

# Intersections Of Literature And Economics In "Barren Lives (Vidas Secas)": A Socioeconomic Perspective

Ricardo Da Costa Nunes<sup>1</sup>, Fábio Roberto Vieira<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PPGCont/Universidade De Brasília, Brazil

<sup>2</sup>Universidade Estácio De Sá, Brazil

---

## Abstract

**Background:** This paper conducts an interdisciplinary analysis of the novel 'Barren Lives (Vidas Secas)' by Graciliano Ramos. This socio-historical document reflects and critiques the living conditions of the most vulnerable strata of Brazilian society. It explores the intersections between literature, economics, and society to decipher the dynamics of class and domination. Through a methodology that combines literary analysis with economic theory, it investigates how Ramos captures the socioeconomic reality of the northeastern backlands, emphasising class struggles and the exploitation of workers under a semi-capitalist system. 'Barren Lives' is not only examined as a work of art but as a document of immense significance, shedding light on the living conditions of the most vulnerable strata of Brazilian society. The adopted methodology involves a critical reading of the text, identifying narrative elements that reveal structures of power and domination, and applying economic concepts to interpret these relations within the Brazilian context. This approach reveals the ongoing relevance of 'Barren Lives' in understanding the complexities of social and economic relationships, highlighting the role of literature as a critical medium for analysing reality..

**Methodology:** The methodology adopted in this research is exploratory and descriptive, incorporating bibliographical and documentary procedures. This approach is suitable for analysing the socioeconomic dynamics depicted in Graciliano Ramos's work "Vidas Secas" and understanding how different economic theories can enrich our comprehension of the theme. The bibliographical research involved a review of literature on economic theories and critical studies on Ramos's work, enabling the construction of a theoretical foundation for the analysis. The documentary research included the analysis of historical documents, economic data, and previous studies on 'Barren Lives' and its historical and social context. This procedure assisted in contextualising the conditions depicted in the work within a broader socioeconomic perspective. The combination of exploratory and descriptive methods and bibliographical and documentary procedures was chosen to address the theme's complexity and multifaceted nature. This approach provided the necessary flexibility to investigate new theoretical perspectives and describe in detail the socioeconomic conditions of the characters, enriching the analysis with a deeper and more comprehensive understanding.

**Conclusion:** Graciliano Ramos's 'Barren Lives' denounced an unjust society in the semi-arid region of Brazil in the 1930s. This study's analysis allowed for an understanding of the trajectory of those excluded from the labour market, emphasising their real-world implications. By examining how Ramos's narrative reflects the failures predicted by orthodox economic theory and echoes Keynesian arguments about the necessity of effective demand to combat unemployment, insights are gained into the applicability and limitations of these theories. The interdisciplinary approach, combining literature, social issues, and Brazilian culture, was crucial for uncovering the nuances of 'Barren Lives'. The integration of literary and economic perspectives facilitated the understanding of the struggles faced by the characters, reflecting the adversities experienced by many Brazilians. The study reaffirms the importance of the novel as a social and economic critique and highlights its usefulness as a pedagogical and awareness-raising tool. Moreover, it opens up exciting avenues for future research, which could expand this focus to include other literary works documenting aspects of Brazilian social and economic dynamics and similar contexts globally.

**Key Word:** Graciliano Ramos; Literature and Society; Empirical Reality and Fiction; Structures of Power and Domination; Social and Economic Critique.

---

Date of Submission: 21-05-2024

Date of Acceptance: 31-05-2024

---

## I. Introduction

Graciliano Ramos, born in 1892, is a towering figure in 20th-century Brazilian literature, most renowned for 'Barren Lives (Vidas Secas)', published in 1938. This novel provides a lens into the social and

economic reality of the northeastern backlands, exploring the complexities of life in a region scarred by climatic and economic adversities. 'Barren Lives' vividly portrays the landscape of drought and immerses the reader in it, presenting characters who grapple with hunger and fatigue, subjected to the most severe, unrelenting natural conditions. Ramos transforms 'Barren Lives' into a comprehensive examination of Brazil's social and political dynamics through his analytical rigour and critical depth. Ramos links the individual experiences of his characters to the sociopolitical structures of the semi-arid backlands, underscoring the pivotal role of literature in illuminating socioeconomic reality.

The narrative of 'Barren Lives (Vidas Secas)' by Graciliano Ramos offers a study on the resilience and adversities that Fabiano and his family face. By focusing mainly on the hardships Fabiano's family encounters, Ramos illustrates the human capacity to survive in a hostile environment, symbolising the daily struggles of the northeastern backlands' population. Moreover, Ramos highlights the characters' resilience through their daily interactions and challenges, providing a detailed view of the familial and community dynamics in the backlands. This analysis goes beyond merely exposing inequalities; it explores the strategies of resistance and adaptation within an oppressive and resource-limited system.

This study will delve into the analysis of Ramos's literary methods based on this interdisciplinary approach. We will focus on analysing Ramos's literary methodology, his representations of class struggles and structures of domination, and the integration of economic concepts to understand how these elements combine to reveal the social and economic dynamics depicted in the novel.

In "Barren Lives (Vidas Secas)", Graciliano Ramos takes a unique approach, using fiction not merely as a vehicle for narration but as a powerful tool to dissect the social and economic fabric. He goes beyond the boundaries of artistic expression, employing his narrative as an instrument to question and challenge the existing social and economic structures. Ramos's work illuminates the intersection between the harsh reality of the backlands and the broader spectrum of inequalities and oppressions. His method not only exposes the harsh conditions but also underscores the transformative power of literature in fostering a deeper comprehension of underlying socioeconomic realities. The novel goes beyond merely depicting the struggle for survival against natural and economic adversities; it delves into a profound analysis of power relations and critiques the structures that perpetuate poverty and marginalisation.

Carvalho and Santos (2023) emphasise the growing significance of interdisciplinary discourse in academia. They point out that the academic community has made efforts to support the integration of various disciplines to foster diverse knowledge, expand intellectual horizons, and ease the sharing of novel discoveries. This study adopts a similar approach in analysing how Ramos's narrative reflects critiques of power structures and inequalities in Brazil, associating the characters' individual experiences with the sociopolitical structures of the semi-arid backlands.

"Barren Lives (Vidas Secas)" is not just a narration but also a tool for social and economic critique. Ramos combines literary analysis with sociological and psychological observations, outlining the adversities faced by characters on the margins of society and revealing the dynamics of power and resistance. This approach highlights the role of literature in illuminating and criticising socioeconomic realities, offering a deep and critical understanding of the issues faced.

"Barren Lives (Vidas Secas)" narrates the experience of Fabiano and his family as a study of resistance in the face of adversity. The focus on Fabiano's family highlights their struggles and capacity to endure in an unfavourable environment, exemplifying the challenges faced by the population of the northeastern backlands. This study aims to transcend the mere exposure of inequalities by delving into the complexity of Ramos's unique approach, offering a detailed analysis of forms of resistance and adaptation within an oppressive and resource-limited system.

Through this perspective, 'Barren Lives' is a literary document of life in the backlands and a critical mirror reflecting the complexities of social and economic relations in a broader context of inequality and the quest for dignity. Such an approach reveals the intrinsic regressiveness of the conditions depicted and, more significantly, underscores the profound power of literature in catalysing a broader and more critical understanding of underlying socioeconomic realities.

Ramos's work goes beyond merely describing the struggle for survival against natural and economic adversities. It delves into the analysis of power relations and critiques the structures that perpetuate poverty and marginalisation. In doing so, it highlights the role of literature in examining and challenging social and economic injustices.

## **II. Subsistence And Power Dynamics In The Backlands: A Socioeconomic Analysis Semi-Capitalist Characteristics of the Semi-Arid Region of the Backlands**

The story unfolds in the semi-arid region of Alagoas, marked by the coexistence of restricted capitalist and subsistence practices. According to Furtado (2005, p. 160),

*The subsistence sector (...) was characterised by a great dispersion. Based on livestock farming and rudimentary agricultural techniques (...).*

In this way, this region lacks fundamental public services such as education, health, sanitation, and basic infrastructure, especially in contrast to the country's large urban centres. Sadlier (2012) identifies the region's archaic characteristics, referring to it as almost feudal, an allusion to its economic and social structure. In a complementary description, Niels (2014) portrays the environment as imbued with anguish and a lack of hope.

Subsistence production involves creating food, clothing, and other goods necessary for the producer's survival and their family or community without the primary aim of profit. Santos added, *The problem of the Northeast is not the climate, but the labour relationship and the property regime* (Apud Avellar, 2007, p. 48).

Bueno's understanding also states:

*Those people may even be condemned to misery, but this, within the novel, has nothing to do with the natural cycle of drought and rain* (BUENO, 2006, p. 663).

The author argues that the misery faced by the characters in the novel is not due to the natural cycle of drought and rain but to deeper social factors related to systems of power and property. This perspective aligns with Furtado's thinking, who argues that underdevelopment is a consequence of historical and economic processes, not a natural condition or a necessary phase of economic development.

Another aspect of this archaic society is the lack of social mobility, as pointed out by Ramos: *He was obliged to work for others, naturally, he knew his place. Well. He was born with this destiny, no one was to blame for him having been born with a bad fate... It was fate. His father had lived like this, his grandfather too.* (RAMOS, 1997, p. 97).

According to Boucinhas (2020), Machado de Assis also observed that the republican period was characterised as a stratified society. The character João de Melo in Machado de Assis had aspirations of becoming a wealthy executive but received only a modest position as a clerk:

*This did not help João de Melo, who one day appeared here, asking for a job. He wanted to be, like him, a bank director. Santos quickly arranged a position for him as a clerk in the civil office in Maricá, and sent him off with the best advice in the world.* (ASSIS, 1904, p. 7).

This passage reflects the idea that, despite João de Melo's aspirations to achieve a higher status, similar to Santos, he ends up accepting a clerk's position with resignation, highlighting the influence of societal expectations and the role of fate in shaping his life, and the difficulty of socio-economic and social advancement in the republican period, even in the large centres. Celso Furtado also points out that the socio-economic structure limits social mobility:

*The economic development of Brazil, and in particular the growth of its industrial structure, was insufficient to absorb the masses who moved from the countryside to the cities, which contributes to the perpetuation of poverty and the limitation of social mobility.* (FURTADO, 2005, p. 178).

The conditions experienced by characters such as Fabiano and his family in 'Barren Lives' vividly illustrate the adverse scenario faced by those on the margins of capitalist society. Through the works of Ramos and Machado de Assis, one perceives a strong critique of social immobility and the perpetuation of inequalities, highlighting the persistent relevance of these themes in Brazilian literature as a reflection of socio-economic struggles (Boucinhas, 2020).

In addition to the already mentioned aspects, other fundamental characteristics reinforce the semi-capitalist nature of the region, such as the presence of common lands, which remain accessible to everyone for grazing and water access for their animals. This community activity demonstrates the operation of low-profit enterprises. Tradition permitted the collective use of natural resources, contrasting with the capitalist principles of private property and exclusive land use.

This society resembles the oldest ones described by Pomeranz (2000). According to the author, ancient societies presented a subsistence-centred way of life with limited infrastructure, reflecting a typical pattern until the seventeenth century. During this period, global economies were almost equal, with a small elite enjoying high consumption while the rest of the population living in subsistence conditions.

In the society described by Pomeranz, where life was primarily centred on subsistence and infrastructure was scarce, one can observe the foundations for the need for water policies described by Molle (1991). In this context, the implementation of dams emerges as a crucial response to overcome the limitations of primitive infrastructure and mitigate the challenges imposed by adverse climatic conditions, such as droughts. Thus, this measure not only benefits the population and livestock by providing better living conditions but also perpetuates traditional natural resource management practices, adapting them to contemporary demands and maintaining the cultural and economic continuity observed since the seventeenth century.

Referring to Europe, Hobsbawm concludes that, at this stage of development, enterprises do not produce sufficient surpluses, specifically tributes, to adequately finance public services intended for the local population (Hobsbawm, 2001). This system of primitive capital accumulation results in a limited surplus. The entrepreneur, holding limited capital and not acting as a rural producer, employs a few workers. For example, Fabiano's employer owned fewer than one hundred head of cattle. This reality contrasts with the situation in Minas Gerais (MG), which, being more developed, houses large farms capable of sustaining hundreds or even thousands of head of cattle. In MG, as in the other states of the South and Southeast regions, the diversity of economic activities contributes to an environment where the capitalist model is more advanced.

This makes government authorities more vulnerable to pressures from the wealthier citizens of the region. The author illustrates this influence of local businessmen with an episode experienced by Fabiano, who, when trying to sell pork cuts in the town, is stopped by a government inspector demanding taxes, forcing him to negotiate exclusively with his employer.

The police action, arresting Fabiano without any justifiable reason, further highlights the deficiencies of the state bureaucracy in a hybrid society. These incidents reflect the corruption and inefficiency that prevent the adequate fulfilment of the population's socio-economic needs, evidencing a clear absence of citizenship. However, Fabiano resigned, stating: "*Government is Government,*" evidencing his acceptance of marginalisation as a consequence of governmental inefficacy (SILVA, 2019, p. 75).

This acceptance shows how much the state bureaucracy, besides being perceived as inefficient and corrupt, fails to meet the population's needs, exacerbating social and economic disparities compared to the more developed regions of the country. In situations like the one portrayed, Araújo and Araújo (2014) ironically point out the paradox of such coexistence.

The possibility of state representatives acting for their own benefit is greater in regions with lower per capita income, see Rose-Ackerman (1999). In these areas, authorities' conduct may lean towards illicit enrichment to the detriment of the common good. This situation is not just a matter of isolated corruption but reflects a system where power structures are manipulated to benefit the already privileged. In this context, the "law of the strongest" emerges as an operational principle where the most vulnerable are systematically disadvantaged.

Another pre-capitalist aspect of the region is the absence of labour regulations that protect workers' rights, Polanyi (2000). As a result of the lack of laws, employers can exploit the workforce, imposing long working hours with low pay and no job security. It is not for nothing that Fabiano's low salary eventually leads him into debt.

*Little by little, the owner's branding iron marked Fabiano's animals. And when he had nothing left to sell, the backcountry worker got into debt. When it came to the division, he was in trouble, and at the time of settling accounts, they gave him a pittance.* (RAMOS, 2003, p. 94)

Fabiano's submission concerns not only social but also economic issues: it highlights how economic inequalities limit his choices and reinforce his dependence on his employer.

In summary, the coexistence of obsolete technology, wage determination by employers, and minimal state intervention creates a unique economic and social scenario. This configuration reveals a hybrid system where subsistence is vital and capitalist elements manifest in a restricted manner. Therefore, the region exemplifies a delicate balance between tradition and adaptation to a specific socio-economic context.

### **The Description of Class Struggles in Barren Lives**

Class struggle tends to be more pronounced in pre-capitalist societies, where economic and social conditions create fertile ground for intense conflicts between the ruling classes and workers, Vidal (2021). This dynamic is evident in the semi-arid setting of the backcountry, reflecting the complexities of a region marked by semi-capitalist practices. The coexistence of a subsistence economy with restricted capitalist practices, the absence of fundamental public services and the prevalence of a traditional rustic structure highlight the socioeconomic fragility of the workers. This fragility, exacerbated by the lack of government protection and the exploitative tactics employed by landowners, underscores the ongoing struggle for survival and social justice.

Amidst this struggle for survival, the desperate conditions of hunger emerge, leading to the debilitation of the body and further weakening their already precarious existence. There are many passages in the book where the characters' hunger and the possibility of death by starvation are constantly narrated. At the mercy of misfortune, the characters fight daily against hunger and fatigue and are subjected to the harshest and most relentless natural conditions. This reality underscores the fragility of their existences, where each day is a battle for survival amidst the adversities of the This dynamic is evident in the semi-arid setting of the backcountry:

*(...) when they were all starving, the little dog had brought them a cavy.*

*He forgot. Now he remembered the journey he had made through the backlands, starving. The boys' legs were as thin as bobbins, and Sinha Vitória stumbled under the trunk's weight. By the riverbank, they had eaten the parrot, which could not speak. Necessity.* (RAMOS, 2003, p. 41)

Fabiano's resignation and the government's inability to meet the needs of its population reflect what Marx (1985) described about the English peasantry during the period of primitive accumulation. Just as the English landowners exacerbated workers' vulnerability by manipulating food prices, land rents, and interest rates, so did the authorities and landowners in Brazil. This underscores the provisional nature of the family's existence, the inescapable fate of wandering beings, as the cowherd, a disposable sub-worker, *would be dismissed when he least expected it* (RAMOS, 2003, p. 23).

The scenario in which Fabiano finds himself illustrates Karl Marx's concept of the 'reserve army of labour,' which describes the group of unemployed workers in capitalism whose existence exerts downward pressure on wages and weakens the bargaining power of employed workers, as defined by Nunes (2023). This group serves the interests of capitalists by allowing for quick adjustments in the workforce in response to market fluctuations, thereby keeping costs low and maximising profits. During favourable economic periods, part of this group is reabsorbed into the labour market, but in recessions, unemployment grows, reinforcing its size. Beyond its financial implications, the reserve army of labour contributes to the alienation and dehumanisation of workers, exacerbating their instability and lack of control over their lives, central elements in Marx's critique of capitalism.

This reality emphasises the constant uncertainty and lack of security that permeate the lives of Fabiano and his family, who are subjected not only to relentless natural conditions but also to economic and social instability. Similarly, Fabiano's employer imposes his will so that Fabiano is forced to relinquish his rights to secure his job. Fabiano accepts the compensation his employer pays even though his accounts for the amounts he is due never align with those of his employer, as described below.

*(...) upon closing the deal, he noticed that Sinhá Vitória's calculations, as usual, differed from the employer's. He complained and received the usual explanation: the discrepancy was due to interest. He was not satisfied: there must be a mistake. (...) and Fabiano lost his temper. The employer got angry, rejected the insolence, and thought it would be good for the cowboy to look for work on another farm.* (GRACILIANO, 2003, p.94)

The excerpt in question illustrates a class confrontation, where Fabiano, representing the proletariat, is subjugated to the conditions imposed by the employer, who symbolizes the bourgeoisie, as anticipated by Lamas and Oliveira (2017) and Burawoy (1978). The power imbalance is evident in Fabiano's inability to effectively contest financial discrepancies, being forced to accept the employer's authority to sustain his livelihood.

The state reinforces the hegemony of the proprietors through legislation and policies that benefit the holders of capital, exemplified by Fabiano's release at the employer's request. This act highlights the influence of state power in maintaining business supremacy as it allows landowners assistance in the class struggle. Marx describes this phenomenon as an opposition between capital and labour, where employers seek to maximise profits by minimising workers' remuneration. In other words, there was a belief that the employer's gain corresponded to the workers' loss. Thus, the rich needed the labour of the poor to be rich, or as stated by Rousseau and cited by Silva (2019, p. 68): *the poor need the rich to avoid being sucked into misery, while the rich need the poor to feed their 'pride' and 'childish vanity'.*

This scenario exemplifies the Marxist class struggle, highlighting the vulnerability of the working class in the face of the dominant class, which holds the means of production and, consequently, the employment and livelihood of the workers. Thus, social welfare is limited to a minority, while the majority of society faces conditions of poverty. From this perspective, according to Niels (2014), Ramos aims to describe the sociopolitical context of the country to expose the social inequalities that affect rural people. The author recognises the division among the rural workers, who are separated into rich and poor. This political approach is contested by Vincent (as cited in Sadlier, 2012), who argues that, although characters like Fabiano and Sinhá Vitória are victims of society, the idea that their struggles have active political implications is rejected. Mazzara (1968) reinforces this finding by stating that Ramos's characters are conservative.

In contrast, "Mother" by Maxim Gorky is intrinsically revolutionary, both in theme and intention, according to Bordini (2019). Gorky's work follows Pelagia's transformation from a state of passivity to that of an active participant in the revolutionary movement, illustrating the power of political consciousness and collective action. Gorky not only criticises the injustices of Tsarism but also explicitly proposes revolution as a necessary means to achieve justice and social freedom. The narrative calls for change, promoting the idea that a just society must be built on socialist principles and encouraging readers to recognise the need for direct political action.

### **Labour Market: Orthodox vs Heterodox Economic Theory**

The theoretical dispute between orthodox and heterodox economists regarding the explanation of the functioning of the labour market, as described in Nunes and Nunes (1997), provides a backdrop for analysing the condition of unemployment faced by literary characters such as Fabiano in Graciliano Ramos's 'Barren Lives'. This section explores how economic theories intertwine with literary narratives to reveal the complexities

of unemployment. While orthodox economic theory, based on neoclassical principles, suggests that employment and wages naturally balance through supply and demand, Keynes critiques this view, arguing that the responsibility for unemployment falls on employers who fail to create sufficient demand for labour. Furthermore, Marxist theory goes beyond criticising the very structure of capitalism, which perpetuates exploitation and inequality in the labour market. At the heart of this theoretical discussion, Graciliano Ramos, through Fabiano's trajectory, illustrates the reality of unemployment and precarious working conditions, providing a perspective that resonates with Marx's critiques of power dynamics in capitalism. In the following, we unfold these theories in light of Fabiano's experience, revealing how 'Barren Lives' fits into this discussion, offering an understanding of the nature of work and unemployment in the Brazilian context.

The motivations for unemployment are a controversial topic. Some studies blame workers who refuse to accept the market wage for unemployment, while others blame employers who fail to create job opportunities. This issue involves ideological positions and different paradigms, and both theories offer an important perspective. Therefore, unemployment can be approached from various perspectives, and fully understanding this issue requires considering both.

In the orthodox view of the labour market, predominant in neoclassical economic theory, employment and wages are determined by the interaction of supply and demand forces, Nunes and Nunes, (1997). Workers, faced with a specific labour supply, compare the benefit of the wage to the sacrifice that work requires. They accept the job if they consider the benefit equal to or greater than the sacrifice. When labour supply exceeds demand, wages tend to be lower; conversely, wages rise if the supply is scarce. Nunes and Nunes (1997) describe how, in the orthodox model, the labour market efficiently adjusts individuals' labour supply to employers' demand for these workers. Therefore, wages adjust to reflect the supply and demand of labour, ensuring that those willing to work for the market wage can find employment.

Keynes (1970) contests this approach, arguing that, from this perspective, the responsibility for unemployment would fall on the workers. He asserts that, under the premise that employers offer a fair wage, it is up to the workers to accept or reject the offer, implying that refusal of a job offer justifies unemployment. Keynes further explains that the origin of unemployment lies in the behaviour of employers, who are the leading creators of labour demand. He argues that employers directly contribute to rising unemployment rates by not generating sufficient demand for labour. Therefore, in the Keynesian view, the level of employment is strongly influenced by employers' willingness to invest and expand their operations, thus determining the amount of labour they demand.

Marxist theory presents a critical perspective that goes beyond Keynesianism. For Marx, this situation of worker exploitation by the employer is inherent to the capitalist system, as seen by Harvey (2013). Karl Marx argues that unemployment should not be seen merely as a casual economic fluctuation or a by-product of inefficiency in the labour market. Instead, it is a direct consequence of the power and property structures that define capitalism, where employers, or the capitalist class, control the means of production, including factories, land, and machinery. Historical expropriation, in which the ruling class usurps common property and divides society into classes, leads to this concentration of wealth in the hands of a select few.

This division results in a situation where workers, deprived of the means to produce their subsistence, are forced to sell their labour power to survive. However, to maximise their profits, capitalists often adopt new technologies to increase productivity or manipulate the labour supply to keep wages low, using unemployment to push wages down and keep the workforce submissive and in a state of precarity.

According to Kuhn (1962) and Lakatos (1970), various economic theories present different perspectives on the theories, each contributing its own method for comprehending different subjects. Kuhn suggests these theories can coexist within distinct paradigms until a scientific revolution occurs. Lakatos contends that competing research programmes can be progressive if they offer new predictions and explanations. Similarly, the fierce dispute for hegemony among different schools of thought in Economics reflects this theoretical diversity. Economic schools of thought can be classified as orthodox, including classical, neoclassical, and new classical economists, and heterodox, encompassing Marxist, post-Keynesian, and some institutionalist economists. It has been observed that, in Economics and sociology, competition between different schools of thought leads many authors to claim that the competing paradigm is inadequate. This dispute reveals the struggle for hegemony in the economic sciences, often resulting in agents disqualifying competitors within the same scientific field. Nunes and Nunes (2018) discuss how the rivalry among different schools of thought amplifies the issue, noting that the field of Public Administration receives these disputes without clearly identifying the assumptions and implications of each adopted theory. They argue that adopting incompatible theories generates a fragility that cannot be overcome merely by higher professional qualifications, as theoretical contradictions will persist until a paradigm is chosen, which is difficult due to the rivalry of transposed paradigms. Bourdieu (1988) explains that the scientific field is a space where competitive struggles take place. Thus, analysing 'Barren Lives' in light of orthodox and heterodox economic theories illustrates how

different approaches can enrich our understanding of socio-economic reality and help inform more just and effective policies.

While orthodox economic theory, based on neoclassical principles, suggests that employment and wages naturally balance through supply and demand, Keynes critiques this view, arguing that the responsibility for unemployment falls on employers who fail to create sufficient demand for labour. Furthermore, Marxist theory goes beyond criticising the very structure of capitalism, which perpetuates exploitation and inequality in the labour market. At the heart of this theoretical discussion, Graciliano Ramos, through Fabiano's trajectory, illustrates the reality of unemployment and precarious working conditions, providing a perspective that resonates with Marx's critiques of power dynamics in capitalism.

In Fabiano's trajectory in Graciliano Ramos's "Barren Lives," this dynamic becomes evident when the protagonist is employed under unfavourable conditions and without labour protection. As Marx analysed, this reflects the prevalence of informal work and heightened inequalities in the labour market. In Fabiano's experience, Graciliano Ramos illustrates the predominance of what is now termed informal work. Employment occurs without a formal contract, social benefits, or labour protection. Fabiano is hired without a formal work contract, social benefits, or labour protection.

The arrival of rain made Fabiano's employment possible, allowing him to work as a cowboy under unfavourable conditions. He received a portion of the animals he raised as payment. However, lacking his land and constantly taking loans from his employer, he always sold his calves and goats back to his employer at a price lower than the market rate. Consequently, he remained indebted (Ramos, 2003). Menegat et al. (2011) also recognise that the primary conditions for these workers are denied.

In conclusion, our analysis of 'Barren Lives' not only deepens our understanding of the labour market dynamics and unemployment but also underscores their real-world implications. By examining how Ramos's narrative mirrors the labour market failures predicted by orthodox theory and simultaneously echoes Keynesian arguments about the need for effective demand to combat unemployment, we gain valuable insights into the applicability and limitations of these theories in the real world. This analysis illuminates the socioeconomic conditions in literature, demonstrating the power of fiction as a mirror of economic reality. It underscores the relevance of literature as a critical tool for examining and questioning economic policies and their consequences on people's lives, enriching academic discussion and fostering a deeper understanding of our socioeconomic landscape..

### **The Role of the State**

The interaction between the State, the police forces, and the landowners not only consolidates the power of the farmers but also intensifies the exploitation of the workers. The government was often complicit with the farmers, who, in return, supported the government through taxes or political support, thus allowing the government to benefit indirectly from the surpluses produced by the landowners. This dynamic reveals a continuous effort to maximise profits at the expense of fair remuneration for the workers, demonstrating the complexity of the power dynamics that sustain capitalist hegemony, as pointed out by Leal in the following terms.

*The patronage system as a framework entailed a reciprocity of favours between the local political bosses, who dominated local politics, and the central government, which required the support of these bosses to maintain political control and order. In exchange for political support, the local political bosses received assurances from the central government that they could exercise their local power with autonomy, frequently abusing this position to manipulate elections, coerce the electorate, and reinforce their economic and social dominance over rural populations. LEAL (1975, p.45)*

The precariousness of Fabiano's life reflects a phenomenon not confined to the northeastern hinterlands of Brazil but observed in various societies transitioning to capitalism throughout history. Fabiano, symbolising the Brazilian peasantry in the country's most adverse region, fails to earn enough to support his family and consequently accumulates debts with his employer. This reality mirrors Karl Marx's analyses of the period of primitive accumulation in England.

According to Marx, the capitalist mode of production is characterised by a clash between two distinct groups of commodity owners: the owners of the means of production, who strive to amass more value, and the free workers, who, lacking access to the means of production, are compelled to sell their labour power for a wage. This stark dichotomy in ownership and power is a key aspect of Fabiano's predicament in 'Barren Lives'.

Thus, the story of Fabiano and his family in 'Barren Lives' vividly illustrates these theoretical conflicts within the specific context of Brazil, demonstrating how Marx's theories apply beyond theoretical boundaries and explain the reality of Brazilian workers. Fabiano and his family represent individuals within semi-capitalist economic structures spread across Brazil. Thus, the work transcends its setting in the Northeast, articulating an extensive critique of the Brazilian socioeconomic framework and the power and domination relations that impact the most vulnerable segments of society.

### **Novel and Scientific Method**

This approach hopes to reveal new forms of understanding and interpretation that transcend the traditional boundaries between scientific and literary disciplines. This novel, therefore, transcends its nature as a work of literary art to become a socio-historical document that prompts reflections on inequalities in Brazilian society. In "Barren Lives," Graciliano Ramos skillfully captures the essence of the way of life of those on the margins of capitalist society. These inequalities become palpable in Graciliano Ramos's narrative, where the oppressiveness of the environment could be attributed to the semi-capitalist nature of the region by a historian.

The goal is to demonstrate how the logical and analytical structure of science can complement and intensify the emotional and thematic depth of the novel, offering a richer and more multifaceted perspective on both fields. This approach will reveal new forms of understanding and interpretation that transcend the traditional boundaries between scientific and literary disciplines.

This novel, therefore, transcends its nature as a work of literary art to become a socio-historical document that prompts reflections on inequalities in Brazilian society. In "Barren Lives," Graciliano Ramos skillfully captures the essence of the way of life of those on the margins of capitalist society. These inequalities become palpable in Graciliano Ramos's narrative, where the oppressiveness of the environment could be attributed to the semi-capitalist nature of the region by a historian.

Such essence, highlighted by Ramos (2003), allows his narrative to underscore the relevant points of rural society in the hinterlands. This aspect is recognised by Eco (1996, p. 94):

*the worlds of fiction are, indeed, parasitic on the real world, but they bracket most of the things about it, allowing us to focus on a finite and closed world, very similar to ours, but poorer.*

Thus, the author describes a universe as accurate, although it is not; it is a world woven with historical and social elements.

Including a literary perspective in scientific articles is not just a means of enriching the content with context. It is a gateway to a deeper understanding of the complexities of the scientific process and a spotlight on the relevance of current research within a broader context. Furthermore, incorporating literary elements opens avenues for exploring the human and ethical dimensions often accompanying scientific and social analyses. Carvalho and Santos(2019)'s transdisciplinary analysis of 'Barren Lives' is a compelling example. This study, employing a qualitative methodology, interweaves literature with other fields of knowledge, demonstrating how literary narratives can both reflect and expand our understanding of complex social conditions.

A classic example is the novel *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (2007), which addresses ethics and governance, critical themes in the social sciences, by exploring the corruption of power. Incorporating works like this into scholarly articles enriches the debate, linking technical issues to broader human and social concerns and reinforcing the importance of an interdisciplinary approach in scientific research.

Thus, literature contributes to scientific study, enriching understanding, providing context, and highlighting the interaction between science and society. Through a narrative, the novel helps to comprehend motivations, the challenges faced in different eras, and the transformations of these ideas over time.

As Eagleton (2013) points out, concepts and theories from the social sciences are vividly illustrated in literature, with works that explore dynamics such as social stratification and mobility through engaging characters and plots, reinforcing the impact and relevance of these narratives in understanding social issues. This use of literature facilitates a deeper understanding of these concepts and highlights literature as a valuable tool for qualitative research. Through the analysis of narratives, social scientists can unravel how people interpret their own experiences and the world around them.

Literature promotes empathy and interpersonal understanding, allowing readers to experience the lives of people from diverse backgrounds. These qualities are essential in social science, where understanding others' experiences empathetically is crucial for ethical analysis and interpretation of social phenomena. Literature also stimulates critical thinking and reflection, challenging readers to question power structures and dominant narratives, a skill indispensable in social science.

Moreover, literature fosters interdisciplinary approaches, combining knowledge from various disciplines to offer a more comprehensive view of society. This interdisciplinary focus is fundamental for a holistic understanding of the complex social and cultural systems that shape human experience. Thus, literature complements social science and is an essential tool for exploring the rich tapestry of social life.

The inclusion of Fabiano and his family's journey in search of a better life in the South is a concrete example of the struggle against adversity and the hope of finding justice and order, contrasting with the neglect they faced in the backcountry. This example illustrates the motivations for internal migration in Brazil, emphasising poverty and the abandonment of specific regions as driving factors.

Given the challenging socioeconomic conditions, Fabiano symbolises the hope for migrating to the South, where he sees the potential for more fairness and order compared to the harsh reality of being forsaken and neglected in the rural areas: *They descended the hill, crossed the dry river, and headed South* (Ramos, 1938,



p.118). This illustrates the search for a new beginning, albeit marked by uncertainty and the complexity of integration into a new social context.

Sachs (1993) corroborates the emigration of groups from the Northeast to the South. According to the author, the reason for such an exodus was that the region was the poorest in the country. Garcia Junior (1990) even refers to the region as Brazil's "rejected" part.

Despite the inherent difficulties of the migration process, the hope of finding better working conditions in the South fueled the desire of many Northeasterners to leave behind the aridity and precariousness of the backlands. It was believed that opportunities in the more developed regions of the country would provide a fairer and more organised environment. The Vargas government, preparing the economy for more significant development, approved regulations that enabled workers to enjoy labour rights, such as regulated working hours and a minimum wage. These measures by Vargas were justified, as the South (especially the Southeast region) began emerging as a more dynamic and structured industrial and agricultural hub, offering better employment prospects, as pointed out by Nunes (2024).

These observations about Brazil's socio-economic conditions and migration movements also lead us to reflect on how literary and scientific narratives can address and interpret these realities. This study proposes a unique association between the novel and the scientific method, offering potential benefits for literature and science. While literature often uses emotion and human experience, science relies on objective observation and rigorous experimentation. By exploring the intersection of these seemingly divergent domains, this analysis aims to reveal how scientific structure and logic can enrich literary narratives. Conversely, it investigates how literature can incorporate and illuminate scientific concepts, potentially making them more accessible and understandable to a broader audience.

### **III. Final Considerations**

'Barren Lives' by Graciliano Ramos encourages us to recognise the persistence of class dynamics and reflect on the urgency of social and economic changes that promote justice and equity. The work transcends its setting in the northeastern backlands. It articulates a critique of the Brazilian socio-economic landscape, highlighting the power and domination relationships that impact the most vulnerable segments of society.

The 'Barren Lives' analysis deepens our understanding of labour market dynamics and unemployment, highlighting their real-world implications. By examining how Graciliano Ramos's narrative mirrors the failures predicted by orthodox economic theory and echoes Keynesian arguments about the necessity of effective demand to combat unemployment, we gain valuable insights into the applicability and limitations of these theories. This analysis demonstrates the socio-economic conditions reflected in literature, showcasing fiction's power to mirror economic realities and emphasising literature as a critical tool for examining and questioning economic policies and their consequences. This study highlights the persistent inequalities and marginalisation within the Brazilian labour market, urging a reflection on necessary social and economic reforms. As illustrated by Ramos's work, literature serves not only as a historical document but also as an essential component in the education and development of social and economic consciousness, encouraging a deeper understanding of the socio-economic landscape and fostering a critical perspective on the need for justice and equity.

This study calls for reflection on the injustices that continue to resonate in contemporary times, reaffirming the relevance of 'Barren Lives' not only as a historical document but also as a significant element in the education and formation of social and economic consciousness. Ramos's narrative, enriched by emblematic characters, criticises the entrenched inequalities that perpetuate the marginalisation and exploitation of the working classes, highlighting the power of literature to transcend art and become a vital tool for understanding and transforming reality.

Despite the inherent difficulties of the migration process, the hope of finding better working conditions in the South fueled the desire of many Northeasterners to leave behind the aridity and precariousness of the backlands. Vargas's measures were justified as the South (especially the Southeast region) began emerging as a more dynamic and structured industrial and agricultural hub, offering better employment prospects, as pointed out by Nunes (2024). This historical context enhances the narrative of "Barren Lives," illustrating Brazilians' socio-economic challenges.

This novel transcends its narrative to become a critical tool for understanding and challenging the persistent inequalities in Brazilian society. The work serves as a mirror for the present, encouraging critical reflection on the current living conditions of many Brazilians who still face similar challenges to those of Fabiano and his family. In concluding this study, the need for a more attentive and critical look at works like 'Barren Lives' is reaffirmed, as they offer profound insights into Brazil's social and economic structure and point the way to potential future changes.

Recalling Tolstoy (2020, p.2): *All unhappy families are unhappy in their own way.* We are led to recognise that families' experiences of suffering are unique, highlighting the importance of addressing social issues with a personalised understanding of individual circumstances.

Through the literature perspective, it is possible to examine the complexities of class structures and domination that manifest not only in the northeastern backlands but in similar contexts throughout the country. This provides the foundations for a deeper understanding of the social dynamics that shape reality.

The analysis of 'Barren Lives' and its contextualisation within Brazil's socio-economic complexities not only achieved this study's objectives but also brought to light the unique perspective this work offers. It highlights the literary relevance of the work and its crucial role as an instrument of social critique and a tool for raising awareness. The study evidenced how literature can reflect and influence social reality, thereby fulfilling the goal of promoting a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of power and class that persist in Brazilian society.

The interdisciplinary approach adopted in this study, which delved into the complex layers of meaning in 'Barren Lives', proved instrumental. This approach, combining literature, social issues, and Brazilian culture, was crucial in uncovering the nuances of the work. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this methodology, particularly in relation to the generalisation of results.

Future research could expand this focus to include other literary works documenting aspects of Brazilian social and economic dynamics. Additionally, comparative studies that include narratives from other geographical regions could enrich our understanding of how inequalities are experienced and represented throughout the country. Such methodological expansion would deepen our academic understanding and better inform practical interventions to combat social inequalities.

The interdisciplinary analysis of Graciliano Ramos' 'Barren Lives' revealed the inequalities and exploitation present in Brazilian society. This study reaffirms the novel's importance as a social and economic critique and highlights its usefulness as a pedagogical and awareness-raising tool. The integration of literary and economic perspectives allowed for an understanding of the struggles faced by the characters, reflecting the adversities experienced by many Brazilians.

Through the experiences of Fabiano and his family, the author describes the difficulties of survival under a semi-capitalist system and critiques the power structures that perpetuate the marginalisation of the working classes. The persistence of these dynamics suggests the need for reflection on changes to promote a fairer and more equitable society.

This work highlights the relevance of 'Barren Lives' in provoking critical reflections on the current reality, serving as a mirror of the persistent social and economic conditions. It emphasises the need for educational strategies and public policies utilising works like 'Barren Lives' to foster a critical and transformative understanding.

The study also suggests future research that could expand this interdisciplinary approach to other literary works, offering insight into experiences of inequality in Brazil and in similar contexts globally. Such expansion would enrich the understanding of complex social dynamics and inform the necessary interventions to address entrenched issues. The conclusion of this study reiterates the importance of exploring literature as a means of critique and reflection on the social and economic structures that shape lives, pointing towards pathways for change and reaffirming literature as a vital instrument in education and the formation of social and economic awareness.

## References

- [1]. Araújo, G. Dos S., & Araújo, M. M. (2014). A Fuga Da Miséria E Da Fome No Romance Vidas Secas, Do Escritor Graciliano Ramos. *Revista De Estudos Literários Da Uems*, 5(8). Revell.
- [2]. Assis, M. De. (1904). *Esaú E Jacó*. Rio De Janeiro: H. Garnier.
- [3]. Avellar, J. C. (2007). *O Chão Da Palavra: Cinema E Literatura No Brasil*. Rio De Janeiro: Rocco.
- [4]. Bordini, M. I. Da S. (2019). *Luiz Ruffato E O Romance Proletário No Brasil*. Belo Horizonte: Universidade Federal De Minas Gerais, Abril De 2019. Tese (Doutorado Em Estudos Literários) - Programa De Pós-Graduação Em Estudos Literários, Universidade Federal De Minas Gerais, 2019. Disponível Em: [Http://Hdl.Handle.Net/1843/Letr-Bbwqr3](http://hdl.handle.net/1843/Letr-Bbwqr3). Acesso Em: Abril De 2024.
- [5]. Boucinha, A. D. (2020). Um Narrador Do Segundo Escalão. *Machado De Assis Em Linha*, 13(31), 44-61. [Https://Doi.Org/10.1590/1983-6821202013313](https://doi.org/10.1590/1983-6821202013313)
- [6]. Bourdieu, P. (1988). *Homo Academicus*. Stanford University Press.
- [7]. Bueno, L. (2006). *Uma História Do Romance De 30*. São Paulo: Editora Da Universidade De São Paulo; Campinas: Editora Da Unicamp.
- [8]. Burawoy, M. (1978). Toward A Marxist Theory Of The Labor Process: Braverman And Beyond. *Politics & Society*, 8(3-4), 247-312. [Https://Doi.Org/10.1177/003232927800800301](https://doi.org/10.1177/003232927800800301)
- [9]. Carvalho, C. A. Das M., & Santos, L. De B. (2019). Vidas Secas E As Relações De Trabalho Rural Degradante No Brasil Contemporâneo: Transdisciplinaridade Entre Direito E Literatura. *Revista De Direito, Viçosa*, 11(1), 145-185. Doi: [Https://Doi.Org/10.32361/20191116345](https://doi.org/10.32361/20191116345)
- [10]. Eagleton, T. (2013). *How To Read Literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- [11]. Eco, U. (1996). *Seis Paseos Por Los Bosques Narrativos*. Barcelona: Editorial Lumen, S. A.
- [12]. Furtado, C. (2005). *Formação Econômica Do Brasil*. São Paulo: Companhia Das Letras.
- [13]. Garcia Junior, A. R. (1990). *O Sul, Caminho Do Roçado: Estratégias De Reprodução Camponesa E Transformação Social*. Marco Zero.
- [14]. Gorki, M. (2019). *A Mãe*. Nova Fronteira.

- [15]. Harvey, D. (2013). *Os Limites Do Capital*. São Paulo: Boitempo.
- [16]. Hobsbawm, E. J. (2001). *A Era Das Revoluções: 1789-1848*. (M. T. L. Teixeira & M. Penchel, Trans.). 3ª Ed. Rio De Janeiro: Paz E Terra. (Coleção Milênio).
- [17]. Keynes, J. M. (1970). *Teoria Geral Do Emprego, Do Juro E Da Moeda*. São Paulo: Fundação De Cultura.
- [18]. Kuhn, T. S. (1962). *The Structure Of Scientific Revolutions* (1st Ed.). University Of Chicago Press.
- [19]. Lakatos, I. (1970). *Falsification And The Methodology Of Scientific Research Programmes*. In I. Lakatos & A. Musgrave (Eds.), *Criticism And The Growth Of Knowledge* (Pp. 91-196). Cambridge University Press.
- [20]. Lamas, F. G., & Oliveira, E. A. (2017). *Democracia E Luta De Classes Na Atual Ordem Sócio Metabólica Do Capital*. R. Katál. Florianópolis, 20(1), 103-110.
- [21]. Leal, V. N. (1975). *Coronelismo, Enxada E Voto: O Município E O Regime Representativo No Brasil*. São Paulo: Alfa-Ômega.
- [22]. Marx, K. (1985). *O Capital: Crítica Da Economia Política* (Vol. 1, 2ª Ed.). São Paulo: Editora Difel.
- [23]. Mazzara, R. A. (1968). *New Perspectives On Graciliano Ramos*. *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 5(1), 93-100.
- [24]. Menegat, M., Behring, E. R., Fontes, V. M., & Coutinho, C. N. (2008). *Dilemas Da Humanidade: Diálogos Entre Civilizações*. Contraponto.
- [25]. Molle, F. (1991). *Caractéristiques Et Potentialités Des "Açudes" Du Nordeste Brésilien*. [Tese De Doutorado, Université Montpellier II].
- [26]. Niels, K. M. L. (2014). *Profano, Maldito E Marginal: O Conto Fantástico Na Literatura Brasileira*. *Revista De Estudos Literários Da Uems*, 5(8). Universidade Estadual De Mato Grosso Do Sul.
- [27]. Nunes, R. C. (2023). *Technical Progress In Classical Economics: Adam Smith, David Ricardo And Karl Marx*. *Iosr Journal Of Economics And Finance*, 14(5), 16-23. <https://doi.org/10.9790/5933-1405061623>
- [28]. Nunes, R. Da C. (2024). *Brazil's Foreign Policy: From Driving Industrialisation To Ineffectiveness In The 1980s - A Review From The 1930s Through The 1980s*. *Iosr Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*, 29(1), 21-32. <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-2901022132>
- [29]. Nunes, R., & Nunes, S. (2018). *Uma Breve Discussão Sobre A Fragilidade Teórica Nos Campos Da Administração Pública*. *Revista Estudos E Pesquisas Em Administração*, 2(1), 135-147. <https://doi.org/10.30781/Repad.V2i1.5996>
- [30]. Nunes, S., & Nunes, R. (1997). *O Mercado De Trabalho Em Keynes E A Rigidez Dos Salários Nominais*. *Revista De Economia Política*, 17(3), 105-119. Recuperado Em 31 De Março De 2024, De [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343167357\\_O\\_Mercado\\_De\\_Trabalho\\_Em\\_Keynes\\_E\\_A\\_Rigidez\\_Dos\\_Salarios\\_Nominais#fulltextfilecontent](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343167357_O_Mercado_De_Trabalho_Em_Keynes_E_A_Rigidez_Dos_Salarios_Nominais#fulltextfilecontent)
- [31]. Orwell, G. (2007). *A Revolução Dos Bichos*. Editora Companhia Das Letras.
- [32]. Polanyi, K. (2000). *A Grande Transformação: As Origens Da Nossa Época*. 2ª Ed. Rio De Janeiro: Campus.
- [33]. Ramos, G. (2003). *Vidas Secas: Romance*, 176. Record.
- [34]. Rose-Ackerman, S. (1999). *Corruption And Government: Causes, Consequences, And Reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [35]. Sabourin, E., & Caron, P. (2003). *Origem E Evolução Da Agricultura Familiar No Nordeste Semi-Árido*. In P. Caron & E. Sabourin (Eds.), *Camponeses Do Sertão: Mutações Das Agriculturas Familiares No Nordeste Do Brasil* (Pp. 29-45). Brasília: Embrapa.
- [36]. Sachs, I. (1993). *Estratégias De Transição Para O Século Xxi. Para Pensar O Desenvolvimento Sustentável*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 29-56.
- [37]. Sadlier, D. J. (2012). *Lendo Graciliano Ramos Nos Estados Unidos*. *Revista Do Instituto De Estudos Brasileiros*, (54), 31-52.
- [38]. Silva, H. A. (2019). *Por Que Razão Pretendeis Ser Pagos Às Nossas Expensas? Pobreza E Desigualdade No Segundo Discurso De Rousseau*. *Cadernos De Filosofia Alemã*, 24(1), 115-132. Apud Rousseau, J.-J. (1995), P. 68.
- [39]. Slegers, R. (2021). *The Ethics And Economics Of Middle Class Romance: Wollstonecraft And Smith On Love In Commercial Society*. *The Journal Of Ethics*, 25(4), 525-542.
- [40]. Tolstoy, L. (2020). *Anna Karenina* (C. Garnett, Trans.). Global Grey. (Original Work Published 1877).
- [41]. Vidal, K. C., Lima, M. L., Silva, F. P., & Carvalho, A. B. (2021). *Máscara Da Desigualdade Social: O Banco Mundial E A Política De Assistência Social*.