

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2176-457336669>

**José de Alencar's Drama *Mãe* and the African-Brazilian Social Voices  
/ *A peça Mãe de Alencar e as vozes sociais sobre a questão afro-brasileira***

Angela Maria Rubel Fanini\*  
Maria Domingos Pereira Ventura\*

**ABSTRACT**

This paper analyzes the drama *Mãe*, written by Jose de Alencar. The narrative takes place in Rio de Janeiro in the second half of nineteenth-century and portrays domestic African slavery. The theoretical background is based on the ideas of Bakhtin and the Circle, focusing on the social discourses about slavery in Brazilian society present in the characters' speeches. This investigation leads readers to perceive the positions on slavery that society supported and that penetrate *Mãe*. Some historical discourses written in the twentieth century are analyzed, offering a dialogical dimension to Alencar's play. The characters' voices portray either their submission to slavery or their autonomy, the latter representing their resistance to captivity. Reading this drama today is important because of the slave culture that still prevails in our society.

**KEYWORDS:** Alencar's drama; Social voices; Slave culture

**RESUMO**

*Este artigo analisa a peça Mãe, de José de Alencar, que tem por cenário o Rio de Janeiro da segunda metade do séc. XIX, retratando a escravidão africana doméstica. Fundamenta-se nas ideias de Bakhtin e do Círculo, focalizando as vozes sociais sobre a escravidão presentes nas falas das personagens. A investigação leva o leitor a perceber os posicionamentos sobre a escravidão presentes no cotidiano nacional que migram para o interior do drama alencariano. Também se mobilizaram discursos historiográficos do século XX que estabelecem dialogia com a obra alencariana. As falas retratam as personagens ora submetidas ao regime escravista, ora em situação autônoma, representando a resistência ao cativo. A leitura da peça é importante para as gerações atuais, visto que a cultura escravocrata perdura em nossa sociedade.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Teatro alencariano; Vozes sociais; Cultura escravocrata

---

\* Universidade Tecnológica Federal do Paraná - UTFPR; Programa de Pós-Graduação em Tecnologia e Sociedade; Campus Universitário Andrade - UNIANDRADE; Programa de Pós-Graduação em Teoria Literária, Curitiba, Paraná, Brazil; CNPq Research Productivity Fellow; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7088-1251>, [rubel@utfpr.edu.br](mailto:rubel@utfpr.edu.br).

\* Rede Estadual de Ensino do Estado do Paraná, Curitiba, Brazil; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3789-2458>; [mdventura@gmail.com](mailto:mdventura@gmail.com).

## **Corpus Delimitation and Discursive Perspective**

This article analyzes the reconstruction of social voices of nineteenth-century Brazilian society in José de Alencar's play *Mãe*,<sup>1</sup> about the condition of the slaves. Machado de Assis (1875)<sup>2</sup> had already asserted that "every writer is a man of his time and of his country."<sup>3</sup> Alencar's plays reflect reality by staging what exists, yet in a refracted manner, according to the worldview of the author and his generation, his cultural and existential repertoire. Every discourse starts from a "chronotopic" situation, a Bakhtinian concept that highlights the spatial and temporal coordinates of the discursive subject. However, this does not imply that it is a photograph of the real *ipsis litteris*. The connection of words with things is mediated because the speaker occupies a unique place in the communication. The question of the subject is complex and the materialist Philosophy of Language, to which this article refers, can elucidate it. In the Bakhtinian perspective, the subject is intersubjective since it exists in dialog with the other. It is founded on language, which is shared. Dialogism does not imply the erasure of the singular because each subject occupies an unrepeatable axiological position. Based on Bakhtin in his essay *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity* (ca. 1920-1923):

Being is, as it were, once and for all, irrevocably, between myself as the unique one and everyone else as others for me. [...] It is only from my own unique place that the meaning of the ongoing event can become clearer, and the more intensely I become rooted in that place, the clearer that meaning becomes (1990, p.129).<sup>4</sup>

It is from this discursive perspective that Alencar's *corpus* is examined. His theatre speeches are historical and singular constructions, although they belong to a social reality that can be shared. Albeit unique and irreproducible, every enunciative act is double-voiced and dialogical as it constitutes a replica within a greater social dialog.

---

<sup>1</sup> Citations from this work were taken from this reference: ALENCAR, José de. *Mãe*. Available from: <http://www.dominiopublico.gov.br/download/texto/bi000161.pdf>/. Accessed: November 16, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Machado de Assis deals with questions surrounding the local in the national literature and its universal reach.

<sup>3</sup> In the original: "todo escritor é homem de seu tempo e país."

<sup>4</sup> BAKHTIN, M. *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov; translated by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990. pp.4-256.

Alencar finds himself in a dialog about slavery (that is tense, contradictory, aggressive, libertarian, revolutionary), which is present in newspapers, legislative speeches, pulpits, plantation houses, slave quarters, public notary documents, witness testimonies from police stations, *quilombos*,<sup>5</sup> prisons, abolitionist groups, international treaties, etc. It should be emphasized that this article looks at the question of social voices and not that of intertextuality. From the Bakhtinian viewpoint, the voices go beyond the texts, for these, from a formalist perspective, lack context, referring to each other within an immanent system. Indeed, the voices are socially situated and respond to concrete and everyday issues. This specificity of Bakhtinian thinking relates to the materialist Marxist tradition in which individuals make their history, although tied to concrete conditions. Following Bakhtin (1992) in *From Notes Made in 1970-71*: “There can be no such thing as an isolated utterance. It always presupposes utterances that precede and follow it. No one utterance can be either the first or the last. Each is only a link in the chain, and none can be studied outside this chain” (p.136).<sup>6</sup> The characters embody the everyday discourses in which either abolitionist or slavery apologist positions stand out. This analysis recognizes that literature is composed of these real historical voices that are organized by the author’s architectonics. We take literature as a source of knowledge about reality and our common cultural baggage equips us with a specific look at the nineteenth century that allows us to recognize certain discourses of that time. It is with this background that the play is read, making these nineteenth-century voices visible. Following Bakhtin, it is assumed that Alencar’s text is also dialogic since there is no discourse without dialogy. In a familiar environment, the dramatic text allows the speeches to be guided either by intimacy, when discursive subjects emerge, or by hierarchy, reinforcing their distances.

## **2 The Many Voices of Slavery: Dialogism in Extensive Temporality**

For centuries, slavery took place in the Brazilian national territory and much has been written and said on the subject. Many voices spoke out about it. The Brazilian

---

<sup>5</sup> TN: Fugitive and former slave settlements.

<sup>6</sup> BAKHTIN, M. *From Notes Made in 1970-71*. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee; edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986. pp.132-158.

historiography is extensive and conflicting, which is natural and congruent to the Russian theorists' perspective adopted herein, who emphasize the impossibility of a unique discourse about a fact. Many are the sources from which the historiography of the twentieth century departs. Public notary documents, legislative documents, religious sermons, accounts from historians of the time, popular songs, newspapers and economic treaties are all sources for historians. Moreover, from the standpoint of Cultural History, literature has been an important contribution to the production of historical accounts. Before moving to the analysis of Alencar's play, some of these historical discourses about the theme shall be outlined. It is not the aim of this investigation to dwell on them in detail, but it is necessary to underline some discourses. Gorender (1990) provides an extensive overview, on which this article is partly based to begin the synthesis mentioned. From the Bakhtinian perspective, it is essential to emphasize these positions in order to verify the dialog between our time and Alencar's. It should be stressed that there is no truer discourse. Indeed, the historiographic viewpoint is not taken as more truthful than the fictional. In the humanities, every discourse is a social position, and its heuristic value cannot be accurately measured. The literary discourse plays an important role in the discussion of the facts as it privileges the *everyday ideology*,<sup>7</sup> bringing real life and its speeches to the scene. As Vološinov (1986) considers, *everyday ideology* refers to the discursive ensemble present in the concrete relations that men and women develop among each other, confronting ideas in the day-to-day of existence. Literature is enriched by these speeches, formalizing them in its characters. In fact, literature can be taken as the primary source, to a great extent, of these speeches since it is impossible to rescue bygone voices *in loco*. However, the work may exceed its period. On the life of a work in great temporality, we find in Bakhtin's (1986) Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff: "Enclosure within the epoch also makes it impossible to understand the work's future life in subsequent centuries; this life appears as a kind of paradox. Works break through the boundaries of their own time, they live in centuries, that is, in *great time*" (p.4; emphasis in original).<sup>8</sup> Thus, this article shall

---

<sup>7</sup> In English, the term has been translated as "behavioral ideology" (p.91) in VOLOŠINOV, V. *Marxism and Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> BAKHTIN, M. Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee; edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986, pp.1-9.

attempt to perceive the voices of the historical period of the play, while also examining how the later voices can have a connection to the play, in a dialogic manner, which we define as extensive.

The play *Mãe* takes place in the nineteenth century in an urban environment. During this period, the debate between abolitionists and slavery apologists was a reality in the public and private spheres. Alencar finds himself within this discursive situation and responds to it. He transports these voices to the interior of the play and links them to characters whose dramas are historically plausible. The nineteenth century saw the increase in uprisings, insurrections and resistance of African-Brazilians against slavery. There were many who fought, died and spoke out against the abominable statute. Thus, it is impossible to recover all those actions and voices that contributed to the end of slavery. However, literature formalizes and perpetuates these voices almost as a primary source to which we allude. The literary source shall work as an archive that will be the source of the discourses. The thesis that the abolition of slavery was only a concession of the elites is no longer accepted. The actions of black resistance were constant and achieved a considerable amount. In this article, we will analyze Alencar's literary voice, who observes the everyday life of a family from which he stages a slavery drama. The playwright presents the slave to talk about himself and the resistance of enslaved people. Due to the lack of space, this article will not discuss those voices documented in sources other than literature. Nevertheless, reading much about the period dealt with herein, the discourses of the characters are plausible and are very close to the everyday life accounts of slaves that were already abundantly recorded in national historiography. We do not overlook the valuable role played by abolitionist intellectuals such as Joaquim Nabuco, André Rebouças, José do Patrocínio, Luiz Gama, Silva Jardim, Rui Barbosa, and José Mariano, among others, regarding the end of slavery, since their actions were decisive in its end. However, one cannot eradicate the struggle of the slaves and their autonomy which contributed to abolition. Alencar represents this resistance in literature.

The slave had an autonomous role towards the conclusion of the slavery crisis. Below the multiform propaganda, whose light was an eye-opener to the intimate sense of iniquity, he constitutes the dominant factor in the effort of redemption of himself. The captive's unwillingness, the glorious exodus of the slaves of São Paulo, solemn, biblical, divine, like the most beautiful episodes of the sacred books,

was the definite disillusionment of the servile property among the dubieties and tergiversations of the Empire (apud GORENDER, 1990, p.182).<sup>9</sup>

The abolitionist and slavery apologist discourses from the elites penetrated everyday life. Slaves were part of this setting. This common social horizon is formalized in the characters' speeches that present men and women in real situations of confrontation and submission.

Let us move on to the twentieth century when part of the historiography investigates the period of slavery. Freyre deals with slavery and his work has been the subject of controversy, focusing on the northeastern sugar economy and family formation and indicating African protagonism in the national formation. From him came the idea of "racial democracy," which eliminates the violent character of slavery. It should be noted that, during the period in which he writes, racist and Aryanist theories were strengthening. Freyre focused on the benefits of miscegenation under the cultural prism, but also highlights its violence:

As to the mistresses being more cruel than the masters in their treatment of the slaves, that is a fact generally to be observed in slave-owning societies [...] There are tales of *sinhá-moças* who had the eyes of pretty *mucamas* gouged out and then had them served to their husbands for dessert, in a jelly-dish, floating in blood that was still fresh. Tales of young baronesses of adult age who out of jealousy or spite had fifteen-year-old mulato girls sold off to old libertines. [...] A whole series of tortures (FREYRE, 1986, p.351).<sup>10</sup>

Freyre emphasizes the superiority of the slaves in relation to the colonizer:

Brazil not only took from Africa the topsoil of a black people that was to fertilize its cane fields and coffee groves, assuage its parched lands, and round out the wealth afforded by its patches of *massapé*; there were to come to it also, from the same source: "mistresses of the house" for its colonists who were without white women; technicians for its mines; ironworkers; Negroes versed in cattle-raising and the

---

<sup>9</sup> In the original: "O escravo teve seu papel autonômico na crise terminativa da escravidão. Abaixo da propaganda multiforme, cuja luz lhe abriu os olhos ao senso íntimo de iniquidade, ele constitui o fator dominante na obra de redenção de si mesmo. O não quero dos cativos, esse êxodo glorioso da escravaria paulista, solene, bíblico, divino, como os mais belos episódios dos livros sagrados, foi, para a propriedade servil, entre dubiedades e tergiversações do Império, o desengano definitivo."

<sup>10</sup> FREYRE, G. *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*. Translated by Samuel Putnam. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986.

pasturing of herds; cloth and soap merchants; schoolmasters, priests, and praying Mohammedans (FREYRE, 1986, p.311).<sup>11</sup>

Long before Freyre, Alencar had noticed the violence as well as the agency of the slaves, as he attempted to portray their everyday lives. Though not explicitly quoted by the sociologist, Alencar is certainly part of a cultural reference that influences the cultural anthropological vision. It is not possible to formally measure this cultural dialog. Being a well-known intellectual, Alencar is part of a referential macro-discourse present in Brazilian formation. This is the way in which the dialogical relation between them is understood herein. Like Alencar, Freyre turns his attention to the family and the relationship between master and slave, thereby detailing the day to day of families.

In the 1960s and 1970s, some historians from the University of São Paulo oppose the Freyrian perspective, criticizing the “racial democracy.” The viewpoint of these historians is economic rather than cultural. They perceive the enslaved black within an economic system that reduces it to the condition of merchandise. In this discourse, the black person appears as *res*, which indicates a negative ontology. The account of the economic mode of production that turns the slave into fixed capital prevails. This line of thought is criticized for not establishing a difference between economic reification and subjective reification. The following excerpt attests to this lack of differentiation:

The reification of the slave took place objectively and subjectively. On the one hand, it became a tool whose social necessity was created and regulated by the economic mechanism of production. On the other hand, the slave was self-represented and represented by free men as a being incapable of autonomic action. In other words, as human being turned into a thing, the slave presented himself as a person who, although capable of taking human actions, expressed social orientations and meanings imposed by the masters through his own conscience and in his actions. In this sense, the consciousness of the slave just recorded and passively mirrored the social meanings imposed upon him (CARDOSO, 1977, p.125).<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> For reference, see footnote 10.

<sup>12</sup> In the original: “A reificação do escravo produzia-se objetiva e subjetivamente. Por um lado, tornava-se uma peça cuja necessidade social era criada e regulada pelo mecanismo econômico de produção. Por outro lado, o escravo auto- representava-se e era representado pelos homens livres como um ser incapaz de ação autônômica. Noutras palavras, o escravo se apresentava, enquanto ser humano tornado coisa, como alguém que, embora fosse capaz de empreender ações humanas, exprimia, na própria consciência e nos atos que praticava, orientações e significações sociais impostas pelos senhores. Nesse sentido, a

In the 1980s State University of Campinas, other voices on slavery emerged, responding to this historiography. This context brings a diversity of accounts on the enslaved black. These focus on the formation and stability of the enslaved family, the networks of solidarity among African slaves, abolitionist societies, the constant struggles for freedom and rights, the escapes from farms, the purchase of letters of manumission by way of the slaves' earnings reserves, the murders of slave masters and guards committed by slaves, which point to individual and collective black resistance. This viewpoint will be criticized for mitigating violence since it relies on negotiation theories. The quotations below synthesize this historiography:

The solidarities created through the working life are essential. In the plantations, there are around 80 to 100 working slaves. With a sprinkling of communal meals, the working day varies a lot throughout the year: in the northeastern summer, it lasts between 12 and 14 hours; in winter, 12 hours or slightly less. The sugar plantation requires very specialized workers such as the sugar purifier (*purgadores*) and those responsible for cooking and separating the sugar in moulds (*banqueiros*). These black specialists are very well treated, like the domestic slaves (MATTOSO, 1990, p.134).<sup>13</sup>

[...]

The slave who really desires his freedom cannot cut the ties. Some conditions do not depend solely on him. Creole and mestizo slaves set out for to gain freedom with the huge advantage of having been generally educated by their masters and of having the opportunity to learn a profession, while forging affectionate ties with their masters from childhood (MATTOSO, 1990, pp.171-172).<sup>14</sup>

[...]

Black or mestizo, African or Creole, Brazil saw the birth of a new man. We saw him live and survive in his family, community and work. We saw him dream of freedom (MATTOSO, 1990, p.172).<sup>15 16</sup>

---

consciência do escravo apenas registrava e espelhava, passivamente, os significados sociais que lhe eram impostos.”

<sup>13</sup> In the original: “Essenciais são as solidariedades criadas pela vida do trabalho. Nos engenhos labutam em média 80 a 100 escravos. A jornada de trabalho, pontilhada pelas refeições feitas em comum, varia muito durante o ano: no verão nordestino, dura entre 12 e 14 horas, no inverno, 12 horas ou pouco menos. O engenho requer operários muito especializados, como os purgadores e os banqueiros do açúcar. Esses negros especialistas são bastante bem tratados, como os domésticos.”

<sup>14</sup> In the original: “O escravo que deseja realmente sua liberdade não pode desfazer seus vínculos. Certas condições não dependem absolutamente dele. Os escravos crioulos ou mestiços partem para a conquista da liberdade com a imensa vantagem de terem sido, em geral, educados pelos senhores, tido a oportunidade de aprender uma profissão, e desde a infância forjados laços afetivos com os senhores.”

<sup>15</sup> In the original: “Negro ou mestiço, africano ou crioulo, é um homem novo o que o Brasil fez nascer. Nós o vimos viver e sobreviver na sua família, em sua comunidade, em seu trabalho. Nós o vimos sonhar seu sonho de libertação.”



Historiography carries value judgments and has either a cultural or an economic point of view. In the nineteenth century, Alencar sustains the idea of the African agency. Thus, the historiography produced at the State University of Campinas is close to Alencar's approach. Bringing to light the discourses of the twentieth century and comparing them to Alencar's discourse is justified since the contemporary reader is led to perceive the discursive set in its greater temporality. Slavery begins in the sixteenth century and to this day its culture persists. This article mobilizes a small part of this discussion, beginning in the nineteenth century and moving to the twentieth century in order to perceive this extensive cultural dialog. Linked to the economic question, the University of São Paulo discourse clearly dialogs in counterpoint with that of the State University of Campinas, which is connected to the perspective of cultural history. There, the dialogism is explicit. But how does the dialogism between these lines of thinking and Alencar occur? It occurs from the contemporary reading that looks at the theatrical text in the great temporality, while realizing that the point of view born at the State University of Campinas already was, in part, present in Alencar. The writer sees the agency of the slave through his daily life. However, the objectification of the slave present in the University of São Paulo discourses is also there in view of the representation of the reification of the slave. The dialogism occurs in the explicit dialogs between orators, but it can also be perceived by the reader who adapts his own timespan to read texts from a different chronotopic condition. We, readers of the twentieth century, perceive this dialog in the extensive temporality which allows us to see the interaction of the historiographic currents of the twentieth century along with Alencar. By emphasizing the slave agency within the family, Freyre indirectly revisits the literary text in which this is constituted. Hence, it is possible to notice the dialog between Alencar and the historiography of the twentieth century. The voices of the nineteenth century are still part of the twentieth century, that is, the "everyday ideology" embodied in the play still resonates both in our daily lives and in our academic contexts.

---

<sup>16</sup> Mattoso (Greece, 1832-2011, Rio de Janeiro) was a researcher from Bahia, whose work is considered a differentiated landmark about the African slavery in Brazil. She perceived the slave as a "being" and not as a thing. Regarding the title of this work *Ser escravo* [*Being a Slave*], it points to a change in the discursive perspective in which the resistances, the struggles, the negotiations between masters and slaves are the stage chosen for the historical interpretation of facts.

Following Vološinov (1986): “The established ideological systems of social ethics, science, art, and religion are crystallizations of behavioral ideology, and these crystallizations, in turn, exert a powerful influence” (p.91).<sup>17</sup> The perspective of the Circle is clearly to rely on everyday material culture in dialog with the superstructure.

### **3 The Voice of Captivity: Joana’s Saga in Alencar’s Play**

In Alencar’s work, the black slave does not just appear as a victim, neither is he portrayed as a hero capable of imposing himself on the system. The writer deals with the verisimilitude and with situations of adjustments and mismatches in the lives of the slaves. It is visible that opposing views are present in the later historiography, in that the slave is either portrayed as a negotiator, who removes violence from the process of slavery, or is subjected, thus becoming depersonalized. However, historians such as Flamarion (2002) distance themselves from these dichotomies and approach the nineteenth-century writer's way of thinking:

On the other hand, I also opposed the historiography that once characterized some master's degrees produced at Unicamp, simplistically centered on the notion of “rebel slave,” wanting to prove, for example, that the Abolition of slavery was a direct consequence of the escapes, uprisings and other forms of resistance of the slaves themselves, rather than being a “white business,” as had been stated before by the Sociological School of São Paulo (Florestan Fernandes, Octávio Ianni, Fernando Henrique Cardoso). In both cases, these are unilateral positions, exaggerated, although opposing each other (MORAES; REGO, 2002, p.221).<sup>18</sup>

Long before the historians of the 1980s cited here, the playwright deals with the slave family, the possible negotiations, and the non-objectified slave subject, even under adverse circumstances. Alencar does not represent the slave devoid of action as does

---

<sup>17</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>18</sup> In the original: “Por outro lado, eu me colocava também em oposição à historiografia que em certa época caracterizava alguns mestrados produzidos na Unicamp, centrada de forma simplista na noção de “escravo rebelde”, querendo provar, por exemplo, que a Abolição da escravidão resultou em forma direta das fugas, sublevações e outras modalidades de resistências dos próprios escravos, em lugar de ser um “negócio de brancos”, como havia sido afirmado antes pela Escola Sociológica de São Paulo (Florestan Fernandes, Octávio Ianni, Fernando Henrique Cardoso). Em ambos os casos, trata-se de posições unilaterais, exageradas, embora de signo oposto.”

part of the historiography of the 1970s. To continue with the analysis, a summary of the play is presented.

The drama takes place in 1855 in the city of Rio de Janeiro in the context of domestic slavery in homes of a modest social class. It is well known that the conditions of the domestic slave were different from those of the plantations, above all, in a small and familiar setting where there was a space conducive to the affection of the group. The slaves of the plantation were numerous and worked outside the domestic environment, not entering the master's intimate circle. Their dwelling was the *senzala* (slave quarters), and the treatment given to them contained greater violence and impersonality. The drama consists of the following argument: the slave Joana has a relationship with Soares, a free man, and becomes pregnant. He buys her, but then dies. Before his passing, he asks his friend, Dr. Lima, to watch over the slave and his son. Joana hides the fact that she is Jorge's mother from him and asks Dr. Lima to do the same. Although many mestizo individuals were born, there was prejudice against them. In hiding Jorge's slave origin, Joana believes she is protecting him from social exclusion. Dr. Lima welcomes them into his house. Joana manages to attain extra odd jobs outside Dr. Lima's residence. With her earnings, she raises Jorge. The condition of the slaves that earned money working for others outside the homes is well documented. The money earned was shared with their masters and many slaves saved to buy their manumission. In the play, Lima and the character Gomes (Jorge's future father-in-law) are mid-level civil servants and Jorge teaches music and languages. Joana is emancipated by Jorge, but she does not accept it, because she fears being away from her son. This fear was common as many freed slaves fell into a more precarious condition upon attaining freedom. Jorge falls in love with Eliza. Her father, Gomes, is in debt. Gomes is in the hands of a loan shark, Peixoto, who threatens to arrest him. Desperate, Gomes attempts suicide. Jorge asks Dr. Lima for a loan. The moneylender demands payment. When she realizes that Jorge cannot get the necessary amount, Joana negotiates with Peixoto in exchange for herself. Jorge is reluctant about the transaction, but accepts it. In the process of negotiation, Joana takes an active role, since it is she who persuades Jorge and Peixoto of the negotiation. When Dr. Lima returns, he tells Jorge that he traded his own mother. Joana poisons herself. Between life and death, Jorge's slave origin is revealed. In the preface, Alencar dedicates the play to his mother,

toasting her with the work. Ironically, the play ends with the slave mother, Joana, sacrificing herself for her son. The central tenet of the play is how motherhood is treated differently in the context of slavery.

#### **4 The Voice of the Domestic Slave: The Threshold between the Condition as *Res* and the Family Integration**

Slave labor did not only consist of plantation work. Many slaves also worked in modest houses. The domestic slave entered the intimacy of the owners' lives. Their treatment was different and bonds of affection were established there. Yet they were still slaves and that limited their agency. This article emphasizes the active role of black slaves. In this perspective, the historian Reis (2002) opposes the idea of the submissive slave:

For it is within the paternalistic domination that the slave trade thrives. It does not point to the “destruction” of the system, but to the opening of spaces of autonomy within it. There is, of course, the estate counterpart. The masters who negotiated did it in the name of peace in the *senzala*, that is, to avoid a boycott in production. However, it was precisely because they knew what slaves were capable of that they accepted bargaining. They were not just victims of a system that developed absolutely independently of their wills. If so, slavery would have been a greater horror than it was, and slaves would not have left the mark of their way of life, of their culture, in a society dominated by whites (MORAES; REGO, 2002, pp.328-329).<sup>19</sup>

Though averse to negotiating theories, Gorender (1990) also emphasizes the difference of the domestic slave: “In passing and without the necessary emphasis, for reasons that we shall soon see, Gilberto Freyre alluded to the fact that there is a hierarchy within slavery, in which the domestic slaves constituted their aristocratic part”

---

<sup>19</sup> In the original: “Porque é no interior da dominação paternalista a que a negociação escrava viceja. Ela não aponta para a ‘destruição’ do sistema, mas para a abertura de espaços de autonomia em seu interior. Há evidentemente a contrapartida senhorial. Os senhores que negociavam fazem-no em nome da paz na senzala, fazem-no para evitar boicote à produção. Mas era exatamente porque sabiam do que os escravos eram capazes que eles aceitavam barganhar. Eles não foram apenas vítimas de um sistema que se desenvolveu absolutamente independente de suas vontades. Se fosse assim a escravidão teria sido um horror maior do que foi, e os escravos não teriam deixado a marca de seu modo de vida, de sua cultura, numa sociedade dominada pelos brancos.”

(p.486).<sup>20</sup> Within the limits of her historical condition, Joana is part of this group that has the power to negotiate. In the following speech, Alencar builds the affective relationship between master and slave, highlighting the domestic environment, racial miscegenation and prejudice:

*Joana:* But Madam is a beautiful lady! And I am her old mulatto woman! I have been serving master Jorge since he was born, and he never argued with me! If he doesn't know how to scold. Look, Madam. He gives me a beautiful dress for every party. And he would give more if he weren't poor.

*Elisa:* Did you raise him?

*Joana:* Yes, Madam. My milk was the only one he had!

*Joana:* He (Soares, Jorge's father) was so fond of me. He gave all he had to have me. Two million réis. I went to his house. Then, my master was born and baptized as his son, without anyone knowing who his mother was.<sup>21</sup>

Set in a family environment, the dramatic text allows the dialog to be guided either by intimacy, making the discursive subjects emerge, or by hierarchy, reinforcing the distances. Bakhtin (1984)<sup>22</sup> highlights the free close contact between individuals and how, in this setting, the discourse constitutes itself in the concrete clash between subjects. Instead of professing his abolitionist libel in the tribune, Alencar formalizes this in the characters who live concrete dramas. The family allows the slave a more autonomous discursive position.

Joana's speech attests to the degree of awareness of her place in that environment. She is either the subject of her action or subjected. The servitude is expressed in the words. The use of the possessive pronoun "her" preceding her condition of racial miscegenation in the expression "her old mulatto woman" indicates the degree of hierarchy between the two, although the dialog takes place in an

---

<sup>20</sup> In the original: "De passagem e sem a necessária ênfase, por motivos que logo veremos, aludiu Gilberto Freyre ao fato de existir uma hierarquia entre a escravatura, no seio da qual os escravos domésticos constituíam sua parte aristocrática."

<sup>21</sup> In the original: "Joana: Mas Iaiá é uma moça bonita! E eu sou sua mulata velha! Desde quando nonhô Jorge nasceu que o sirvo, e nunca brigou comigo! Se ele não sabe ralhar. Olhe, Iaiá. Todas as festas me dá um vestido bonito. E não dá mais porque é pobre. / Elisa: Foste tu que o criaste? / Foi Iaiá. Nunca mamou outro leite senão o meu! / Joana: Ele (Soares, pai de Jorge) me queria tanto bem. Deu por mim tudo quanto tinha. Dois contos de réis. Eu fui para sua casa. Aí meu nhonhô nasceu e foi logo batizado como filho dele, sem que ninguém soubesse quem era a mãe."

<sup>22</sup> BAKHTIN, M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984.

affectionate tone. Moreover, the expression “He gave all he had to have me” reinforces the status of object when she refers to her acquisition. However, she emerges as a precious and differentiated good. This differentiation also occurs in the sentence that emphasizes the affective value in “He was so fond of me.” The protagonist takes part in the community parties with her new clothes. However, this action is granted to her from the outside. Again, her life is at the threshold between freedom and submission. Joana does not stop being a slave, because as she states, she “serves” and was bought by means of an economic transaction. However, she is not an object since she talks in the first person, and is thus endowed with speech and, consequently, consciousness. We realize in the play, though, that both in this speech and in others the protagonist never declares herself as Jorge’s mother. She does not utter the word mother when referring to herself, which demonstrates an awareness that the words refer to things, and that his secret could be revealed and come to harm the social situation of the child. The relationship is pendular, because Joana is simultaneously familiar with the environment of the house and still an object of merchandise. The use of the possessive pronoun “my” in the last sentence refers to this duality, signaling both to the relation of mercantile property in which Joana is an object and the loving and intimate relationship. This double-voiced word represents the duality of the condition of the enslaved class within a domestic environment that softens slavery. Vološinov (1986) states, that “sign becomes an arena of the class struggle” (p.23).<sup>23</sup> Freyre also emphasizes the differentiated treatment given to the domestic slave, authorizing us to establish a dialog between the sociologist and Alencar, even if indirectly:

The Big House caused to be brought up from the *senzala*, for the more intimate and delicate service of the planter and his family, a whole set of individuals: nurses, house-girls, foster-brothers for the white lads. These were persons whose place in the family was not that of slaves, but rather of household inmates. They were a kind of poor relations after the European model. Many young mullatoes would sit down at the patriarchal board as if they were indeed part of the family: *crias* (those who had been reared in the house), *malungos* (foster-brothers), *muleques de estimação* (favorite houseboys). Some would even go out in the carriage with their masters, accompanying them on their jaunts as if they had been their own sons (FREYRE, 1986, p.369).<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>24</sup> For reference, see footnote 10.

## 5 The Voice of the Earning Slave: Ideological Sign and Infrastructure

The earning slave was a current reality and this condition allowed the slave a degree of negotiation. Gorender (1990) mentions this condition:

They oversaw all urban work, above all the transportation of goods and passengers. They constituted the special category of earning slaves, which I have often referred to. They spent the day outside offering their service with the obligation to give their masters a previously agreed daily or weekly income, keeping the rest of the earnings (GORENDER, 1990, p.476).<sup>25</sup>

Many slaves bought their manumission document, proving their agency. The view of the black slave as an object within the production model is already abundantly disputed, as Gorender (1990) affirms: “Slaves were present in urban professions. Carpenters, masons, cobblers, printers, furniture and carriage builders, manufacturers of military ornaments, lamps, silver objects, jewelers and lithographs” (p.474).<sup>26</sup> This account contradicts the view of the slave as passive in the mode of slave production. In the play, this is consubstantial with the following discourse, which demonstrates the dialog of Alencar with his time:

*Dr. Lima:* But why did you still need to be a slave? Could you not be freed?

*Joana:* Me, Sir? How so?

*Dr. Lima:* With the money that you earned from your work, and used for your son’s education.

*Joana:* I never thought about that, Sir. Furthermore, enfranchisement could send me away from this house and I would not be near him anymore. A slave does not say goodbye.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> In the original: “Eram eles os encarregados de todos os serviços urbanos, sobretudo do transporte de mercadorias e passageiros. Constituíam a categoria especial dos negros de ganho, à qual me referi várias vezes. Passavam o dia na rua alugando seus serviços com a obrigação de entregar ao senhor uma renda diária ou semanal previamente fixada, pertencendo-lhes o que sobrasse.”

<sup>26</sup> In the original: “Os escravos faziam-se presentes em ofícios urbanos. Carpinteiros, pedreiros, calceteiros, impressores, construtores de móveis e carruagens, fabricantes de ornamentos militares, de lampiões, artífices de objetos de prata, joalheiros e litógrafos.”

<sup>27</sup> In the original: “Dr. Lima: Mas que necessidade tinhas de ser escrava ainda? Não podias estar forra? Joana: Eu, meu Senhor? Como? / Dr. Lima: Com o dinheiro que tiravas do teu trabalho, e gastavas na educação do teu filho. / Joana: Nunca pensei nisso meu Senhor. Demais, forra poderiam me deitar fora de casa.e eu não estaria mais junto dele. A escrava não se despede.”

The protagonist is aware of her precarious condition of enfranchisement. There was a lack of employment for everyone, since the main economy was that of plantations, leaving few jobs for the freed slaves in urbanized areas. Once released, the slaves needed to survive on their own. Joana alludes to this situation in her speech. Moreover, the maternal bond with Jorge prevented her from wanting freedom, since it would distance her from her son. It should be noted that in Joana's speech there is a duality in the treatment she gives herself, because it either emits a positioning in the first person singular, or she sees herself as a transactional object. She refers to herself as a slave who does not "say goodbye," which refers to the economic system to which she is subjected. There, she appears as a depersonalized object. However, captivity can assure that she will be in her son's company. By saying this, Joana indicates a degree of awareness about the condition of the emancipated slaves. This discursive duality is recurrent in Alencar's play since the protagonist is aware of her class condition, perceiving the advantages and disadvantages of freedom in an inhospitable environment for those who are emancipated. Joana's speech is ambiguous, as was the condition of most slaves, because they had agency within certain limits. The slave is either utterly ignorant of the purchase of manumission, even if he has the means for such an action, or mobilizes an economic reasoning in which the slave cannot be dismissed, since he is an object and not a formally free worker. There are numerous documented accounts that prove the marginalization of the slaves after their emancipation. Certainly, Alencar was not oblivious to this and, in the play, he covers this reality, establishing a dialogic with his time. Joana's voice points to the imbalance between infrastructure and superstructure, a subject dear to the Marxist universe. Her voice comes from the base, that is, she recognizes that the alteration of the infrastructure (transition from slave to freed person) by obtaining manumission can be beneficial, but this freedom does not guarantee inclusion, because the superstructure does not change in one movement. The word attests to the contradiction between infrastructure and superstructure. The former confronts the latter due to the factor of racial prejudice. Taking a step away from Stalinist schematic Marxism, which was based on economic determinism, Vološinov (1986) attests this fact: "The category of mechanical causality in explanations of



ideological phenomena can most easily be surmounted on the grounds of philosophy of language” (p.24).<sup>28</sup>

## **6 The Voice of Prejudice against the Mulatto: The Dialog with Eugenic Theories**

From the nineteenth century, Brazilian society strengthened its economy through the monoculture of coffee, which became a large-scale export production, employing, above all, slave labor.<sup>29</sup> The slave economy generates a slave culture. Until today, this slave culture persists, although the slave production mode has disappeared. As already mentioned, the superstructure universe of the culture shifts from the economic level. At the time of the play, this problem was more accentuated and, as a result, children of slave mothers were discriminated against, even with free status. At the time, eugenic discourses promoted a heated debate between monogenists and polygenists, strengthening whitening and racial degeneration theories. Schwartz (1993) deals with this context. The debate mainly takes place in Schools of Medicine and Law, but it is also part of the “behavioral ideology” to which everyone had access, including slaves. They were discursive positions that credited the national backwardness of the miscegenation, being also debated outside the academy, in the “behavioral ideology” from which Alencar also participates. This is the case of the character Jorge who cannot know of his slave origin, because he would be discriminated against. At the end of the play, Elisa’s father discriminates against Jorge because of his black genealogy, which demonstrates that Alencar dialogs with the eugenic discourses of the time:

*Gomes:* This marriage is no longer possible.

*Gomes:* Mr. Jorge, I like you, but...

*Jorge:* You are right Mr. Gomes, you judge me unworthy of belonging to your family because I am the son of the woman who sold herself to save this same honor in the name of which you repel me.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>29</sup> Regarding the exogeny of the Brazilian economy, see a classic on the subject in Prado Junior (2006).

<sup>30</sup> In the original: “Gomes: Esse casamento não é mais possível. / Gomes: Sr. Jorge, eu o estimo, porém... / Jorge: Tem razão Sr. Gomes, O Sr. me julga indigno de pertencer a sua família porque eu sou filho daquela que se vendeu para salvar essa mesma honra em nome da qual me repele.”

It is noticeable that Gomes's character does not mention the slavery status, but uses an ambiguous speech, marked by reticence, implying that the slave condition is an impediment to marriage. Prejudice is visible, but it cannot be pronounced. Words are avoided, but context clarifies what is silenced. Jorge does not mention Joana's slave condition either, but emphasizes the moral aspect of the protagonist, exposing the pettiness of Gomes by demonstrating that Joana, although a slave, saved him from dishonor. Joana's work also refers to the generic condition of class, because it reveals how the labor of the enslaved supported the masters. They are the voices of the time in the speeches of the characters.

## **7 The Slave Traders' Voice: Mercantile Discourse and the Emergence of the Subject**

The activity of the black slave is herein emphasized, but this activity encountered limits imposed by the system, since slaves remained someone else's property, that is, a fixed capital. However, there are gaps and resistance. The play deals with this contradictory movement when Joana is pawned to pay off Jorge's debt. The money lender Peixoto sees Joana as a commodity, inspecting her body to obtain the quality of the product. The voice that is revealed there represents the daily life of the slave markets seen as objects of economic transaction. Joana becomes known as a commodity and exposes herself by describing her qualities. However, the object of the transaction becomes a subject when referring to herself. It should be noted that at the same time Joana is a subject, provided with a voice, and an object, the target of the objective description of this same voice:

*Joana:* Yes, there is, Sir! This slave. How much do you think she is worth?

*Peixoto:* I will pay three hundred thousand réis.

*Jorge:* What? Wasn't she guaranteed for six hundred thousand réis that I have just paid today?

*Peixoto:* That was before! She is old now.

*Joana:* Me, old? I have barely thirty-seven years of age! [...] I know very well how to comb and dress a lady. Better than many a famous maid. [...] But I also know how to sew, wash, iron. I sweep floors, organize everything, cook, set the table. And I still make time to do my own stitching. Ask my master.

*Jorge:* During the period that this... Joana will be in your house.

*Peixoto:* Who is my slave, you mean.  
*Jorge:* I ask you to treat her kindly. She is used to living with me, more like a companion than...  
*Peixoto:* Save yourself from asking me that. I am a good master.  
*Peixoto:* Well, good. Let us close the deal. Come here, black lady. Let me see your feet.  
*Joana:* You are suspicious of me. I don't have a disease... If I have never had a headache to this day, thank God.  
*Joana:* No one has ever treated me like this!  
*Peixoto:* Come on, show me your teeth.  
*Joana:* All healthy.  
*Jorge:* Sir, stop that. I cannot see this anymore.  
*Peixoto:* The one who gives his money, Mr. Jorge, must know what he is buying. If you don't like it...<sup>31</sup>

The speeches present a complex negotiation in which the slave presents herself as a commodity, subverting the order, since from inanimate and mute object, she becomes a subject. The situation is formalized through a technical expedient of carnivalization as the roles are reversed, because the slave advertises herself as a tradable object. The term “carnivalization” is taken from Bakhtin (1984)<sup>32</sup> whose work deals with the human body and how it is represented in a multifaceted way through the lenses of popular culture and the arts. In popular culture, as well as in a certain kind of literature, the body appears in its totality, dialogically congregating the opposites. However, from the Modern Age, the body is fragmented. With the advent of industrial labor, the body of the working class is now reduced to its factory productive function. Bakhtin (1984)<sup>33</sup> deals with the labor world associated with the feast and the body as a totality in popular culture, which is different from what occurs in bourgeois society. In the slave regime, this condition will intensify. Joana represents this reductionism, but

---

<sup>31</sup> In the original: “Joana: Tem sim, meu Senhor! Tem esta escrava. Quanto acha V. m que ela vale? / Peixoto: Dou sobre ela trezentos mil réis. / Jorge: Como? Não estava hipotecada por seiscentos mil réis que acabei de pagar hoje? / Peixoto: Foi em outro tempo! Já está velha. / Joana: Eu velha? Mal tenho trinta e sete anos! [...] Sei pentear e vestir uma moça que faz gosto. Melhor do que muita mucama de fama. [...] Mas sei também coser, lavar, engomar. Varro, arrumo tudo, cozinho, ponho a mesa. E ainda me fica tempo para fazer as minhas costuras. Pergunte a Nhonhô. / Jorge: Durante o período que esta... Joana vai estar em sua casa. / Peixoto: Que é minha escrava quer o Sr dizer. / Jorge: Peço-lhe que a trate com doçura. Está habituada a viver comigo, mais como uma companheira do que... / Peixoto: Excusa pedir-me isso. Sou um bom senhor. / Peixoto: Ora, bem. Fechemos o negócio. Vem cá mulata. Deixa lá ver os pés. / Joana: O senhor está desconfiado comigo. Eu não tenho doença... Se nunca senti me doer a cabeça, até hoje, graças a Deus. / Joana: Ninguém ainda me tratou assim! / Peixoto: Anda lá, mostra os dentes. / Joana: Todos são. / Jorge: Senhor, acabe com isso. Não posso mais ver essa cena. / Peixoto: Quem dá o seu dinheiro, Sr. Jorge, deve saber o que compra. Se não lhe agrada...”

<sup>32</sup> BAKHTIN, M. *Rabelais and his World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

<sup>33</sup> For reference, see footnote 32.

also reverses it, thus dethroning it. It presents a public body that is for sale as *res*, which is the generalization of a class, and a private body, endowed with a unique position and voice. These two dimensions are in dialog and in confrontation through her voice, which consists of several social voices of both resistance and submission. Object and subject, body and ideological consciousness, are confronted and clarified by the speech of the protagonist. The slave owner is reluctant to negotiate, and the slave is the protagonist of the purchasing process, which indicates autonomy. However, in this negotiation, the crudeness of the process of commodification of Joana's body is exposed. It is noticeable that in the negotiation Joana refers to herself in the third person singular, distancing from herself in order to comment on her qualities as a saleable object. However, because she is active, she goes back to using the first person singular, resuming her autonomous position. Jorge, too, becomes ambivalent, for in referring to Joana, he either treats her as a person he knows, or he does not define her as a slave. Jorge avoids defining her as slave when referring to Joana. Yet, the buyer presents an economic and mercantilist bias, targeting the profit of the transaction. To do so, he disqualifies Joana, classifying her as "old." He is also guided by usury by lowering the price of transaction when he sees that the situation of the family guarantees such negotiation. He treats her as a thing, calling her a slave or a mulatto. He does not utter her name, but defines her through the legal and racial prism, thereby mobilizing the economic field and the eugenics present in the nineteenth century society. However, Alencar represents him as a good owner, that is, one who treats the product in a less objectified way. In the speech of the merchant, the word "good master" refers to a humanitarian situation, within the limits of subservience, which is not economic, personalized. It magnifies the master to the detriment of the merchant. The speech also demonstrates ambiguity, because within slavery's legal system, less inhuman words emerge. On the other hand, the body inspection reduces Joana to the level of an object. This speech reveals the ambivalent relations that permeated the slave-owner relationship. The very economic system required careful treatment of the slave in order not to lose the capital invested, as attested by much of the national historiography. Alencar dialogs with his time also by harboring this mercantilist bias. Again, the tensions between infrastructure and superstructure (the symbolic level) are given by language, moving away from Stalinist Marxism.

## 8 The Voice of the Integrated and the Slavery Apologist Alencar

The voice of the character Vicente Romão is emphasized herein as he represents many marginalized people that integrate the culture of the elite when entering the universe of labor, hence reaching a hierarchical place. Of gypsy origin, he meets Joana when he was Jorge's manservant. The dialog between him and Joana spans a whole scene. He climbed socially and became a bailiff. Vicente discourages Joana from calling him by his nickname, Bilro, in order to hide his humble origins and also his friendship with a slave. Joana defies his request and does not treat him formally. Alencar makes the necessary adjustments to the scene to guarantee that a superior caste is kept in a society divided into social classes. Drawing on Bakhtin (1984),<sup>34</sup> it is possible to see the discursive diversity given either in the familiar zone that brings individuals together, or in the external hierarchical context, which requires the use of a ceremonial and official tone in the enunciative exchanges. It is also important to emphasize that class mobility locates Bilro's speech at the threshold between his humble past and the reality in which he is a professional bailiff who demands a discursive treatment that brings him closer to the elite and guarantees a hierarchy between him and Joana. As a counterpoint, Alencar's voice in political texts, present in such work as *New Letters of Erasmo*, demonstrates that the writer defends slavery. Alencar's voice follows an economic basis that defended the permanence of the slave since there were not enough workers to maintain agricultural and export production. The abolition of slavery would incur an economic deficit that the country could not bear. Alencar finds himself split between antagonistic positions and chooses to present his antislavery libel only in theater, relying on cultural awareness in the long term. This ambiguity of his thinking can be understood as the result of a time of conflicting voices. It also offers a class discourse because he belongs to the cultural and economic elite, and his voice has boundaries circumscribed therein. Every voice brings an axiological position and the intellectual of the Conservative Party is placed in a slavery context and operates in this scenario. Vološinov (1986) deals with this question from a class viewpoint: "The generation of language cannot be studied, of course, in complete disregard of the most solid kind of

---

<sup>34</sup> Fore reference, see footnote 22.

social existence refracted in it and of the refracting powers of the socioeconomic conditions” (p.158).<sup>35</sup>

## 9 The Author’s Voice in the Play’s Preface

In the preface, Alencar dedicates the play to his mother. White motherhood is a reason for joy. However, it brings the theme of slave motherhood to the scene in the face of slavery. In real life, the slave mother must become invisible, but the play pedagogically shows this condition. Joana represents the very slave condition of men and women transplanted from their nations in order to do forced labor. The play testifies to the mestizo condition of the Empire by focusing on slave motherhood as a national genesis. The country arises from the miscegenation seen in the character of Jorge, whose existence is the result of it. In the following part of the play taken from the epilogue, the drama of recognition ends on the threshold of death. Speech at the threshold bares the intimate condition of the mestizo households, referring to the domestic slaves, but which can be generalized to the economic situation of the slave of the plantations. In Bakhtin’s (1984)<sup>36</sup> work, the threshold is the founding element of his epistemology, as he rejects the dichotomy of antithetical pairs. It is a situation of fraught limits, of duplicity in which life and death, the secret and the revelation, the outside and the inside, the dream and the vigil, the high and the low, the rich and the poor, the behavioral ideology and crystallized ideologies, reflection and refraction, the subject and the other confront each other, thus provoking enlightenment. In the play, it is in the dialog at the threshold that the dialogical revelation of truth occurs, as a result of confrontation between the characters. The problem of truth reminds us of Bakhtin who is as far removed from relativism as from metaphysics. For him, the truth manifests itself in a dialogical way, in the confrontation, and is unstable. He refers to the Socratic perspective that starts from truth born in dialog, in which the hierarchies of authoritarian thinking dissipate (BAKHTIN, 1984).<sup>37</sup> In the play, the dialog on the threshold elucidates the dramatic situation that has been conforming, reaching the climax, stripping slave motherhood.

---

<sup>35</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>36</sup> For reference, see footnote 22.

<sup>37</sup> For reference, see footnote 22.

*Jorge:* Call me your son. I beg you.  
*Joana:* But no... and no... I swear!  
*Dr. Lima:* Joana, God is listening!  
*Joana:* For God's sake... He knows why I say this! For God, I swear that... Ah...  
*Joana:* He is mistaken. I am not... I am not your mother, no... my son!  
 She dies.  
*Jorge:* My mother!<sup>38</sup>

The reader realizes that the dramatic situation of the protagonist prevents her from confessing that she is Jorge's mother, as she avoids uttering the word mother to refer to herself. However, even when she uses the verbal construction to deny motherhood, repeating the word "no" several times, Joana is betrayed by the words as she pronounces the word "son" plus the possessive adjective. The word "mother," which refers to Joana, occurs only in Jorge's voice and at a different moment in Dr. Lima's speech. The title of the play, *Mãe*, refers to Joana and transcends the universe of the drama experienced by the characters, because the playwright formalizes it as he presents an outside position in relation to the staged universe. He provides an end to the drama where he explains to the audience the condition of slave motherhood. Alencar is the one who organizes the speeches of the play dialogically, that is, immersed in fact and character, but also distanced from them. He talks to them and about them. Alencar formalizes his vision of the world presenting the enslaved African as the matrix that generates mestizo life. Joana represents the many enslaved Joanas that constituted Brazil. The term outsideness is taken from Bakhtin (1990),<sup>39</sup> who understands it as an ontological factor since the distance between oneself and the other is an indispensable condition of existence. This detachment must be perceived through a dialogical perspective, that is, in permanent interaction with the other. Alencar gives his characters their own lives and distances himself from them. However, they come into existence from his pen, but he does not merge with them. The writer also emerges in a dialogical attitude with his time because, in the organization of his text, the voices of his time appear conformed in the characters' speeches.

---

<sup>38</sup> In the original: "Jorge: Chama-me teu filho. Eu te suplico. / Joana: Mas não... e não... Eu juro! / Dr. Lima: Joana, Deus nos ouve! / Joana: Por Deus mesmo... Ele sabe porque digo isso! Por Deus mesmo juro que... Ah... / Joana: Ele se enganou. Eu não...Eu não sou tua mãe, não... meu filho! Morre. / Jorge: Minha mãe!"

<sup>39</sup> For reference, see footnote 4.

## Final Considerations

According to the Bakhtinian perspective, every discourse is part of a great social orchestra of voices that converge or diverge, faced with the objects on which concrete women and men stand, demonstrating axiological positions. In the play *Mãe*, Alencar enters the discursive field of slavery and formalizes a certain discourse that dialogs with everyday national voices present in the newspapers, the parliament, the street, the slave quarters, the *quilombos*, the abolitionist and slavery apologist writings. In this dialogical attitude, which is the basis of every discourse, he expresses his view of captivity from the dramatic situation of an enslaved mother who, as we have seen, is subjected to the degradation of the slave condition, but as a human being she manifests her existence by means of a unique voice at the same time as being an expression of a particular, yet also generic situation, since she refers to the class condition that encompasses other Joanas. Through the voice of the characters, the social voice of the earning slaves, the domestic slaves, the slave merchants, racial prejudice, and the mixed-race Brazil resonate, which have been registered in history books, films, national imagery, in everyday conversations, soap operas, etc. Alencar includes in the play the drama of the enslaved, giving him a voice that empowers him as agent of his destiny, although subjected to degrading conditions. In the audience, there are both abolitionists and slavery apologists. The recourse to theater as a means of political and ethical awareness is the great achievement of an engaged work that resists what is found in life, proving that literary discourse “reflects reality and refracts it,” while trying to modify it.

The historiography of the twentieth century also depicts the slave from different perspectives, either transformed into an object or as an active agent of the process. As we read Alencar, it is possible to perceive the freshness of his work, seeing that in the twentieth century an academic discourse emerges: that of the State University of Campinas, which is very similar to what had already been verbalized in the literary voice of the writer from the state of Ceará. Readers perceive Alencar’s work in this extensive dialogism to which we have alluded. The perspective of the play, betting on the agency of the enslaved, is also of a strand of the UNICAMP’s historiography, which was produced more than a century later than that of Alencar. The theme and reality of slavery are revisited and earlier discourses are mobilized. This mobilization does not



have to be explicit, such as looking for references to the play *Mãe*. However, this dialog between diverse chronotopes can be established later. Moreover, Cultural History has relied on literary texts to build its place of interlocution. In the great temporality of the life of a work, it is possible to follow Bakhtin in *Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff*: “Enclosure within the epoch also makes it impossible to understand the work’s future life in subsequent centuries; this life appears as a kind of paradox. Works break through the boundaries of their own time, they live in centuries, that is, in *great time*” (1986, p.4; emphasis in original).<sup>40</sup>

## REFERENCES

- ALENCAR, J. *Mãe*. Disponível em: <http://www.dominiopublico.gov.br/download/texto/bi000161.pdf>. Acesso em: 16/11/2014.
- ALENCAR, J. *Novas cartas de Erasmo*. Disponível em: [http://www.academia.org.br/abl/media/Carta de Erasmo ao Imperador-Jose de Alencar.pdf](http://www.academia.org.br/abl/media/Carta%20de%20Erasmo%20ao%20Imperador-Jose%20de%20Alencar.pdf). Acesso em: 29/05/2018.
- ASSIS, M. *Notícia da atual literatura brasileira: instinto de nacionalidade*. Disponível em: [http://machado.mec.gov.br/obra-completa-lista/item/download/95\\_a034209a67594696a9b556534ff73116](http://machado.mec.gov.br/obra-completa-lista/item/download/95_a034209a67594696a9b556534ff73116). Acesso em: 10/11/2010.
- BAKHTIN, M. *Problemas da poética de Dostoiévski*. Trad. de Paulo Bezerra. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Forense-Universitária, 1981.
- BAKHTIN, M. (VOLOCHINOV). *Marxismo e filosofia da linguagem*. Problemas fundamentais do método sociológico na ciência da linguagem. Trad. Michel Lahud e Yara Frateschi Vieira. São Paulo: Hucitec, 1986.
- BAKHTIN, M. *A cultura popular na Idade Média e no Renascimento: o contexto de François Rabelais*. Trad. Yara F. Vieira. São Paulo: Hucitec, 1987.
- BAKHTIN, M. O autor e o herói. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Estética da criação verbal*. Trad. Maria E. G. G. Pereira. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1992, p.23-220.
- BAKHTIN, M. Os estudos literários hoje. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Estética da criação verbal*. Trad. Maria E. G. G. Pereira. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1992, p.359-368.
- BAKHTIN, M. Apontamentos 1970-1971. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Estética da criação verbal*. Trad. Maria E. G. G. Pereira. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1992, p.369-397.
- CARDOSO, F. H. *Capitalismo e escravidão meridional: o negro na sociedade escravocrata do Rio Grande do Sul*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1977.
- FREYRE, G. *Casa grande & senzala: formação da família brasileira sob o regime da economia patriarcal*. 31.ed. Rio de Janeiro; São Paulo: Editora Record, 1996.
- GORENDER, J. *A escravidão reabilitada*. São Paulo: Ática, 1990.

---

<sup>40</sup> For reference, see footnote 8.

MATTOSO, K. *Ser escravo no Brasil*. 2. ed. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1990.

MORAES J.; REGO, J. *Conversas com historiadores brasileiros*. São Paulo: Editora 34, 2002.

PRADO JUNIOR, C. *História econômica do Brasil*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 2006.

SCHWARCZ, L. *O espetáculo das raças: cientistas, instituições e questão racial no Brasil- 1870-1930*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1993.

**Statement of authorship and responsibility for published content**

We declare that all of the authors had access to the research *corpus*, participated actively in the discussion of the results, and conducted the review and approval process of the paper's final version.

Translated by Patrick William Bushell – [patbmail@yahoo.com](mailto:patbmail@yahoo.com)

*Received March 27,2018*

*Accepted May 24,2019*