconstructions of worlds implanted by the author. Testimony is a possibility of presenting accounts with a traumatic and unavoidable weight, raising questions and giving voice to the narratives of minorities, holocaust survivors and other forms of genocide, repression and human rights violations (Maciel, 2016, p.75).

In this formulation, it is evident that this literature operates on the threshold between memory and history, tensioning the limits between what is lived and what is narrated. By dealing with genocidal, repressive events or events marked by the violation of human rights⁴, the testimony makes visible what remains as an open wound, refusing to forget it as a form of artificial pacification of the past. Trauma, in this horizon, is not only a painful memory, but a mark that insists on updating itself in the present. Seligmann-silva defined trauma as "trauma [...] characterized by being a memory of a past that does not pass" (2008, p. 69), an expression that synthesizes the persistence of these experiences in historical temporality. Thus, testimony not only records events, but confronts the linear course of history, by re-inscribing in the now what the official narrative tends to relegate to silence.

By shifting the focus of the narrative to the experience of those who directly suffered the effects of historical violence, the testimony alters the very status of the story. History ceases to be just a succession of chronologically ordered facts and starts to be questioned from the marks left on bodies and subjectivities crossed by historical traumas. In this

⁴ The juridical-institutional formulation of human rights was consolidated at the international level only after the Second World War, especially with the promulgation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. As Comparato noted, "the internationalization of human rights is a recent historical phenomenon, which developed after the end of the Second World War" (Comparato, 2010, p. 226). Thus, the reference to "human rights violations" in this article is used in an analytical-retrospective sense, in order to designate historical practices of violence that, although prior to the contemporary normative systematization, undermined principles later recognized as universal.

movement, the past does not appear as a stage that has been overcome, but as a dimension that challenges the present and requires positioning. Testimonial writing, therefore, is not limited to the description of events, but establishes a field of responsibility, in which narration means confronting the conditions that made barbarism possible and preventing its naturalization. Wilberth Salgueiro, in his text "What is testimony literature (And considerations around Graciliano Ramos, Alex Polari and André Du Rap)", indicated traits that characterize this production:

1) The first-person record, (2) a commitment to the sincerity of the report, (3) the desire for justice, (4) the will to resist, (5) the shaking of the hegemony of aesthetic value over ethical value, (6) the presentation of a collective event, (7) the presence of trauma, (8) rancor and resentment, (9) close bond with history, (10) feeling of shame for the humiliations and animalization suffered, (11) feeling of guilt for having survived; (12) radical impossibility of re-presenting what has been experienced/suffered (2012, p.292-293).

Among these elements, four aspects stand out for the purposes of this analysis: the *centrality of traumatic collective events; the feeling of shame in the face of the humiliation suffered; the commitment to justice; and the dimension of resistance inscribed in the narrative*. The desire for justice is a structuring feature of Testimony Literature. It manifests itself in the narratives of oppressed and silenced groups, converting testimony into an ethical and political gesture. By exposing situations of human rights violations, these works invite the reader to reflect on the binomial justice/injustice in a collective perspective. Trauma also occupies a central position. It is the effort to narrate what resists representation, to give shape to what seems unspeakable.

The wounds persist in the memory of the victims, manifesting themselves sometimes as shame, sometimes as a demand for recognition and reparation. Testimony Literature thus presents itself as a counterpoint to the narratives consolidated by official historiography. By highlighting the suffering experienced by collectivities subjected to political and economic power structures, the possibility of reinterpreting the past from the perspective of those who bore its consequences is opened. Azevedo, in his article "Literature as memory: the losers the history in Vidas Secas, by Graciliano Ramos", stated that:

In contrast to historical discourse, which narrates from the perspective of the dominators – according to Benjamin – literature has the chance to put under the spotlight the figures forgotten by History. That which is taxed as unworthy of a place of speech in the registers can have empowerment and voice from the literary discourse. Because it is a field that is not defined (nor is it defined by the masses) as an agent of capital Truth, literature provides a reading of various truths from various points of view. In this way, it is more open to a more comprehensive contemplation of the small stories

that make up the real – however, far from contemplating the whole of the real (2021, p. 26).

Azevedo's observation allows us to understand that literature does not compete with historiography on the level of factuality, but tensions it on the level of perspective⁵. By not claiming for itself the monopoly of truth, literary discourse makes room for a plurality of voices that often remain excluded from official records. This openness does not imply absolute relativization, but recognition that the real is composed of multiple experiences that escape totalizing narratives. By illuminating the "forgotten figures", literature shifts the focus from the centrality of the victors to the subjects who bore the costs of history.

In addition, by highlighting that literature is more open to the contemplation of "small stories", the quote points to a redefinition of what deserves to be narrated. The attention to fragments, ordinary existences and marginal experiences challenges the hierarchical logic that has traditionally organized historical accounts. In this sense, the literary narrative not only broadens the field of the representable, but also reconfigures the criteria of historical relevance, allowing sufferings previously considered secondary to acquire density and meaning. It is in this movement that Literature of Testimony asserts itself as an aesthetic and political practice, capable of confronting official memory and of re-inscribing on the collective horizon what has been relegated to silence.

If literature can illuminate the figures forgotten by history and expand the field of the narrable, as Azevedo suggested, testimony is not restricted to a specific genre or a specific literary form. In dealing with this plurality, Salgueiro observed that "there are, in short, countless modalities of testimony, whether in relation to situations, events, periods (Shoah, Gulag, genocides, wars, dictatorships, torture, misery, oppression, etc.), or in relation to forms of expression of testimony (memory, novel, film, testimony, poem, comics, songs, etc.)" (2012, p. 286). This multiplicity reveals that testimony is not only a thematic content, but a mode of narrative construction that crosses languages and adapts to different historical contexts.

The temporal dimension of this gesture is also decisive. As Nascimento stated, "One witnesses by commitment to the past and, above all, to the present and the future. One

⁵ Perspectivism should not be confused with moral relativism. The criticism of the idea of metaphysical truth — understood as an absolute and transcendent foundation — does not imply the defense that all judgments have equal value or that every position is equivalent. On the contrary, in both Nietzsche and Benjamin, the refusal of the abstract neutrality of truth shifts the problem to the historical and political terrain, where interpretation is linked to relations of force, memory and responsibility. The critique of historicism, in this sense, does not dissolve the ethical requirement, but radicalizes it, to the extent that it summons the interpreter to take a position in the face of the past and its vanquished. As Benjamin rightly pointed out: "Nor will the dead be safe if the enemy wins" (Benjamin, 2012, p.243),

witnesses to give a tomb to the dead, a name to the unknown and a voice to those who do not have" (2013, p.72). Testimony, in this sense, alters the very relationship with historical time, to the extent that the past ceases to be something concluded and begins to question the present. By re-inscribing silenced experiences in the public space, the idea of linear continuity is questioned and the permanence of the violence that structured certain historical processes is exposed. It is precisely at this point that the theses on the concept of history become absolutely fundamental for analysis, because, by problematizing the notion of progress and proposing the reading of the past from the memory of the oppressed, the German thinker offered conceptual instruments to understand testimony as a critical intervention in the historical narrative.

Remembering, in this context, is not a mere exercise in nostalgic evocation, but a critical gesture that prevents the dissolution of suffering in the undifferentiated flow of time. By bringing to the scene the voices of the dead, the wounded and the rags of history, the testimony interrupts the naturalization of the violence that structured certain historical processes and re-inscribes in the present what was tried to relegate to silence. Memory, therefore, ceases to be a simple recollection and becomes an act of symbolic resistance. It is in this horizon that Benjamin's philosophy becomes decisive.

By recognizing that testimonies can contribute to the reinterpretation of events often presented through the prism of bourgeois and progressive historiography, Benjamin problematized the idea of progress and proposed to rethink the analysis of events from the articulation between history, memory and narrative. In his critique of the linear continuity of historical time, the philosopher shifted the axis of interpretation to the perspective of the oppressed, suggesting that the past should be apprehended not as an accumulative sequence of conquests, but as a field of tensions in which the marks of violence persist. In this sense, the literature of testimony finds in Benjamin's philosophy a theoretical foundation capable of sustaining the reading of history against the grain.

2.2 HISTORY, MEMORY AND NARRATIVE

Walter Benjamin, in his theses *On the concept of history (1987)*, his last posthumously published writing, sought to establish a conception of history antagonistic to the readings consolidated by traditional historiography, produced by the classes that hold power. In this sense, the philosopher criticized two specific strands: bourgeois historiography and progressive historiography. Both are based on a conception of linear and chronological time, which results in the production of narratives that, directly or indirectly, benefit the dominant

classes. It is a discourse that builds empathy with the winners and naturalizes their historical position. As the German thinker stated:

The nature of this sadness will become clearer if we ask ourselves with whom the historicist researcher establishes a relationship of empathy. The answer is unequivocal: with the winner. But those who rule at a given moment are the heirs of all those who have conquered before. Empathy with the winner therefore always benefits these dominators. That says it all to the historical materialist. All those who have won to date participate in the triumphal procession, in which today's rulers trample on the bodies of those who are prostrate on the ground (Benjamin, 1987, p.225).

The historicist conception, therefore, privileges the dominators and perpetuates an image of the past marked by the continuity of triumph. Benjamin's critique is directed precisely at this crystallization of history as a succession of accumulated victories. By narrating the events from the perspective of the victors, the experience of the vanquished is silenced and the marks of violence inscribed in the historical process are obscured. It is enough to consider, for example, that there is extensive production on the "arrival" of the Portuguese in Brazil, while the testimony of native peoples about this same event rarely occupies a central place in the records considered to be the founders of collective memory. This logic produces heroic narratives⁶ that hide the traces of indignities and injustices left along the way. The collective traumas experienced by the vanquished are absorbed or minimized in the name of a supposed civilizational march. In another passage of the Theses, Benjamin's criticism of the progressive tradition becomes evident.

The theory and, even more, the practice of Social-Democracy were determined by a dogmatic concept of progress without any connection with reality. According to the Social-Democrats, progress was first and foremost a progress of humanity itself, and not of its abilities and knowledge. Secondly, it was a process without limits, an idea corresponding to that of the infinite perfectibility of the human race. Thirdly, it was an essentially automatic process, irresistibly following a sloping or spiral trajectory [...] The idea of a progress of humanity in history is inseparable from the idea of its march within an empty and homogeneous time. The critique of the idea of progress is based on the critique of the idea of this march (1987, p.229).

⁶ The heroic narratives of history tend to be articulated with hegemonic Eurocentric historiography by organizing the past according to a causal, linear and progressive logic, centered on great characters and civilizing achievements. Such a narrative structure reinforces the idea of continuity and progress, obscuring ruptures, colonial violence, and subalternized experiences. Benjamin's critique of historicism destabilizes precisely this interpretative matrix, by stating that "historicism is content to establish a causal link between the various moments of history" (Benjamin, 2012, p. 231), converting the past into an evolutionary chain and legitimizing the present.

The criticism of the idea of progress consists in the rejection of this fantasy of inevitable civilizational advancement. By conceiving history as an automatic and unlimited process, catastrophe is transformed into a necessary stage of human evolution. Violence becomes an acceptable cost of development, and collective suffering is interpreted as a transitory moment towards a better future. Benjamin demystified this conception by demonstrating that the notion of progress sustains an image of history as a completed totality, closed in on itself. Such a perspective legitimizes the idea that "everything is allowed" in the name of progress, even if along this path humiliations, traumas and destruction accumulate. The image of homogeneous and empty time erases the singularities of historical experiences and puts at risk the memory of those who were run over by what the philosopher figured as the train of progress. The testimonies that could reveal the contradictions of this official narrative tend to remain underground, threatened by oblivion.

For this reason, Benjamin understood that "history is an object of construction whose place is not homogeneous and empty time, but a time saturated with 'nows" (1987, p. 229). History, in this conception, is not an accumulative sequence of facts, but a field of tension in which the past can be re-actualized based on the demands of the present. Historical time ceases to be a continuous line and becomes a space of interruption and criticism. In thesis VII, it is possible to find the following statement:

There has never been a monument of culture that was not also a monument of barbarism. And just as culture is not free from barbarism, neither is the process of transmitting culture. Therefore, as far as possible, the historical materialist deviates from it. He considers it his task to brush history against the grain (1987, p. 225).

Brushing history against the grain means reinterpreting it from the ethical commitment to the subalterns, following the traces of the dead and wounded left by the march of progress. If every document of culture is also a document of barbarism, then the critical task is to reveal the violence hidden under the guise of civilization. If official historiography celebrates the triumph of the victors through the construction of an artificial collective memory, centered on stereotyped representations of potentially resistant groups, the philosophical task implies shifting the center of the epistemological process. It is about highlighting the narratives that make explicit contradictions, traumas and humiliations of those who did not have a voice in history.

This displacement, however, is not reduced to a methodological choice or a change in academic perspective; It is a question of taking a position in the face of historical time. By recognizing that violence is not an occasional accident, but a structural element of processes that present themselves as civilizing, criticism takes on a character of urgency. History, seen

from the vanquished, reveals not an overcoming succession of injustices, but the permanence of a state of domination that is actualized in new forms. It is precisely when one understands that the exception does not constitute a momentary rupture, but a reiterated condition of the experience of the oppressed, that it becomes necessary to reformulate the very concept of history – no longer as a triumphal continuity, but as a field of struggle in which the memory of the subalternized challenges the present. In thesis VIII, Benjamin pointed to the urgency of reinterpreting history from the point of view of a commitment to the tradition of the oppressed:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of exception" in which we live is the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history that corresponds to this situation. Our historical task will then consist in bringing about the coming of the true state of exception, thus improving our position in the struggle against fascism. The fact that its adversaries confront it in the name of progress, taking it as a historical law, is not exactly the least of the chances of fascism. There is nothing philosophical about being astonished by the fact that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century. It is an astonishment that is not born of a knowledge, but of this: that the idea of history that provokes astonishment is not sustained. (Benjamin, 1987, p. 226)

The "state of exception", in this perspective, is not an anomaly, but a permanent condition imposed by the structures of domination. Breaking with this state requires adopting a conception of history that produces estrangement in the face of the contradictions of capital, refusing to empathize with the victors. For this conception to gain strength, the narrative needs to regain centrality. In "The Narrator: considerations on the work of Nikolai Leskov", Benjamin stated that the narrative "[...] it is itself, in a certain sense, an artisanal form of communication. It is not interested in transmitting the 'pure in itself' of the thing narrated as information or a report. It immerses the thing in the narrator's life and then removes it from him" (1987, p. 205). The narrative, therefore, does not transmit data, but sedimented experiences.

In another passage, the German thinker added that "It always has in itself, sometimes latent form, a utilitarian dimension. This usefulness can consist of a moral teaching, a practical suggestion, a proverb or a rule of life – in any case, the narrator is a man who knows how to give advice" (Benjamin, 1987, p. 200). The narrator transmits wisdom rooted in experience, ensuring historical continuity that is not reduced to the chronology of the winners. With regard to memory, Jobin and Souza stated that, for Benjamin, "[...] memory is a current rereading of the past that enhances the possibilities of intervening in the events of the future" (2014, p. 185). Remembrance, therefore, is not a simple return to the past, but an operation that critically updates it. As Reyes Mate pointed out:

The purpose of remembrance is to rescue the right to justice from the past or, if one prefers, to recognize in the past of the vanquished an injustice that is still in force, that is, to read the frustrated projects with which history is sown, not as costs of progress, but as pending injustices (Mate, 2011, p. 28).

To have access to the "chest of remembrance" is to recognize that the past is not presented as a pacified narrative, but as a field crossed by barbarism and injustices of multiple orders. Opening this chest means destabilizing the comfortable image of a history driven by the continuous thread of progress and confronting what has been relegated to the margins of official memory. Remembrance, in this horizon, is not limited to reliving events, but acts as a critical gesture that rescues traumatic experiences and reopens, in the present, the demand for justice denied under the argument of the "costs of progress". By bringing to the surface what has been buried, memory is transformed into a force of historical interpellation.

Literary productions that are guided by the perspective of Testimony Literature take up precisely this movement. By shifting to the center of the narrative the injustices and traumas experienced by subalternized collectivities, these works carry out an exercise of remembrance that challenges the naturalization of the violence inscribed in the past. It is not just a matter of telling forgotten stories, but of re-inscribing on the collective horizon the pending injustices of the tradition of the oppressed, converting literature into a space for the critical elaboration of memory and the reconfiguration of historical understanding itself.

If the critical task consists in shifting the historical gaze to the traces left by the vanquished, then literature can be configured as fertile ground for this operation. By incorporating into its narrative fabric the marks of collective suffering and the experiences of those who remain on the margins of official discourses, the literary work becomes an instance of symbolic elaboration of what historiography tends to silence. It is in this horizon that *Vidas Secas* presents itself as a fertile object of analysis. Graciliano Ramos' novel, by inscribing the precarious life of the northeastern peasantry at the center of the narrative, allows us to question whether we are facing the mere reproduction of crystallized images of backwardness or the construction of a testimony that re-inscribes, within literature, the tradition of the oppressed. From this question, the novel is examined in the light of Testimony Literature and Benjaminian criticism of history.

3 DRY LIVES AS TESTIMONY LITERATURE

The analysis that follows focuses on *Vidas Secas*, articulating Graciliano Ramos' novel to the theoretical horizon outlined in the previous section. More than situating it within northeastern regionalism, it is interesting to examine it as a narrative construction that puts on stage a historically marginalized experience. The life of the peasantry, marked by material precariousness, silence and structural violence, does not appear only as a thematic background, but as an organizing axis of the literary form. Although the work admits multiple readings, the excerpt proposed here seeks to identify narrative elements that bring the novel closer to the testimonial logic: the centrality of lived experience, the fragmentation of narrative, the economy of language and the repeated exposure of the conditions of oppression. The question lies not only in what is represented, but in the way in which this representation is constructed, producing an image of the peasantry that can tension the consolidated versions of history.

3.1 "DRY" MEMORIES AND THE TRADITION OF THE OPPRESSED

Starting from the problematizations developed in the first section — especially the traits that characterize Testimony Literature, as systematized by Wilberth Salgueiro — some decisive elements are resumed here: the centrality of traumatic collective events, the feeling of humiliation, the desire for justice and the dimension of resistance. These aspects, articulated with Benjamin's reflections on history, guide the reading of *Vidas Secas*, allowing us to examine how the novel constructs a narrative crossed by marks of social suffering and collective memory.

Published in 1938, within the generation of 30, the novel emerged in a context of political and social instability. Brazil lived under the Estado Novo, established by Getúlio Vargas in 1937, while the international scenario was still marked by the consequences of the First World War. Graciliano Ramos inscribed his fictional production in this horizon of tensions, making literature a space for exposing the structural inequalities and mechanisms of oppression that permeated social life.

The choice of the sertanejo peasantry as the narrative nucleus is already a significant gesture. Rather than celebrating heroic figures or chronicling major political events, the novel focuses on the precarious survival of a family of migrants. Drought, hunger, exploitation and instability do not appear as isolated episodes, but as a permanent condition. The narrative shifts the gaze from exceptionality to the routine of misery, making everyday experience the privileged place of historical inscription.

This centrality of collective suffering brings the novel closer to the logic of witness. It is not only a matter of representing poverty, but of inscribing on the literary plane a historically marginalized form of existence. The plot does not build a spectacle of misery; on the contrary, it shows the normalization of social violence. The precariousness of life is not an accident, but a structure. The economy of language and the silence that mark Fabiano and his family constitute decisive formal elements. The characters speak little, express themselves in a fragmentary way, hesitate. Silence, far from signifying the absence of thought, reveals a subjectivity tensioned by experiences that exceed its capacity for immediate elaboration. Violence does not manifest itself only as an external event, but infiltrates the very possibility of enunciation.

Walter Benjamin, in "Experience and Poverty," reported that many soldiers who survived World War I returned mute, unable to narrate what they had experienced. The traumatic shock produced a psychic fracture that was externalized in silence. As Guimarães pointed out:

This experience of shock that the fragile and tiny human body had to endure when contemplating the great humanitarian indignities of wars, produced a psychic fracture for the survivors such that silence is the externalization of their own disorientation in the face of the violence experienced (Guimarães, 2019, p. 117).

Reading this excerpt allows us to understand that silence can be a form of indirect expression of trauma. When experience goes beyond the limits of symbolization, language falters and withdraws. In *Vidas Secas*, Fabiano's mutism does not stem from naturalized incapacity, but from a historical condition marked by repeated humiliations and by a life reduced to the struggle for survival. The rarefied word becomes a symptom of fracture.

In addition, silence is not only individual; it takes on a social dimension. The structure of domination that organizes the sertanejo field disallows the worker's speech, reducing it to the condition of murmuring. Symbolic violence precedes and accompanies material violence. In this sense, the novel not only portrays suffering, but incorporates in its narrative form the difficulty of narrating it, approaching what the testimonial tradition identifies as an effort to give shape to the almost unspeakable.

Azevedo's observation expands this understanding by shifting the analysis to the temporal dimension of the drought: "In the present time of the work, the drought is, in a large part of the narrative, the past, inhabiting the universe of traumatic memories; or future, haunting the possibilities of life to come" (Oliveira and Azevedo, 2020, p.240).

The drought organizes the temporal experience of the characters. It is not limited to the immediate present, but reappears as a painful memory and as an imminent threat. The

past is not over; it returns in the form of fear. The expectation of a new drought conditions decisions, dreams and displacements. The novel thus constructs a temporality marked by the recurrence of trauma. This temporal configuration breaks with chronological linearity. The drought appears fully only at the beginning and end of the narrative; in the intermediate chapters, it subsists as memory and as projection. Life is organized around an event that does not pass. It is, in Seligmann-silva's terms, "[...] a memory of the past that does not pass" (2008, p. 69). The repetition of the traumatic experience inscribes in the novel a perception of time that is close to Benjamin's critique of progress. Another revealing aspect is the desire for transformation that emerges, albeit timidly, in the aspiration to educate children:

Little by little a new life, still confused, was outlined. They would settle in a small farm, which seemed difficult to Fabiano, who was raised free in the woods. They would cultivate a piece of land. They would later move to a city, and the boys would attend schools, they would be different from them (Ramos, 1980, p. 125-126).

This excerpt shows that the characters perceive their social position as a result of structural conditions. The school appears as a promise of breaking with the cycle of exploitation. However, this hope remains fragile, strained by the materiality of the drought and by power relations that limit the real possibilities for change.

The projection of this "new life" reveals more than a simple desire for social ascension; it exposes the awareness, even if diffuse, that the condition experienced is not a natural destiny, but the result of a specific social organization. The dream of the children's schooling introduces, within the narrative, a tension between permanence and transformation. By imagining that the boys "would be different from them", Fabiano and Sinhá Vitória recognize the generational transmission of precariousness as something that could be interrupted.

However, the formulation of this desire remains in the realm of conjecture, marked by verbs in the future tense and by a spatial vagueness ("a city", "an unknown land"), which reinforces the uncertain character of this expectation. The novel, thus, builds a promise that is born through instability, showing that the possibility of breaking with the cycle of oppression depends on historical conditions that escape the immediate control of the characters. Hope, therefore, appears not as an effective overcoming, but as a glimmer that illuminates, even if briefly, the awareness of structural injustice.

If, on the level of imagination, the education of children appears as a possibility of social displacement, on the level of immediate experience, injustice imposes itself in a concrete and unavoidable way. The narrative thus alternates between the horizon of expectation and direct friction with the power relations that structure the sertanejo field. When

inequality ceases to be just a silent condition and manifests itself as a mismatch between work and reward, the latent tension takes shape.

It is at this moment that the novel brings out not only the awareness of exploitation, but the impulse — albeit hesitant — to contest it. The desire for justice is manifested more explicitly in the chapter "Accounts":

He did not conform: there must have been deception. He was rough, yes sir, you could see perfectly that he was rough, but the woman had brains. Surely there was a mistake in the white paper. The error was not discovered, and Fabiano lost his stirrups. To spend his whole life like this on the stump, handing over what was his on a silver platter! Was that right? Work as a black man and never get a letter of manumission! The boss got angry, repelled the insolence, thought it was good that the cowboy went to look for work on another farm.

Then Fabiano lowered his blow and kissed. Well, well. There was no need for noise. If he had said a word for nothing, he apologized (Ramos, 1980, p. 93).

In this episode, the impulse to contest reveals awareness of injustice. Fabiano recognizes the imbalance of the relationship, but backs down in the face of the threat of exclusion. Domination operates both through economic exploitation and through the internalization of fear. The novel thus evidences the tension between resistance and submission, a recurring feature in testimonial narratives.

The passage is particularly significant because it makes explicit the language through which Fabiano tries to name his own condition. By comparing continuous work to the absence of a "letter of manumission", the character mobilizes a historical image that refers to slavery, revealing an intuitive perception that the exploitation experienced does not differ substantially from past forms of domination. Although it does not formulate a systematic analysis, the analogy establishes a link between past and present, evidencing the permanence of structures of subjugation within the so-called modern social order. The subsequent retreat — "I apologized" — does not nullify the moment of consciousness; rather, it exposes the limit imposed on the insurgency. The word arises, but it is immediately contained by the threat of expulsion and material precariousness. The novel thus constructs a scene in which the contestation appears as an interrupted flash, a gesture that announces and retracts under the weight of historical conditions.

It is noteworthy that the migratory movement of the family inscribes the individual experience in a dynamic that goes beyond the domestic sphere and reaches a broader historical dimension. The departure is not only configured as a circumstantial survival strategy, but as a recurrent response to a cycle of precariousness that structures life in the hinterland. The displacement reveals that drought and exploitation are not exceptional

episodes, but forces that continuously reorganize social space, producing human flows marked by necessity. By placing its characters in transit, the novel transforms escape into an index of a social order incapable of ensuring minimum stability for those who live from work in the fields.

[...]Fabiano was happy and believed in this land, because he did not know what it was like or where it was. She meekly repeated the words of Sinha Vitória, the words that Sinha Vitória murmured because she had confidence in him. And they walked south, immersed in that dream. A big city, full of strong people. The boys in schools, learning difficult and necessary things [...] would arrive in an unknown and civilized land, they would be trapped in it. And the hinterland would continue to send people there. The hinterland would send strong, brutish men to the city, such as Fabiano, Sinha Vitória and the two boys (Ramos, 1980, p. 126).

The expression "the hinterland would continue to send people" shifts the focus of the narrative from the individual to the collective level. The family ceases to be an exception and starts to represent a reiterated social movement. The verb "to command" suggests a structural force that pushes subjects out of their territory, converting migration into a systematic mechanism for the reproduction of inequality. The dream of the city appears to be permeated by ambiguity: it is a promise of civilization and, at the same time, an anticipation of a new form of subjection — "they would be trapped in it". Mobility, therefore, does not automatically equate to liberation; it can only mean a change of scenery to the same logic of domination.

At this point, the novel exposes the historical dimension of the narrated experience. Drought, exploitation and forced migration are no longer isolated dramas and configure a collective structure that crosses generations. Trauma takes on a social aspect and not just a psychological one. By inscribing this dynamic within fiction, *Vidas Secas* transforms the literary narrative into a space for the critical elaboration of the memory of the peasantry, making a story told from those who are continuously displaced by economic and political processes emerge. Thus, the novel approaches the logic of Testimony Literature not only by thematizing suffering, but by constructing a narrative form that reveals the permanence of injustices and challenges the conciliatory image of progress.

The experience of drought, exploitation and migration outlines, in the novel, a horizon of suffering that goes beyond the individual drama and takes on collective contours. However, what is at stake is not only the presence of these events, but the way they are narrated. The representation of the peasantry in *Vidas Secas* is not limited to registering precariousness; it organizes a way of seeing and saying the hinterland that challenges consolidated images of the rural man as a passive or backward figure. The analysis that follows shifts the focus to

this literary construction, as it is interested in acquiring the philosophical clairvoyance of how the sertanejo testimony takes shape in the narrative and how its voice, although marked by silence, reconfigures the historical imaginary about the peasantry.

3.2 PEASANT REPRESENTATION BASED ON SERTANEJO TESTIMONY

Understanding *Vidas Secas* as a narrative inscribed on the horizon of Testimony Literature implies recognizing that the novel articulates the desire for justice, the presence of trauma and the exposure of a collective event that involves the man of the countryside — traits that characterize this literary tradition. The characters Fabiano, Sinhá Vitória, the oldest boy and the youngest boy, accompanied by the parrot and the dog Baleia, form a family nucleus that fights for survival in extreme conditions of precariousness. The experience lived by this group does not appear as an exception, but as a synthesis of a broader social reality.

At this point in the reflection, it is important to examine how the peasantry is represented from the memories and reports that cross the narrative. The question that guides this subtopic can be formulated in the following terms: is it a representation aligned with the perspective of the "winners", which reinforces stereotypes such as that of Jeca Tatu and fixes the peasant in the image of backwardness and passivity⁷, or a representation constructed from the testimony of the countryside, which re-inscribes the man of the countryside in the tradition of the oppressed?

The excerpts analyzed throughout the work indicate that the peasant is not described as a caricatured figure or ridiculed for his language or way of life. On the contrary, it appears as a subject crossed by material and symbolic violence. The oppression that falls on Fabiano and his family does not stem from individual moral traits, but from structural conditions: lack of access to land, economic dependence, lack of state assistance, and submission to deeply asymmetrical power relations. This awareness emerges in the character's own discourse when she states: "It saddened. Consider yourself planted in someone else's land!" (Ramos, 1980, p. 19). The expression evidences an acute perception of the precariousness of his condition: to be "planted" in soil that does not belong to him is to recognize himself rooted in dependence.

⁷ We can confirm this description by Monteiro Lobato in the following excerpt: "Jeca didn't want to know anything. Working was not with him [...] one day a doctor came there because of the rain and was astonished by so much misery. Seeing the caboclo so yellow and chucro, he decided to examine him. - Friend Jeca, what you have is disease. "Maybe." I feel an endless tiredness, and headache, and a twinge here in the chest that responds in the cacunda. [...] The doctor prescribed him the appropriate medicine, then said: "And try to buy a pair of boots and never walk barefoot or drink pinga again, do you hear?" "That's it," the doctor concluded, taking his hat. [...] Do what I said, and you will be strong, tough and rich like the Italian [...] everything the doctor said happened right! Three months later, no one knew Jeca anymore. Laziness disappeared (Lobato, 1961, p. 331-334).

The clash between peasants and large landowners inserts the novel within the tradition of the oppressed, as thought by Benjamin's philosophy. The narrative does not celebrate progress or harmonize social contradictions; rather, it exposes the wreckage left by the logic of property and exploitation. The figure of the farmer is not constructed as a civilizing hero, but as an agent of a system that perpetuates inequalities. By shifting the focus to those who bear the brunt of these relationships, the novel breaks with the triumphalist perspective that usually guides the official memory.

Another fundamental element for the construction of this representation concerns the lack of access to basic rights: land, health, formal education, housing and stable income. The school exclusion of Fabiano's children is not treated as an individual failure, but as an effect of a context that restricts possibilities. The narrative does not hold the characters responsible for their condition; evidence, on the contrary, of the silent violence of a social order that naturalizes inequality. Ignorance of social and political rights does not appear as an intrinsic incapacity, but as a result of historical deprivation. The form of payment received by the cowboy concretely illustrates this structure of exploitation:

Fabiano received in the division the fourth part of the calves and the third of the goats. But as he had no garden and only limited himself to sowing a few handfuls of beans and corn in the ebb and flow, he ate from the market. He got rid of animals, did not go so far as to shoe a calf or sign the ear of a goat (Ramos, 1980, p. 92).

The division described does not ensure autonomy; keeps the worker in a permanent cycle of dependence. By not being able to "shoe a calf" or "sign the ear of a goat", Fabiano remains on the margins of effective ownership. The system of non-monetary payment prevents accumulation and perpetuates subordination. The novel thus exposes an economic mechanism that transforms work into a mechanism for the reproduction of inequality. Although Fabiano expresses, at certain moments, a desire to free himself from this condition, the constant threat of expulsion limits any gesture of rupture. Submission does not result from conformism, but from calculation imposed by necessity. The belief that "Government, a distant and perfect thing could not make a mistake" (Ramos, 1980, p. 33-34) reveals a distance between concrete experience and the institutional sphere. Power appears as an abstract and unattainable instance, reinforcing the perception that the state of exception — in which precariousness is normalized — is a rule of country life.

It is important to note that the characters do not organize themselves politically or formulate a collective project of transformation. Still, the narrative has political force. Politicization does not occur through programmatic discourses, but through the repeated exposure of humiliations, injustices and structural vulnerability. By witnessing these

experiences, the novel calls on the reader to recognize that the condition of the peasantry is not the result of cultural inferiority, but of historical exclusion.

The criticism present in the work is therefore directed not at the sertanejo way of life, but at the economic and social conditions that make it precarious. Even under daily experience of shock, the peasant identity does not dissolve. The permanence of traditions and crafts is a central element of this representation. Fabiano is a cowboy — and the cowboy, in the northeastern culture, symbolizes courage, resistance and bond with the land. This dimension becomes evident in the admiration of the younger boy:

Stuck in the hides, of flints, doublet and breastplate, he was the most important creature in the world" and then taming a rough mare "Climbing the gate of the corral, the younger boy twisted his sweaty hands, stretched to see the cloud of dust that clouded the imburanas" (Ramos, 1980, p. 47).

The scene projects on the cowboy a centrality that contrasts with his objective social position. The clothing — the leathers, the doublet, the breastplate — does not appear as a sign of inferior rusticity, but as an expression of belonging to a craft that requires physical resistance and practical knowledge. It is through the boy's gaze that the father acquires greatness. This perspective is not irrelevant: by choosing the child's admiration as a point of focus, the narrative displaces external judgment and values the internal codes of the country culture.

The gesture of taming the brute mare shows skill and technical mastery, reinforcing the image of competence. There is no irony or trace of debauchery. The narrative restores to the cowboy a dignity that the social structure refuses him. Although economically submitted, it remains symbolically invested with importance within its cultural universe. This tension between material subordination and symbolic recognition prevents the character from being reduced to the stereotype of the backward or incapable peasant.

In this way, the novel moves away from the caricatural tradition that marked part of the representation of the man of the countryside in Brazilian literature. Instead of reaffirming the image of the sertanejo as a grotesque or indolent figure, he builds a presence crossed by strength, tradition and belonging. Appreciation is not abstract; it emerges from concrete practices, inherited gestures, and recognition between generations. Another excerpt reinforces this cultural dimension:

Fabiano cured the fox heifer's worm in the wake. He carried a vial of creolin in the aió, and if he had found the animal, he would have made the ordinary dressing. He did not find him, but he supposed to distinguish his footsteps in the sand, he bent down,

crossed two sticks on the ground and prayed. If the animal was not dead, he would go back to the corral, because the prayer was strong.

Once the obligation was fulfilled, Fabiano got up with a clear conscience and marched home. He reached the edge of the river [...] the chimes of the rattles that weighed on his shoulder, hanging from straps, beat deaf. His head bowed, his spine curved, he waved his arms to the right and to the left. These movements were useless, but the cowboy, the cowboy's father, grandfather, and other older ancestors had become accustomed to walking along paths, pushing the bush away with their hands. And the children were already beginning to reproduce the hereditary gesture. (Ramos, 1980, p. 17)

The excerpt shows a dimension of the sertanejo experience that is not reduced to material need. The knowledge of the cowboy emerges as an incorporated practice, the result of continuous learning transmitted between generations. Identifying tracks, preparing the dressing, resorting to prayer, making a way through the vegetation are gestures that articulate technique, belief and tradition. The repetition of these movements does not indicate backwardness, but cultural continuity. The bent body and the curved spine bear marks of hard work, but they also inscribe in the physical the memory of a way of life sedimented in time.

The hereditary gesture thus acquires historical depth. Father, grandfather and children connect through practices that resist even in the face of economic instability and forced displacement. There is a memory that does not manifest itself primarily in words, but in repeated action. It is knowledge that does not depend on institutional legitimacy to exist. The novel suggests that this embodied memory sustains identity and belonging, functioning as a silent form of permanence. The peasant representation constructed by Graciliano Ramos, therefore, does not reinforce stereotypes, but re-inscribes the sertanejo as a historical subject. From the testimony of its characters, the novel shifts the reader's gaze to the interior of an experience marked by exploration, but also by silent resistance and cultural permanence. In doing so, it approaches the critical task of tensioning hegemonic narratives and returning centrality to those that official historiography has often relegated to the margins.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analytical path undertaken sought to investigate whether the representation of the peasantry in *Vidas Secas*, by Graciliano Ramos, can be understood in the horizon of Testimony Literature or if it reproduces images crystallized by the dominant historiography. The central question was not restricted to the thematic content of the work, but focused on the way in which the sertanejo experience is narrated and re-inscribed within history. The analyses developed allow us to sustain that the novel constructs a representation aligned

with the tradition of the oppressed and effectively tensions the consolidated forms of representation of the man and woman of the countryside.

The experience of the subjects in the field appears marked by material precariousness, structural violence and forced displacement. However, this condition is not converted into a moral trait or naturalized as destiny. The narrative shows that vulnerability stems from determined historical relations — land concentration, labor exploitation, state negligence and educational exclusion. By shifting the explanation of the experienced condition from the individual plane to the realm of social structures, the novel breaks with readings that associated the peasantry with intrinsic backwardness.

It is at this point that the opposition to the figure of Jeca Tatu gains relevance. If Lobato's construction crystallized in the national imagination the image of the peasant as indolent, incapable and responsible for his own stagnation, *Vidas Secas* operates, against the grain of progress, the opposite movement. Graciliano Ramos does not present the sertanejo as a caricature or as an obstacle to progress; rather, it exposes the conditions that produce its precariousness. What appeared in Jeca Tatu as an individual moral failure appears, in the novel analyzed, as an effect of an unequal social order. The difference is not only aesthetic, but political: it is about shifting the guilt of the subject to the structures that keep him in a condition of vulnerability.

Reading in the light of the Literature of Testimony showed that *Vidas Secas* articulates trauma, memory and the desire for justice as structuring elements. Drought, economic exploitation and compulsory migration do not appear as natural fatalities, but as repeated experiences that cross generations. Suffering takes on a collective dimension and reveals the fragility of the progressive narrative that presents development as a linear and inclusive trajectory. By inscribing these experiences within fiction, the novel transforms literature into a space for the critical elaboration of historical memory.

The representation constructed by Graciliano Ramos restores cultural density to the subjects of the countryside. The cowboy is not reduced to ignorance or unproductivity; He is presented as a bearer of knowledge, transmitted practices and a deep bond with the land. Tradition, far from signifying backwardness, appears as historical continuity that persists even under adverse conditions. This symbolic reconfiguration directly confronts images that still persist in the Brazilian social imaginary.

Under the horizon of Benjamin's reflections, the work can be understood as an aesthetic gesture that reopens the past as a field of dispute. By shifting the focus to those who bear the effects of power structures, the novel weakens automatic empathy with the victors and re-inscribes the tradition of the oppressed at the center of the narrative. History

ceases to be a celebration of achievements and reveals itself to be crossed by pending injustices.

Thus, *Vidas Secas* not only denounces inequalities, but reconfigures the imaginary about the Brazilian peasantry. By contrasting with the caricatural representation enshrined in the figure of Jeca Tatu, the novel offers another possible image of the subjects of the countryside: not as obstacles to progress, but as protagonists of a historical experience marked by exploration, memory and resistance. Its critical force lies precisely in this inversion of perspective, which transforms fiction into an instrument for revising collective memory and questioning hegemonic narratives.

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