



**TRANSCULTURALITY IN ARIANO SUASSUNA'S THEATER:  
VOICES IN DIALOGUE**  
**TRANSCULTURALIDADE NO TEATRO DE ARIANO SUASSUNA:  
VOZES EM DIÁLOGO**

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**ABSTRACT:**

The text brings a dialogue between *Auto da Compadecida*, by the author Ariano Suassuna, and *Auto da Barca do Inferno*, by the author Gil Vicente, through the perspective of carnival literature. It presents a study on the Iberian influence in the theatrical production of the Brazilian author, Ariano Suassuna, in the light of carnivalization. It proposes a reflection on the subordinate's voice through laughter and on the author's place in cultural production in Latin America.

**KEYWORDS:** Carnival; Tradition; Subaltern's voice; Latin America.

**RESUMO:**

O texto traz um diálogo entre *Auto da Compadecida*, de Ariano Suassuna, e *Auto da Barca do Inferno*, de Gil Vicente, através da perspectiva da literatura carnavalesca. Apresenta-se um estudo sobre a influência ibérica na produção teatral do autor brasileiro Ariano Suassuna à luz da carnavalização. Propõe-se uma reflexão sobre a voz do subordinado através do riso e sobre o lugar do autor na produção cultural na América Latina.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Carnavalização; Tradição; A voz do subalterno; America Latina.

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When we talk about the subordinate's voice through laughter, we intend to show, from the perspective of laughter, the dialogue established between the theatrical text *Auto da Compadecida*, by Ariano Suassuna, and the theatrical text *Auto da Barca do inferno*, by Gil Vicente. When comparing two literatures produced at different times and in different social conditions, we understand that this is a question of transculturality, as we have different cultures that dialogue, forming something new. There is a crossover of cultures that is established without making way for the imposition of the strongest culture. This is not a cultural measurement of forces, but points of contact that point to similarities between two cultural productions and highlight, mainly, the differences of each one. This dialogue between different cultures is the axis around which cultural production in Latin America revolves, because the countries that compose it are part of a colonization process marked by domination and exploration. Such historical condition reveals the formation of a literature that has a local color. This is a difference. However, they also present the vestiges of a cultural legacy left by the colonizer. That way, we have the construction of a mixed imaginary, in other words, marked by different features.

*Auto da Compadecida* is a dramatic text written in 1955 that rescues traces of medievalism and inserts them in a northeastern context where there was no Middle Ages. This is not free. Much is due to the legacy of colonization. The discovery of the Americas bears the marks of Iberian colonization. It is not just about the colonization of Brazil, but of the countries of Latin America. We received a social, economic and cultural heritage that reflects Portugal and Spain. In this package, come the molds of medieval culture. Traces of religiosity appear in cultural production, establishing a game between the sacred and the profane, following the Catholic tradition of the late Middle Ages. In addition, we can see that the universe of erudite culture absorbs the tone of popular culture, which is essentially oralized and carnivalized. Perhaps these aspects are perceived more clearly in the Northeast of Brazil, because this region was the first to prosper, during colonization, through sugar cane. Thus, we can talk about the persistence of the tradition in *Auto da Compadecida*.

At this intersection of erudite and popular culture, laughter emerges as a way to reveal differences. It is through laughter that the countryman appears. The stories told through orality, through the cord, of the leaflets are incorporated in *Auto da Compadecida* and, through laughter, they reveal the northeastern culture with its own color. It is a tone that reveals the differences in relation to the cultural legacy received through Iberian colonization.

We should also note that Brazil, as a colonized country, assumes a subordinate economic position in relation to the countries of the first world. This condition extends to the countries that make up Latin America. In this scene, the northeastern hinterland, due to its economic and social condition, occupies a subordinate position in relation to the other regions of the country, revealing, therefore, a subordinate of the subaltern. These marks of economic and social marginality appear in cultural production, so it is important to identify the place of the author Ariano Suassuna in cultural production in Latin America.

## The persistence of tradition

What does the persistence of tradition mean? What tradition is this? *Auto da Compadecida* is a dramatic text that rescues northeastern popular culture filled with medieval hues and rescues, also, the literary tradition by incorporating elements that are present in *Auto da Barca do Inferno*. Gil Vicente is part of the literary tradition. He is part of the list of authors who represent the high echelon of erudite literature in the timeline. Tradition is shaped, then, by this incorporation of medievalism whose source is in popular leaflets and in Vincentian theater. Tradition does not mean something prior to the modern, but something that persists in the modern. The rescue of the content and form of Gil Vicente's theater reveals to us the persistence of part of what was given to us as the construction of the imaginary through the ways of Iberian colonization. Therefore, we can say that *Auto da Compadecida* is a text of modern theater that allows, in contemporary times, **the persistence of tradition**.

As a starting point, we have two productions characterized as AUTO. This is a type of theatrical representation with a religious theme. We have the dichotomy good and bad. We have the idea of seeking divine justice. We have the idea of heaven and hell. We have the search for morality. In *Auto da Compadecida*, everything moves towards the judgment of the population of Taperoá after death: "Auto da Compadecida! O julgamento de alguns canalhas, entre os quais um sacristão, um padre e um bispo, para o exercício da moralidade." (SUASSUNA, 1990, p. 22) In *Auto da Barca do Inferno*, the devil leads the boat that takes to hell those who, in Portuguese society of the sixteenth century, committed the worst acts:

### DIABO

Bem está.

Anda-te nesta hora má

e estende aquele palanque,

desocupa aquele banco

para a gente que virá.

[...] (VICENTE, 1985, p. 71)

In both authors, however, there is an inversion of everything that represents religiosity. These themes undergo an inversion process when placed in the perspective of laughter. Therefore, we can understand these two texts as parodies of this dramatic genre, that is, parody of what is meant by AUTO. In fact, they do not moralize, but relativize acts and values in the imminence of death. *Auto da Compadecida* and *Auto da Barca do Inferno* are representations of carnivalized literature, that is, they are texts that present the nuances of the carnival party. They are texts that, in terms of production time, have a distance of centuries, translating different societies and addressing a different reading public. However, the carnival elements bring them together.

In *Auto da Compadecida*, we have the story presented as a theatrical show at the fair. The story begins in a square, reproducing the image of the courtyards of countryside churches. This relationship with the fair theater not only represents common practices in Northeastern popular culture, but also establishes points of contact with the cultural imagery of the Middle Ages.

[...] como um picadeiro de circo[...] pode apresentar uma entrada de igreja à direita, com uma pequena balaustrada ao fundo, uma vez que o centro representa um desses pátios comuns nas igrejas das vilas do interior. A saída para a cidade é à esquerda e pode ser feita através de um arco. (SUASSUNA, 1990, p.21)

The image of the square, the arena, the fair theater is linked to the image of carnival. In the Middle Ages, this was a party similar to theatrical performances. What is Carnival? This is a show without a limelight, because the great stage of carnival is the universe. It is a party whose essential factors are the renovation and revival of the world. Therefore, it can be said that carnival works with the idea of universality. If there is no stage in this show, there are also no actors and spectators. Therefore, it is a spectacle to be experienced and not represented.

Carnival works with images. It does not go into literature. What literature does is to establish a type of discourse, where it becomes possible to perceive the hues of this popular party. This is because carnival, as a party, is one thing and the speech about carnival is another. It is not possible to fully translate the language of carnival into verbal language. Therefore, what happens is just a transposition of the language of carnival, that is, of ambivalent, multiple images and sensory registers, to the language of literature. It is a matter of transposing one type of language into another. Bakhtin (1997, p. 122) calls this transposition of the language of carnivalization of literature. It is worth remembering that carnivalization is a transculturalization through laughter. The culture of the OTHER is absorbed and transformed into something new through laughter. An initial text is transformed into something new. It is not about A or B, but about C, that is, it has the marks of previous cultures, antecedents that clash or intersect with the OTHER to create something new. Therefore, we can see that Ariano Suassuna rescues traces of a 16th century theatrical production, but it gives this production a new look, that is, it gives a local color. By recapturing medievalism in contemporary times, he shows us that there is a **persistence of tradition**, but revisited through local histories. There is a resumption of thematic and formal aspects of Gil Vicente's theater. European culture at the time of the discovery leaves its marks on American lands. It is not possible to let go of this legacy. However, we must consider the universal clashes with the region. Ariano creates the image of the poor man in the back lands through João Grilo. It is a type character that reveals hierarchical groups like the countryman and, also, like the medieval. The medieval imagination is resumed, because the Americas are an extension of Europe. The construction of thinking in Latin America is linked to the legacy left by Spain and Portugal, which were our cultural references. It is about the coloniality of power: "A colonialidade do poder sublinha a organização geoeconômica do

planeta, a qual articula o sistema mundial colonial/moderno e gerencia a diferença colonial.” (Mignolo, 2003, p. 85).

Latin American countries, such as Brazil, are part of global projects of European domination. They are objects of economic exploitation and cultural absorption. Thus, they are subordinate due to the economic condition and the construction of the imaginary. Europeans impose their culture, their thinking on colonized peoples. However, this project meets local stories. Colonized countries have their histories, that is, their values, customs and ideologies.

Ariano Suassuna, when he rescues the Portuguese cultural tradition through Gil Vicente, shows the subordination of knowledge, shows the colonialism of power through the letter. However, it also shows a decolonization of thinking when it creates something new, that is, when it transports information to the context of the northeastern hinterland. Then, medievalism appears with the colors of the hinterland. João Grilo and Chicó represent the countryman. The stories they tell are taken from popular leaflets. The burial of the dog, the story of the horse that defecated money, the punishment of pride and the fight of the soul are leaflets that the author uses to build the stories told by João Grilo and Chicó. These characters reveal the values, the imaginary and the way of life of the simple man of the hinterland. They therefore represent the social fragment silenced in Brazilian society. They have speech and writing, but they have no social voice power. They are voices that are hardly heard in the production of knowledge. When these voices appear in *Auto da Compadecida*, we perceive the local stories, that is, we perceive that the Northeastern cultural universe produces knowledge through the connection of these silenced social voices, such as the countryman, with the silencing voices that represent the hegemonic cultural power. It is the formation of a preliminary thought, that is, a constructed thinking in between. Ariano Suassuna, as an author, speaks of a privileged place. He is part of the cultural and socio-economic elite of the Northeast. However, he opens space for the subordinate’s voice to seek, in the folk, the reference for the construction of their characters. Ariano, then, starts from references like Gil Vicente, but seeks the image of the folk he knows and represents it through laughter.

### **Laughter as an exit to reveal differences**

What is the social function of laughter? Why do we laugh when reading *Auto da Compadecida*? The characters don’t laugh, but the reader / viewer laughs. These are questions that lead us to understand that laughter was the solution found by Ariano Suassuna to highlight the values of Northeastern society and to show the ways in which the poor man of the hinterland uses himself to survive. Through the laughter provoked in the reader / spectator, the socially and economically marginalized man finds space for representation.

There are several scenes created in *Auto da Compadecida* that promote laughter. However, we highlight one that finds echo in Gil Vicente’s text. Both *Auto da Compadecida* and *Auto da*

*Barca do Inferno* bring to the scene the image of the realm of the dead. However, this is not just any death. It is death happily represented. It is the carnivalized image of death. We must remember that death-rebirth is one of the carnival actions. Such use of the image of death shows us the relationship between these two texts and the Menippean satire that is one of the genres of the comic-serious.

In *Auto da Compadecida*, we witnessed the dethroning of Church members and of the wealthier ones like the baker and his wife.

We should note, initially, that the entry into the realm of the dead is preceded by the assault of the bandit Severino de Aracaju. In the imminent death, an atmosphere, typically carnivalized, is established, because the police, responsible for the social order, run away. The pontiff, minister of faith, collapses and the rest start to tremble. The characters are revealed as grotesque figures that destroy all kinds of respectability. The characters are revealed as grotesque figures that destroy all kinds of respectability. Then, those who should maintain peace and spirituality are deprived of this function.

At the frontier of life and death, a discourse develops that deconstructs the image of all those who are there. It is a threshold discourse, which is part of an intermediate space. In this space, the bishop, the highest symbol of the church, in the text, is terrified, contradicting his role as promoter of an existence after life. In fear of death, he ridicules his middle position between God and men. Through a repetitive gesture of getting up and passing out, the character is dressed in comicality, thus losing the seriousness that his condition of bishop requires. This fragility, which he assumes, reveals the dual image. It is a typical carnival image. In this threshold space, what is behind the social masks is revealed. At this border, members of the Church are caricatures. In addition, death brings together those who differ in life. We have *Mésalliance*, that is, the meeting of social antitheses. There are gathered the representatives of the church, the merchant, represented by the baker, the bandit and his assistant, the poor man, represented by João Grilo.

It is also worth remembering that the whole story is led by a clown. Even whoever carries the body of João Grilo is this symbol of joy. The clown holds one side of the net that carries João Grilo's body.

In *Auto da Barca do Inferno*, everyone dies and is reborn on the pier, which acts as a threshold space. There, the boat's anchor that will take everyone to hell or to heaven. The text presents the triplane structure of menippean satire. Everything is divided into earth, heaven and hell. The boat image is a representation of transience. In this space of transposition to another life, discourse on the threshold appears among passengers on the ferry. There, the latest attitudes of men in life are raised. It is these attitudes that have built everyone's way to hell. In this interlacing, all those who occupied a high position in life, are demoted and become like everyone else. Even with the devil. Thus, between the devil and the nobleman, that is, between

a representative of the low and a representative of the high social, a dialogue full of familiarity develops. This is typical of the carnival imaginary.

**DIABO**

Ah, que caravela esta!

Alça bandeiras que é festa;

Alta a verga, âncora a pique

(Para o pobre D. Henrique que se aproxima)

Ô poderoso Don Henrique!

Vós aqui? Que coisa é esta?

**FIDALGO**

(Vem seguido de um criado que carrega uma cadeira)

Onde esta nau vai agora

assim tão abastecida?

**DIABO**

Vai para a Ilha Perdida

e há de partir nesta hora

**FIDALGO**

Para lá vai a senhora?

**DIABO**

(Retificando)

Senhor. A vosso serviço.

**FIDALGO**

Mais parece isso um cortiço.

**DIABO**

É porque a vedes de fora.

**FIDALGO**

Mas a que terra passais?

**DIABO**

Para o Inferno, meu senhor.

**FIDALGO**

Que terra tão sem sabor!

**DIABO**

O quê? Também vós zombais?

**FIDALGO**

E passageiros achais  
para tal embarcação?

**DIABO**

Pois vos vejo à perfeição  
para ir ao nosso cais.

**FIDALGO**

A ti te parece assim?

**DIABO**

Onde esperais ter guarida?

**FIDALGO**

Eu deixo na outra vida  
quem reze sempre por mim.

**DIABO**

Quem reze sempre por ti?

Hi, hi, hi, hi, hi, hi, hi, hi.

Viveste a teu bel prazer  
pensando te defender  
só porque rezam por ti?  
Embarcai logo, embarcai  
que esta é a hora derradeira.  
Levai também a cadeira  
que assim passou vosso pai.

(VICENTE, 1985, p. 73-75)

As it turns out, Don Henrique is literally sent to hell. The member of the nobility loses respectability when he lands on the platform of hell. At the last hour, that is, at the moment of death, truths come to the surface. The kind of life that D. Henrique had led him to hell: “Viveste a teu bel prazer” (VICENTE, 1985, p. 75). The two main carnival actions are represented here. The death-rebirth binomial is associated with the crowning-dethroning binomial.

In *Auto da Barca do Inferno*, the barge, as a threshold space for life and death, also brings together those who differed in life. In the same boat, D. Henrique, the shoemaker, the



moneylender, the friar, the fool, the pimp, the procurator, the corregidor, the Jew and the hanged man ascend. In this threshold space of life and death, the truths of each person's life appear. The actions they took, in life, emerge as justifications to lead them to the boat of hell. As in the *Auto da compadecida*, we find here the manifestation of the last questions and the social antitheses. Death brings together those who differ in life. It is worth noting that the two texts reveal actions that are common to man of any age and of any region, such as betrayal, greed and falsehood. However, the local color makes the difference. Gil Vicente brings the representation of 16th century Portuguese society. We even have the nobility represented by D. Henrique. Ariano Suassuna brings to the scene the image of northeastern society with backwoodsman of the 20th century. We realized, then, that the conditions of production of the texts are quite different. In *Auto da Barca do Inferno*, facing death, the title of nobility of D. Henrique has no importance. The dependability that he had in life in his position does not save him from the boat of hell. At this time, vanity and contempt for the humble are the characteristics of the nobleman taken into account. These are attitudes that do not make you worthy of the ferry from heaven.

D. Henrique trusted his noble position, but it did not free him from the boat of hell. Face to face with the devil, the dialogue that is established is familiar and seductive. The devil, when calling D. Henrique sweet, builds a speech to present his boat as the best option for the nobleman.

Eccentricity, which is a carnival category, also appears in the life of D. Henrique. Before his death, his wife was, according to the devil, with another. Adultery is an eccentric attitude. It escapes normality. It runs away from what is expected from marriage, in the Christian mold, which is faithfulness until death. Although the devil's voice is unreliable, it brings to light the falsity of relationships. The false tears of the nobleman's wife represent a union sustained by hypocrisy. In the sequence of characters, the moneylender appears, who carries the marks of eccentricity, as he lives on easy money, that is, he chose an illicit way. For this condition, not only does he deserve the boat of hell, but he is also presented as a relative of the devil. Familiarity, then, goes a little beyond speech. It is a case of consanguinity.

The priest's image represents, as in the *Auto da Compadecida*, the dethroning of the church. It is the image of a worldly priest who deconstructs the functions of the priesthood, being a devotee, priest and husband. At the threshold of death, the friar's mask falls, revealing the difference between essence and appearance. The prayed psalms do not neutralize their carnal acts. That way, he doesn't escape the boat of hell.

Dona Brígida Vaz's mask, a pimp, also falls off, revealing the difference between the person and the character. Their luggage, due to the amount of addictions, is heavy even for the boat of hell. It contains robbery, prostitution, lies and illusion.

The corregidor and the prosecutor represent the carnival reversal of justice. The corregidor's speech in Latin is a parody of the legal discourse that normally uses Latin words.

In dialogue with the devil, fraud appears.

The prosecutor, too, is part of this block of justice that has its power relativized by its actions. For this reason, he is prepared to take his place in the barge of hell, going from bachelor to rower. This is the process of downgrading carnival. In the face of death, the social positions occupied in life undergo an inversion. The conditions that the characters occupy, at the threshold of life and death, reveal, through laughter, a deconstruction of social values and beliefs. Gil Vicente finds, in laughter, the way out to expose the common practices in the society of his time. Relativize functions and positions occupied by men in the different sectors of Portuguese society of their time.

Ariano Suassuna, in the same way, finds, in laughter, the alternative to deconstruct the values of the Northeastern society and to show important issues such as the boss's exploitation of the poor man of the Northeast region. João Grilo was exploited by the baker. Fact that he brings up in the final judgment. So, in a laughable way, we can see that the subordinate's voice resonates. The voice of someone who has no voice resonates in Brazil's socio-economic scenario. João Grilo and Chicó are the marginalized that, when telling funny stories, and by articulating situations that generate laughter, they allow the reader / viewer to reflect on the ability that the poor man has to survive in the northeastern hinterland in the face of the excesses of the boss and the more affluent members of society. It is in this emphasis given to the voice of the subaltern that is the difference of the theater of Suassuna. The voice of João Grilo, who represents the voice of many Brazilians, is what makes all the difference. Laughter expresses a way of seeing and understanding the world. The truth about all things comes out through laughter. It is the expression of a point of view. Laughter has the revealing power of the inside out of the world, the inside out of values and behaviours. Thus, in *Auto da Compadecida*, we have a destructive and relativizing laugh at everything and everyone. It is a laugh that demeans everything and everyone, not to destroy, but to relativize values and to renew them.

### **The place of Ariano Suassuna in cultural production in Latin America**

What is Latin America? What can we call Latin American literature? It is from these two questions that we can situate Ariano Suassuna's production.

Ariano Suassuna presents, through his text, the construction of a discourse molded according to a determined social imaginary. When he rescues traces of a text produced by Gil Vicente, he signals that Portugal is one of our cultural borders. It is not a physical border, but it is a cultural border. However, the works were produced in totally different historical, social and economic contexts. Although they are united by laughter, by the perspective of carnival. Thus, we realize that Ariano dialogues with the OTHER, but transposes the themes to the reality he observes: the northeastern hinterland.

For us to think, therefore, of a literature produced in Brazil and, in a broader view, in Latin America, we must understand the concept of Latin America. These are countries that have received different forms of colonization, such as English, French, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, among others. Therefore, all these cultures are absorbed. There is an integrative perspective, because everyone goes through the colonization process. However, there is diversity, as colonized countries acquire their local colors. They have their own traits, because each was colonized in a different way. Latin American countries have similarities in cultural formation, because they have historical similarities. There are economic, social and cultural similarities. This resonates with literary discourse. We must understand literature as a type of discourse that tries to give an account of history, that is, it is a discourse that reveals the values of society at a specific time. It reveals the relationships established between men within a certain time, within a certain pattern of sociability. So, what is Latin American literature? It is a type of discourse that reflects diversity in the unit. It arises from common cultural meanings that develop. Countries suffered similar influences in the colonial system and in the capitalist process, which is why they have similar features. While colonized, they are cultural subordinates. It is a literary production that arises from the mixture of the European and the new world. European language meets the experiences of a new world. However, in the unit, there is diversity. As well? Despite the features that unite the countries of Latin America, there are many differences between them. They are cultural subordinates, but they seek to impress their brand on the world scene, because each country had a way of reacting to the colonization process. Latin American literature is a type of discourse that carries the marks of formation of the countries that compose it. It reflects the ideology of colonized countries, of subordinate voices, but each in its own way, because the conditions of colonization were different. Therefore, it is not just any speech. It is a discourse with specificity, with particularities and, mainly, with plurality. Latin American literature is formed by more than one literary system, so it is plural:

aquello que llamamos literatura latino-americana constituye en realidad un conjunto formado por lo menos por dos a três sistemas literários diferentes segun las regiones, que provienen de sistemas culturales em general bastantes diferenciados. (PIZARRO, p. 19)

There is, therefore, no single and complete literary system. There is a confluence of voices. In a society, elements of classical culture share space with elements of popular culture. There is no 100% pure culture. This is reflected in the literature. In *Auto da Compadecida*, we have the representation of cultured literature, that is, we have a text produced in the elite spaces of knowledge construction. However, it brings the voice of cordel literature, elements of popular culture. There is a confluence of speeches. The popular imagination remains through a cultured literary system. These are the echoes of the off-axis voice in the Brazilian scenario, in Brazilian literature.

*Auto da Compadecida*, rescuing traces of *Auto da Barca do Inferno*, exemplifies a Latin

American production where the voices of a diverse society, a diverse culture resonate. Such influence paves the way for universality, for the transcultural character. However, it breaks with the European paradigm by presenting variants, by presenting its local color. D. Henrique, as a representative of the nobility, of the high social, is not similar to Major Antônio Moraes, representative of the high social in Taperoá. One is noble and the other is a landowner in the northeastern hinterland. The Friar, from *Auto da Barca do Inferno*, does not have the same profile as the representatives of the Church in *Auto da Compadecida*. João Grilo and Chicó, by representing the poor men of the hinterland, impress the difference in relation to the characters of *Auto da Barca do Inferno*. In *Auto da Compadecida*, then, we find the universe of bandits and landowners in the Brazilian Northeast. We find traces of cordel literature that rescues orality as a cultural representation. Such orality can be seen, for example, in the way João Grilo calls *Compadecida*:

Valha-me Nossa Senhora,  
Mãe de Deus de Nazaré!  
A vaca mansa dá leite,  
A braba dá quando quer.  
A mansa dá sossegada,  
A braba levanta o pé.  
Já fui barco, fui navio,  
Mas hoje sou escaler.  
Já fui menino, fui homem,  
Só me falta ser mulher.  
(SUASSUNA,1990, p. 170)

This reverse prayer rescues the tone of popular singers, giving the text the marks of orality. It is the representation of popular culture. This popular tone with the colors of the hinterland establishes the cultural difference. It is a reaction to European cultural dependency and is the representation of the subordinate's voice. These are differences, in relation to the universal culture, that allow us to hear the voice off the axis.

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