



THAT THING WE CALL IDENTITY: A READING OF *TUDO PODE SER ROUBADO*, BY GIOVANA MADALOSSO
AQUILO QUE CHAMAMOS DE IDENTIDADE: UMA LEITURA DE *TUDO PODE SER ROUBADO*, DE GIOVANA MADALOSSO

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ABSTRACT

The following article proposes a reading of Giovana Madalosso's Brazilian novel *Tudo pode ser roubado* (2018), based on the idea of performativity, presented throughout the work of Judith Butler (1997;2017), applying it to the characters of the narrative and its apparent dialogue with *O Guarani* (1857), by José de Alencar, in order to question not only the construction of gender identities, but also the construction of a national identity within the subject's own ontology in the characters of the narrative.

KEYWORDS: Performance; Identity; Giovana Madalosso; Brazilian literature.

RESUMO

O presente artigo propõe uma leitura do romance brasileiro *Tudo pode ser roubado* (2018), de Giovana Madalosso, a partir da ideia de performatividade, presente ao longo da obra de Judith Butler (1997;2017), aplicando-a aos personagens da narrativa e de seu aparente diálogo com *O Guarani* (1857), de José de Alencar, de modo a questionar não somente a construção de identidades de gênero, mas também a de identidades nacionais e a própria ontologia do sujeito nos personagens da narrativa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Performance; Identidade; Giovana Madalosso; Literatura brasileira.

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In *Tudo pode ser roubado*, we follow a first-person narrative about a waitress who works in the Paulista Avenue, the busiest street in the city of São Paulo. The point of view of the afore-mentioned waitress is what conducts the reader's perspective of facts, and in any moment of the narrative it is revealed the narrator's real name – all the characters call her by the nickname of Rabudinha. The only information concerning the protagonist involve her part-time job, which basically consists of stealing luxury items and reselling it in thrift stores for a high price. Her methodology consists in observing the wealthy clients who attend the restaurant she works, and then, in the right time, stealing the object, whether it is a valuable accessory or piece of clothing.

Because of her clandestine life, the protagonist is surrounded by a very restrict social circle, having as her best girlfriend Sebastiana, the owner of a thrift shop in the neighborhood of Pinheiros, to which the stolen objects and clothes are sold to for a high price. Tiana, the character's nickname, is a successful trans woman, who finds herself in an abusive relationship with Marcelo, a man who often attacks her for not accepting to be seen in public hanging out with her. Another friend of the protagonist goes by the name of Biel, who lives a very similar life as Rabudinha's, as he survives by reselling stolen luxury items. Between waitressing and gold digging, that is how the protagonist makes most of her income and manages to pay for a simple apartment in São Paulo, a city that is now taken by real estate speculation and people's emotional exhaustion.

Her friend Biel shows her the mission that will conduct most of the narrative: stealing the first edition of *O Guarani* (1857), by José de Alencar, to their new client, an art collector who likes rare pieces. The book in question was auctioned by the value of 100,000 reais to a professor, and Biel delegates her the responsibility of finding the man who purchased it. In order to do so, Rabudinha starts to attend literature lessons at FAAP (a local college) taught by Cícero, a literature professor geared towards journalism students, and she then assumes the identity of an aspiring journalist who is interested in receiving publishing tips and recommendations. In the beginning, she uses her beauty and seducing techniques to get close to Cícero, and they have their first date in a bar. As a consequence, aside of frequently attending literature lessons, she also starts to mold herself according to the professor's cultural tastes, which involves pretending to be an expert in literature, opera concerts and cult films exhibited in alternative circuits.

The job becomes tedious given the fact that the newly divorced professor holds a mysterious personality and is hardly persuaded by the protagonist, who often attempts to have a sex night at the guy's apartment as an excuse to look through his belongings and finding the rare book. For being the protagonist's most ambitious task to date, we follow, throughout the narrative, other episodes of her life, consisting in incorporating different identities and trying to find valuable items that were either lost or forgotten, while trying to meet with wealthy men who she finds in dating apps in her spare time.

However, her involvement with Cícero grows with time, as she sees herself forced to create more layers of her invented character because the literature professor starts to open up and show more of his personality. Therefore, she needs to attend opera concerts, movie sessions, go to thrift stores, among other activities that make her extremely bored. In any moment whatsoever she demonstrates to have a sense of attachment to the professor, being it an exclusively professional interest. On the other hand, Cícero starts to show a love affection by Rabudinha, despite constantly avoiding having sexual contact with her, given that each of their dates always ended up with him giving an excuse for her not to enter his apartment.

Throughout the narrative, we also get a deeper depiction of Tiana, which takes the role of Rabudinha's best friend and is constantly suffering with her boyfriend's aggressions and temper tantrums. Her figure is seen by the protagonist as an almost similar person to her, for she is a trans woman who, in a given moment of her life, completed the full surgical transition of her gender identity. The same reflection is extended to Cícero, when she holds an observation about him during one of his lessons:

If we dig deep inside ourselves, we'll only find organs and guts, which indicates that we don't have a core, but that we are made of layers, and one of them are the clothes, which go way beyond what we want to depict, it is in fact part of what we are. And, surrounding myself, there were many examples. The guy wearing a skirt not only waved to other with his feminine self as well as introjected these characteristics within his own body, because the skirt allowed him to have a new physical experience, having, for example, to lift the fabric when urinating, just like women do. And what about the girl wearing an ethnical jacket? I would bet that if she were in her country, she would be wearing Calvin Klein, but being outside of it, the local handmaid craft worked as a point of affective contact. [...] Regarding Cícero, as I could later make sure, his monochromatic rags weren't the result of an exacerbated, striped of the material world kind of intellect, as many pigheaded like to think of themselves. They were just the visible part of an entirely grey fruit (MADALOSSO, 2018, p. 157, own translation²).

This thinking comes associated with the clothes people are wearing in her surroundings and the identity implications it has. According to the reflection, clothes would serve as a package to personality and individuality, something close to what Butler (2017) argues as performance when discussing other aspects beyond gender. The philosopher observes, for example, the way subjection produces individuals who are supported by discourses and ideologies that give the

² Se cavarmos dentro da gente, só vamos achar órgãos e vísceras, o que indica que não temos um núcleo, mas que somos feitos de camadas, e uma delas é a roupa, que vai muito além do que queremos aparentar, é de fato parte do que somos. E, em volta de mim, estavam os exemplos. O cara que usava saia não só acenava para os outros com seu eu feminino como também introjetava essa característica no seu corpo, ao passo que a saia lhe permitia viver uma nova experiência física, tendo, por exemplo, que levantar o tecido como as mulheres ao mijar. E a garota de jaqueta étnica? Aposto que, se estivesse no seu país, estaria vestindo Calvin Klein, mas, estando fora dele, o artesanato local funcionava como um ponto de contato afetivo. [...] Sobre Cícero, como tive certeza depois, seus andrajos monocromáticos não eram o resultado de um intelecto exacerbado, despojado do mundo material, como muitos cabeçudos gostam de pensar sobre si mesmos. Eram apenas a parte visível de um fruto inteiramente cinza (MADALOSSO, 2018, p. 157).

illusion of materializing a specific identity.

In the study conducted by Brazilian scholar Berenice Bento (2006), the sociologist applies Butler's idea of performativity in interviews given by trans people who are waiting for the sexual reassignment surgery in Spain. The people who still had not had the chance to undergo the surgery needed to find other ways of gender affirmation besides the sign of the sexual organ of birth. Therefore, clothes and both verbal and body language serve as acts of repetition that bring the desired materialization of gender, whether is that socially conceived as male or female, and this is possibly what approximates Rabudinha of her trans friend: seeing her as a reflection of herself in the sense that she assumes different identities depending on the context or the situation. Tiana, on the other hand, had to assume her female identity in order to be happy with her body and also to fit in society's rules regarding the gender and sex that were assigned at birth.

Throughout Rabudinha's journey, the distance and coldness to which the character sees other people surrounding her, allied to her life perception, makes her range of social performances to acquire similar layers of those that were incorporated by gender studies within the discussion on how sexual identities are constantly forged by the use of discourse and also physical objects. Therefore, extending the concept to the fictional dimension of *Tudo pode ser roubado*, we could deal with characters in a constant process of identity transitions and/or in search of objects that are able to translate their desire of becoming a subject. In the case of Rabudinha, her object of desire is the purchase of the apartment where she lives in; Cícero's, the first and rare edition of *O Guarani*; Tiana's, finding a man who can give her the nurturing she deserves.

After a series of failed attempts, the protagonist manages to reach her plan of entering Cícero's apartment. After a dinner, some drinks and Rabudinha's persistence, the two of them go to the professor's apartment, who later is not able to sustain an erection during their sexual intercourse, which serves as a trigger to his panic syndrome. He then takes his antidepressant and falls asleep, which gives her the opportunity to search his apartment after the rare book edition. Ultimately, her mission goes exactly as planned and her, along with Biel, receive the promised amount of money as a prize for accomplishing the mission.

That is how Rabudinha steals from Cícero a book edition that symbolized his personal identity, that of a university professor of journalism. A book that, in turn, was responsible for forging the cultural identity of a country by subscribing the Indian into an idyllic figure which, as a scaffold, reproduced the false idea of the construction of country modernity based on the primitive figure of the original peoples who inhabited this land before Portuguese colonization.

In order to commemorate the success of their mission, the protagonist suggest a date with Biel, who manages to come up with an excuse to postpone it to the following day. Obviously, the guy disappears of her life and Rabudinha discovers that, just like her, Biel was actually a person who assumed a completely fake identity, from his name until the place where he lives.

Desolated by her recent discover, Rabudinha calls Tiana, a friend she had neglected to tell her problems and businesses to. Arriving at her thrift shop, she finds a completely empty space and a message from her friend saying that she had tried unsuccessfully to make contact with her. The reason it happened was for finding out that both her address and identity did not match what she had told Tiana: “I went to look for you to say goodbye and hand you the jacket and I found out that... Honey, I have no idea where you live, where you work! At college, no one knew who you were” (MADALOSSO, 2016, p. 187, our translation³). That is how we become acknowledged that not only had the protagonist built a false identity to mislead others from her professional mission, but also to prevent her interpersonal relationships of reaching her, even the genuine ones, such as Tiana’s friendship. Rabudinha, therefore, builds herself as an identitarian nomad, almost like a contemporary *flanêuse*, meaning, a person who wanders around the urban spaces of a big metropolis. Madalosso’s narrative is built around this aspect of its main character, in the sense that in each chapter we get to witness a different stealing, and along with that we get to know a different story from one of Rabudinha’s victims who live in São Paulo.

It is worth mentioning that Tiana is not the first trans character to appear in one of Madalosso’s writings. In her very first book, a collection of short stories named *A teta racional*, the short story “Roleta-russa” is told in first person by a transvestite who goes into a sex party of a gay friend. During the party, she notices that amongst the guests there is a masculinity and homosexuality spectrum: departing from uninhibited men, up until shy and restrained men. In a flashback, we get to know the protagonist’s past, in which she remembers the exact moment of receiving the positive results to an HIV exam. The remembrance is overlapped with her sexual experience during the party, in which she feels proud for spreading the virus for so many married men without them being aware of it. The idea of performance hidden behind an idyllic figure of trans subject also pervades the narrative of this short story.

Venturing a little further in our analysis, the intertextuality with José de Alencar’s *O Guarani*, the book that is stolen by Rabudinha, can be analyzed departing from the point of view of national identity construction, which is also proposed by Butler (1997) in *The psychic life of power*, when analyzing the invisible forces of discourse that shape us into specific identities, whether they refer to gender role, race, or even our nationality. Butler’s work can be read as a continuation of Foucault’s theory of biopower, only here she focuses on how these forces penetrate our subjectivity by constantly forcing us into adhering to arbitrary identities. Alencar’s work finds itself circumscribed as part of an aesthetical project of 19th century Brazilian literature, in which, along with *Iracema* (1865) and *Ubirajara* (1874), devises a retake of the Indian figure as an idyllic figure of what would be a fixed Brazilian identity. The narrative tells the story of love and devotion of an Indian named Peri to a white woman named Cecília, who

3 “Eu fui te procurar pra dar tchau e entregar a jaqueta e descobri que... Meu bem, eu não sei onde você mora, onde você trabalha! Na faculdade, ninguém sabia quem era você” (MADALOSSO, 2016, p.187).

belongs to a wealthy family of Portuguese noblemen.

While Madalosso's narrative gives us a deeper look into forged identities, Rabudinha attempts to steal one of the most acclaimed novels by literary critics and Brazilian literary canon. A novel that was responsible for inventing a Brazilian identity within the 19th century, in the midst of a modernity and positivism background, based on a figure of the Indian, later deconstructed by writers of the early 20th century literature, who resumed the same figure with a non-idyllic approach, but as a symbol of resistance of national culture.

When the rare edition is finally in the hands of Rabudinha, who hands it to J., Biel's wealthy client, she wonders to herself:

For the first time I ask myself if J. has already read *O Guarani*. If he will ever read it. And then his bookshelf comes to mind. The few amount of titles, the acrylic dome, the absence of other books around the house. The fixation for rare works, not necessarily for literature. So much so that *Macunaíma* was not opened in a text page, but in one containing illustrations only. And I think that it was not opened in the page with the 1/50 because it would be of extremely bad taste, excessively exhibitionist for an elegant guy like him. I realize that I'm dealing with two distinct figures, one of the collector and one of the literature lover. Of course both could come within the same person, but it doesn't seem to be the case. Cícero has got a boner for content. J., on the other hand, for the object. Far from me judging other people's boners, but I suddenly realize the value this business has for each one. Because, considering, J.'s boner is not even the object. It is, above all, the body of his collection. The mosaic that needs to be filled. [...] This is why the first edition of *O Guarani* is worth more than one hundred reais for Cícero and almost nothing for J. (one hundred reais is almost nothing for J.), because there isn't a real value for anything, just the myriad of unreal values – and true – that our emotions label on top of everything (MADALOSSO, 2018, p. 173-174, our translation⁴).

The reflection above shows that the value, and therefore, the identity that are given to objects are a product of social construction and are crystallized after subjective taste and criteria. If the Brazilian literary canon includes *O Guarani* within its main cutout, it is because the ideologies represented by the novel were discursively built along time, and later crystallized and internalized within Brazilian literature historiography. If other equally relevant writers for the history of Romanticism are still relegated to oblivion and enjoy less literary prestige, like

4 Pela primeira vez me pergunto se o J. já leu *O Guarani*. Se um dia vai ler. E então a estante dele vem à minha cabeça. A pouca quantidade de títulos, as redomas de acrílico, a ausência de outros livros pela casa. A fixação por obras raras, não necessariamente por literatura. Tanto que o *Macunaíma* não estava aberto numa página de texto, mas de ilustrações. E acho que só não estava aberto na página onde havia o 1/50 porque seria de mau gosto, muito exibicionismo para um cara elegante como ele. Eu me dou conta de que estou tratando com duas figuras distintas, um colecionador e um amante de literatura. Claro que os dois podiam vir na mesma pessoa, mas não me parece o caso. O tesão do Cícero é o conteúdo. O do J., o objeto. Longe de mim julgar o tesão dos outros, mas de repente percebo o valor que esse negócio tem para cada um. Porque, pensando bem, o tesão do J. nem é o objeto. É, antes de tudo, o corpo da sua coleção. O mosaico que precisa ser completado. [...] É por isso que a primeira edição de *O Guarani* vale mais de cem mil para o Cícero e quase nada para o J. (cem mil é quase nada para o J.), porque não existe um valor real para nada, só a miríade de valores irrealis – e verdadeiros – que nossas emoções etiquetam em cima de tudo (MADALOSSO, 2018, p. 173-174).

Júlia Lopes de Almeida, a contemporary writer to José de Alencar, we can question its oblivion departing from the aesthetical criteria an subjective choices that pervade her work, such as a potentially emancipatory feminist discourse that we can find in novels such as *A falência* (1901).

Thus, the rare edition of the work of Alencar represents opposite values to Cícero and J. For the first, it is something that reinforces the identity that is aimed by the professor, that of the intellectual with monochromatic clothes, whereas for J. it is the symbol of financial power, something that is symbolic to the capitalist logic of endless accumulation.

Throughout the entire narrative, Rabudinha steals objects that are left and/or forgotten by her clients in the restaurant, objects that serve as personality trails and accessories for the identities they intended to portray. As someone without great ambitions and an identity that is not based on ideals or specific ideologies, the protagonist collects other people's traces of identities and resells it for a high price in thrift stores. The cultural industry appears here as a twin sister of the society of the spectacle (DEBORD, 2005), which suggests the personal identification of the subject with consumer goods. According to the French philosopher:

Culture is the general sphere of knowledge and of representations of lived experiences within historical societies divided into classes. It is a generalizing power which itself exists as a separate entity, as division of intellectual labour and as intellectual labour of division. Culture detached itself from the unity of myth-based society “when human life lost its unifying power and when opposites lost their living connection and interactions and became autonomous” (DEBORD, 2005, p. 180).

Debord's affirmation can be seen as analogous to the cynical attitude towards historical objects of the protagonist, which moves and leads the protagonist's narrative.

Literature has a fundamental role when it comes to the aspects that involve culture and myth-based societies of the past. Especially if we take into consideration the literary canon that decides which narratives are the most important ones to that specific society. The literary canon is also discursively built and modified according to society's aesthetic values change. Consequently, there is an increase of financial value attributed to the works of specific writers that stand for those principles. Thus, it is worth questioning a possible symbiosis between the cultural industry and the election of authors, aesthetics and specific works conditioned to a specific thought that relegates certain writers and works to oblivion and the exaltation of others based on an evaluative choice.

In *O Guarani*, the narrative begins in the year of 1604, in Brazil. We follow the story of Cecília, a bourgeois woman who meets nobleman Antonio; and the story of Peri, an Indian who came to a tribe that crosses Cecília, and who is hired by her father to be her protector. Despite revendicating the legitimacy of an Indian culture and language, the narrator presents us to Peri and the other Indians of the narrative by referring to them as “wild” or other adjectives that belong to the same spectrum of meaning, therefore simplifying the narrative to a clash between the original peoples from Brazil and an Eurocentric culture that was established in that territory,

based on the erasure of a culture that was already present and established in that land.

By depicting indigenous subjects and culture from his point of view, the narrator circumscribes that original identity to an idyllic subject, reflecting a regard of the subject from the second half of the 19th century upon a story that happened in the 17th century, what ends up reducing the identity of Peri – as the synecdoche of a culture – to a subject whose value is limited to its willingness to save and protect white bourgeois people from the perils they might come to face, such as evidenced by countless moments in the narrative, as, for example, a moment after Peri tells his origin story:

While he spoke, a burst of wild courage and strength shone through his dark eyes, and gave certain nobility to his act. Although ignorant, son of the forests, he was a king; he had the royalty of strength. Just concluded, the haughtiness of the warrior disappeared; he got shy and modest; he was no longer more than a barbarian in the face of civilized creatures, whose superiority of education his instinct could recognize (ALENCAR, 1970, p. 150-151, our translation⁵).

In other words, from the reading of the novel, it is possible to observe the presence of a narrator that makes explicit a supposedly hierarchy between the Indian knowledge of Peri and his tribe, which would be inferior to that white, European knowledge represented by the figures of Antônio and Cecília, as well as in the ways of interpersonal relationships within their family.

A similar aspect between the narrators of Alencar and Madalosso is in the fact that both pay special attention to the objects that are featured in the spaces where the narratives take place. Alencar's narrator gives extreme detailing on the house of Cecília's family, especially the objects that remain in their bookshelves or that are hanging on the walls, many of them serving only as a demonstration of power and wealth. In the same way, Madalosso's narrator dedicates a great part of her story telling to observing what is in Rabudinha's victims apartments, as well as in the physical descriptions of the victims whose objects are being stolen. This strategy is used by the narrator to show how Rabudinha tries to guess people's values and background stories which lie in the objects and furniture they own.

Just like Guy Debord (2005) argues, if material objects once symbolized the inherent values of their owners – ranging from wealth, life experiences up to educational level – nowadays what is sold in the society of the spectacle are no longer objects that can be priced, but the image, the experience and the illusion of being a different person, in a way that the performance of oneself became more valuable than a false reality constructed by pricy items. Thereby, the copy of *O Guarani* – object that serves as Cícero's representation of persona, as well as his intellectual/professor lifestyle – is the way in which Rabudinha transforms herself into a *flanêuse*.

The reading of *O Guarani*, a major canon work in the literary canon, evidences literature as an important tool to analyze the role of discourse while an identity shaping tool, which traces

5 Enquanto falava, um assomo de orgulho selvagem da força e da coragem lhe brilhava nos olhos negros, e dava certa nobreza ao seu gesto. Embora ignorante, filho das florestas, era um rei; tinha a realeza da força. Apenas concluiu, a altivez do guerreiro desapareceu; ficou tímido e modesto; já não era mais do que um bárbaro em face de criaturas civilizadas, cuja superioridade de educação o seu instinto reconhecia (ALENCAR, 1970, p.150-151).

are changed and modified according to historic, socioeconomic and political background. In the case of Alencar's work, Indian identity is mediated by an omniscient third person narrator who is clearly not trustworthy, due to the fact that it imprints on its characters the mark of its ideology. Whereas in Madalosso's novel we follow a first person narrator that tells the multiple personalities that she assumes depending on the context in which she finds herself in: since an aspiring journalist to conquer the professor, up to depicting herself as innocent girl to the men who she has intercourse with, always keeping the stealing as her main and only goal of life. The narrator's cynicism regarding her own (lack of) identity is a characteristic that is reminiscing of the typically ironic and cynical narrators from the second half of the 20th century.

Therefore, by the end of this reflection we can ask ourselves: has there existed, in any given moment of history, such a thing as a fixed identity of any kind? Some crystallized readings on the multiplicities and social, sexual and psychic transformations on the 21st century, such as the one of Zygmunt Bauman (2007), give the impression that it is a recent and exclusive phenomenon of the breaks of paradigms typical of this century. On the other hand, as Henri Bergson (2010) states, the memory of the past is not limited to an objective reality, but to something conditioned to the interpretation of the past departing from the circumstances of the present. *Tudo pode ser roubado* is an interesting entry for contemporary Brazilian literature in the sense that it is a deconstruction of forged and fixed identities regarding our nationality, gender and class. In the current unstable times we live in, Madalosso's narrative proposes a witty and disruptive regard on things that should not be seen as stable, meaning, identities that are continually assigned to us.

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