

Bridging the real and the imaginary: modernity, tradition, and the power of the fantastic in Socorro Acioli's *A cabeça do santo*

Entre o real e o imaginário: modernidade, tradição e o poder do fantástico em *A cabeça do santo*, de Socorro Acioli

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Abstract

This article explores the sociocultural and psychological dimensions of Socorro Acioli's *A cabeça do santo* (2014) through the lens of fantastic literature, focusing on the protagonist Samuel's journey and its broader implications. By analyzing the narrative's construction of uncanny spaces and its juxtaposition of modernity and tradition, the study investigates how Acioli employs spatial ambiguity and polyphonic voices to reflect social tensions, existential conflicts, and rural marginalization. Through a theoretical-critical approach grounded in concepts of magical realism, polyphony, and spatial theory, the analysis reveals how the novel bridges the real and the imaginary, intertwining cultural identity, individual subjectivity, and societal violence. The findings highlight Acioli's innovative narrative strategies in representing the interplay between faith, folklore, and technological change, ultimately emphasizing the resilience and invisibility of marginalized communities. This study contributes to discussions on contemporary Brazilian literature, particularly its engagement with regional traditions and universal themes of power, displacement, and transformation.

Keywords: Brazilian literature; fantastic literature; magical realism; sociocultural criticism; spatial theory.

Resumo

Este artigo explora as dimensões socioculturais e psicológicas de A cabeça do santo (2014), de Socorro Acioli, sob a ótica da literatura fantástica, com foco na jornada do protagonista Samuel e suas implicações mais amplas. Ao analisar a construção de espaços insólitos na narrativa e a justaposição entre modernidade e tradição, o estudo investiga como Acioli emprega a ambiguidade espacial e vozes polifônicas para refletir tensões sociais, conflitos existenciais e marginalização rural. Por meio de uma abordagem teórico-crítica

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fundamentada em conceitos de realismo mágico, polifonia e teoria do espaço, a análise revela como o romance conecta o real e o imaginário, entrelaçando identidade cultural, subjetividade individual e violência social. Os resultados destacam as estratégias narrativas inovadoras de Acioli na representação da interação entre fé, folclore e mudanças tecnológicas, enfatizando, por fim, a resiliência e a invisibilidade das comunidades marginalizadas. Este estudo contribui para as discussões sobre a literatura brasileira contemporânea, especialmente sua interação com tradições regionais e temas universais de poder, deslocamento e transformação.

Palavras-chave: literatura brasileira; literatura fantástica; realismo mágico; crítica sociocultural; teoria do espaço.

Introduction

In contemporary Brazilian literature, the intersection of magical realism and sociocultural criticism has emerged as a powerful tool for exploring themes of marginalization, identity, and transformation. Socorro Acioli's *A cabeça do santo* (2014) exemplifies this trend, blending elements of the fantastic with the stark realities of the *sertão*³ to create a narrative that is both imaginative and deeply rooted in cultural traditions. Previous studies on Acioli's (2014) work have highlighted its innovative narrative techniques, particularly the use of uncanny spaces and polyphonic voices, but there remains a need for deeper exploration of how these elements address broader sociocultural dynamics, such as the tension between modernity and tradition and the invisibility of marginalized communities. This article situates *A cabeça do santo* within this critical framework, drawing connections between the novel's representation of spatial ambiguity and its engagement with regional and universal concerns.

The primary purpose of this initial study is to analyze how Acioli (2014) employs fantastic and spatial dynamics to construct a narrative that criticizes societal hierarchies while simultaneously reflecting the existential struggles of its protagonist. By examining the interplay between real and imaginary spaces, this article illuminates the resilience of cultural identity amid technological encroachment and systemic violence. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on contemporary literature's ability to navigate and mediate the cultural and political complexities of rural Brazilian life. While the current analysis provides valuable insights into the sociocultural implications of Acioli's (2014) narrative, further research could deepen this inquiry by exploring additional examples and elaborating on the narrative strategies discussed, thereby expanding our understanding of their contributions to literary criticism.

³ A semi-arid region in Brazil characterized by its harsh climate, rural landscapes, and cultural significance, often associated with resilience and traditional ways of life.

This study is guided by two primary research questions: (1) How does the novel's use of fantastic elements and spatial ambiguity criticize sociocultural dynamics? (2) In what ways do these narrative strategies reflect the protagonist's subjective experience and broader societal tensions? The analysis employs a theoretical-critical methodology, drawing on concepts from magical realism, polyphony, and spatial theory to elucidate the novel's narrative structure and thematic concerns.

This article is organized into three sections. The first section explores the role of uncanny spaces and the fantastic in constructing the novel's thematic framework. The second section examines the protagonist's subjective journey and its connections to the sociocultural dynamics of Candeia. The final section discusses the tension between modernity and tradition, highlighting how these forces intersect to shape the novel's sociopolitical criticism. Together, these sections provide a comprehensive analysis of *A cabeça do santo*, situating Acioli's (2014) work within the broader context of Brazilian literary and cultural studies.

The uncanny space and the fantastic in *A cabeça do santo*

In *A cabeça do santo* (2014), Socorro Acioli constructs an uncanny fictional space that not only serves as the backdrop for supernatural phenomena but also functions as a deliberate narrative strategy – a strategy that resonates strongly with the formal procedures outlined by Ceserani (2006) in his study of the fantastic. Ceserani (2006) identifies a series of narrative techniques that characterize the fantastic mode, and several of these can be clearly observed in Acioli's work. In particular, the novel exemplifies the “passage of limit”, the exposure of narrative procedures, and the creative use of language to generate alternative realities.

One example of the passage of limit occurs when Samuel, the protagonist, takes refuge within the hollow head of a massive, abandoned statue of Saint Anthony – the town's patron saint. This moment is not merely a physical relocation; it is emblematic of a shift from the mundane world of Candeia into a liminal space where the boundaries between reality and the fantastic are blurred. Ceserani (2006, p. 68-69) argues that such a transition is a defining feature of fantastic literature, as it disrupts the reader's expectations by transforming a familiar urban element into a site of supernatural possibility. In this context, the hollow head becomes a symbolic threshold: it is a concrete object that simultaneously anchors the narrative in the real and signals the emergence of a dreamlike, ambiguous realm. Samuel's experience of entering this space thus exemplifies the deliberate manipulation of narrative

procedures that Ceserani (2006) highlights, where every shift in space serves as a reminder that the narrative is both constructed and self-aware.

Moreover, the novel continuously foregrounds its own narrative mechanisms, echoing Ceserani's (2006) observation regarding the exposure of narrative procedures. For example, when Samuel contemplates the inexplicable events around him, he muses, “Talvez um gigante tenha degolado o santo, ele pensou...” [“Maybe a giant decapitated the saint, he thought...”] (Acioli, 2014, p. 33). This self-reflexive moment not only introduces an element of absurdity but also alerts the reader to the constructed nature of the narrative. Ceserani (2006) maintains that such moments of narrative self-awareness – where the text seemingly reveals its own artifice – are crucial for creating the distinctive tension of the fantastic. They compel the reader to oscillate between belief and skepticism, reinforcing the idea that, although the story is imbued with supernatural elements, it remains a crafted narrative with its own internal logic. This dual awareness, where the reader is both immersed in the story and constantly reminded of its fictional nature, is essential to the experience of the fantastic as described by Ceserani (2006).

The creative potential of language is another key aspect that Ceserani (2006, p. 70) emphasizes, and which Acioli (2014) exploits masterfully throughout the novel. Rather than serving as a neutral conduit for conveying reality, language in *A cabeça do santo* is imbued with a plasticity that allows it to construct new, alternate realities. This is evident in the evocative descriptions of both the landscape and Samuel's physical form. For instance, the narrator's portrayal of Samuel as “um corpo magro e faminto, quase uma sombra” [“a thin and starving body, almost a shadow”] (Acioli, 2014, p. 13) does more than simply depict his physical weakness – it creates an image that resonates with the desolation of the town itself. The use of metaphor here is not incidental; it is a deliberate act that aligns with Ceserani's (2006) assertion that the fantastic leverages the creative capacities of language to generate imagery that transcends the literal. Through such imagery, Acioli (2014) invites readers to experience the narrative on both a sensory and symbolic level, where every descriptive detail contributes to an overarching sense of ambiguity and wonder.

Another procedural aspect that Ceserani (2006) highlights is the active involvement of the reader through mechanisms such as surprise, terror, and humor. In *A cabeça do santo*, these affective responses are elicited by the interplay between the supernatural and the mundane. For example, the repeated, disorienting experience of Samuel waking “at exactly five in the morning, tormented, confused...” [“Eram exatamente cinco horas da manhã

quando Samuel começou a acordar, atormentado, confuso...”] (Acioli, 2014, p. 33) creates a persistent atmosphere of unease. Such moments of auditory dissonance – where overlapping voices and inexplicable sounds disrupt the normalcy of the everyday – embody Ceserani’s (2006) notion that the fantastic draws the reader into its world by unsettling their conventional perceptions. The deliberate juxtaposition of fear with moments of absurdity or humor, as seen later in the text when a seemingly mundane event is described with an unexpected twist, further reinforces the idea that the narrative is constructed to evoke a dynamic range of emotional responses. This active engagement of the reader, as Ceserani (2006) contends, is central to the fantastic, as it transforms passive consumption into an interactive experience where the boundaries between the reader’s reality and the narrative’s constructed world become porous.

Furthermore, the uncanny space in *A cabeça do santo* is not limited to its physical settings but extends to the psychological realm, mirroring Samuel’s inner turmoil and feelings of alienation. Ceserani (2006) underscores the importance of the “passage of limit” as a mechanism that demarcates the border between the familiar and the unrecognizable. In the novel, Candeia itself is depicted as a desolate town – “Quase nada. Não mais que vinte casas mortas...” [“Almost nothing. No more than twenty dead houses...”] (Acioli, 2014, p. 17) – which symbolizes decay, isolation, and the collapse of social bonds. This portrayal of the town functions as a powerful metaphor for the protagonist’s internal state. Samuel’s personal journey – his search for familial connections and his confrontation with his own solitude – mirrors the external decay and abandonment of the environment. In this sense, the spatial ambiguities that define Candeia are not incidental; they are intricately linked to the character’s existential struggles, reinforcing Antonio Candido’s (1999) concept of *humilhação* [humiliation] and *machucamento* [wounding] as central to the experience of marginalization. The interplay between the physical desolation of the town and Samuel’s psychological isolation exemplifies how Acioli (2014) uses space as a narrative tool to explore broader themes of alienation and disintegration.

Karl Erik Schollhammer’s (2009) insights further elucidate this complex narrative interplay. He describes contemporary fiction as a performative production of reality—one that seeks to transcend the referential limitations of traditional realism through affective and tactile language (Schollhammer, 2009, p. 80; 2012, p. 143). Acioli’s (2014) narrative, with its fusion of the real and the fantastic, exemplifies this performativity. The deliberate exposure of narrative devices, the creative manipulation of language, and the construction of liminal

spaces all contribute to a text that is at once richly evocative and self-reflexively aware. This dual-layered narrative strategy allows Acioli (2014) to comment not only on the external realities of rural Brazil – its decay, its marginalization – but also on the internal landscapes of his characters, thereby bridging the gap between the tangible and the imagined.

The subjectivity of the protagonist and social relationships

Samuel, the protagonist of *A cabeça do santo*, is portrayed as a migrant in search of familial connections. Described as a young man with “um par de bichos disformes,” [“a pair of misshapen beasts”] (Acioli, 2014, p. 11) he wanders barefoot through the small town of Candeia to find the father and grandmother who abandoned him years earlier. His journey is motivated by a promise made to his dying mother, who urged him to seek out the family that had never recognized him. This sense of duty propels Samuel into a world where his experiences oscillate between the mundane and the supernatural.

The protagonist’s disorientation intensifies when he begins hearing voices of women praying at the statue. These voices, described as a chaotic blend of “reza, briga, conversa” [“prayer, quarrel, conversation”] (Acioli, 2014, p. 33), unsettle Samuel and deepen his sense of alienation. Selma Calasans Rodrigues highlights this narrative technique in fantastic literature, noting that such texts offer a dialogue between reason and unreason, where the protagonist grapples with both rationality and mystery. This tension permeates the reader’s experience, fostering a delicate balance that tilts in favor of the fantastical (Rodrigues, 1988, p. 11). Samuel’s journey unfolds as a dramatic exploration of isolated spaces and fragmented identities, mirroring the struggles of those marginalized in the arid sertão.

Acioli (2014) constructs Samuel’s physical and emotional journey with vivid imagery, emphasizing his vulnerability. Descriptions such as “sobrancelhas fartas e juntas acima do nariz, boca carnuda e traços de índio” [“thick eyebrows joined above the nose, full lips, and Indigenous features”] (Acioli, 2014, p. 13) highlight his marginalized identity, while phrases like “Samuel era um corpo magro e faminto, quase uma sombra” [“Samuel was a thin and starving body, almost a shadow”] (Acioli, 2014, p. 13) underscore his physical frailty. Osman Lins’s definition of atmosphere as “[...] a designation linked to the idea of space” (Lins, 1976, p. 76) aptly captures the oppressive environment through which Samuel roams. The arid, confining spaces serve as metaphors for his inner turmoil and estrangement. In the desolate landscapes of Candeia, where hardly more than “twenty dead houses” exist, the oppressive and arid setting serves as a powerful metaphor for Samuel’s inner turmoil. The physical decay

of the town echoes his emotional disintegration, suggesting that the environment itself is complicit in his alienation. This interplay between space and psyche is not accidental; it is a deliberate narrative strategy that reinforces the theme of isolation. The barren, confining spaces of Candeia become a reflection of Samuel's internal state – a constant, tangible reminder of the neglect and disenfranchisement that pervade his life.

The cacophony of prayers that Samuel hears is central to the novel's polyphonic structure. These overlapping voices create a narrative complexity that mirrors Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, where "the underground hero listens to all word others say about himself" (Bakhtin, 2010, p. 59). Samuel's experiences within the hollow head of the statue embody this idea, as his interactions with the voices reveal his growing self-awareness. His character's gradual self-revelation occurs as conflicts arise, drawing him deeper into the spiritual and emotional dynamics of the town.

Acioli's (2014) narrative also challenges traditional religious perspectives, opting instead for an irreverent and popular cultural approach. The hollow head of the saint, initially a source of fear, transforms into a mythical and utopian monument in Samuel's perception. This shift reflects the novel's subversion of conventional spaces and the protagonist's acceptance of the supernatural. The text demonstrates this evolution: "No dia seguinte ele comeu goiaba, folhas, bebeu água da chuva e percebeu que as orações aconteciam de manhã e à tarde" ["The next day he ate guava, leaves, drank rainwater, and noticed that the prayers happened in the morning and in the afternoon"] (Acioli, 2014, p. 34). Through this lens, the fantastic becomes normalized, blending seamlessly with Samuel's reality.

Samuel's invisibility within the town parallels his lack of agency in life, yet his accidental arrival at the abandoned statue propels him into a role that intertwines personal discovery and communal impact. Furtado's observation that the fantastic "presupposes an always precarious balance between an appearance of the real and its illusory subversion" (Furtado, 1980, p. 125) aptly describes Samuel's journey. His curiosity drives him to navigate the religious and social dynamics of Candeia, unraveling the mysteries of the town's residents and their prayers.

The narrative's turning point comes with the arrival of Francisco, a young boy who brings companionship and disrupts Samuel's isolation. Initially suspicious, Francisco gradually becomes Samuel's confidant, catalyzing a transformation in the protagonist's outlook. Their relationship reflects the novel's thematic interplay between solitude and connection. As their bond deepens, Samuel reveals his ability to hear the prayers of the

town's women, initiating a series of events that blend rationality and irrationality. Rodrigues argues that such narratives “[...] feed on this fragile balance that tilts in favor of the implausible” (Rodrigues, 1988, p. 11), a dynamic that defines Samuel's experiences.

Together, Samuel and Francisco devise ways to manipulate the miraculous encounters the women pray for, culminating in the unconventional marriage of Medeuza and Dr. Adriano. This plotline introduces elements of humor and satire, as seen when Samuel relays, “Ele disse que hoje ia entrar aqui uma moça dizendo que estava com um passamento no coração” [“He said that today a young woman would come in here saying she had a fainting spell in her heart”] (Acioli, 2014, p. 55). The comedic tone contrasts with the novel's earlier tensions, showcasing Acioli's ability to blend genres and tones effectively.

As Samuel gains the status of a mythic figure within Candeia, the narrative criticizes social hierarchies and the commodification of faith. The satirical lens of Acioli's storytelling dismantles the authority of scientific rationalism embodied by Dr. Adriano, emphasizing the enduring power of popular beliefs. Ligia Chiappini explains that myths and legends “[...] are miraculous stories of the supernatural and what approaches it” (Chiappini, 1988, p. 155), a description that aligns with Samuel's transformation into a symbol of hope and change.

Ultimately, Samuel's commodification of his gift leads to its decline, as the voices that once defined him fade away. The hollow head becomes a site of commercial activity rather than spiritual revelation: “Aos poucos Samuel foi incrementando os conselhos. Francisco cuidava de organizar a fila e recolher o dinheiro” [“Little by little, Samuel started giving more detailed advice. Francisco took care of organizing the line and collecting the money”] (Acioli, 2014, p. 81). This evolution highlights the tension between spiritual authenticity and material exploitation, leaving Samuel once again grappling with isolation and uncertainty. Through this multifaceted portrayal, Acioli (2014) captures the complex interplay between individual subjectivity and social dynamics, offering a nuanced exploration of human experience.

Modernity, tradition, a sociocultural criticism

The transformation of Candeia from an abandoned, somber place into a bustling town illustrates the tension between modernity and tradition. Once desolate and eerie, the town experiences a revival spurred by the arrival of the visionary outsider, Samuel. This revitalization brings a festive atmosphere, physical improvements, and the implementation of tourist-oriented changes. A passage from the chapter *Casablanca* captures this shift: “Um

cinema em Candeia. Nada de *macumba*⁴ ou rituais macabros. A sala estava pintada de preto para garantir a boa visibilidade de tela” [“A cinema in Candeia. No macumba or macabre rituals. The room was painted black to ensure good screen visibility”] (Acioli, 2014, p. 81). Through these developments, Candeia becomes a microcosm for examining the coexistence of two worlds – the mythical and the technological.

The juxtaposition of tradition and modernity shapes the narrative's exploration of Candeia as a space of dualities. On one side, the town is steeped in cultural elements like myths, saints, and *cordel* literature⁵. On the other hand, the encroachment of modern technologies such as cinema and television introduces new dynamics. This rapid transformation sets the stage for a tragic twist: the reappearance of Osório, the former mayor, who orders the destruction of the saint's head before dawn. Trucks filled with explosives arrive, symbolizing the violent culmination of the town's growth. This moment evokes themes of *cangaço*⁶ and *coronelismo*⁷, as the heroic journey of the migrant protagonist is dismantled. The narrative captures this descent: “Equipes de TV vinham junto para filmar o espetáculo, o fim do sacrilégio contra Santo Antônio” [“TV crews came along to film the spectacle, the end of the sacrilege against Saint Anthony”] (Acioli, 2014, p. 133).

Osório's tyranny underscores the exploitation of power and the erasure of communal spaces. As the town's self-appointed authority, he seeks to sell the land for industrial development, illegally claiming ownership of the homes. Samuel becomes a target of this oppression, as reflected in the line: “A lei de Candeia era Osório quem fazia, com truculência” [“The law in Candeia was made by Osório, with truculence”] (Acioli, 2014, p. 133). The old jail is reopened specifically to hold Samuel, emphasizing the extremes of political greed and corruption. The protagonist, accompanied by Father Zacarias, is eventually forced to leave the town, embarking on a new pilgrimage. As he departs, he sees the town's population gathered around the statue, awaiting its destruction.

The narrative's focus on Samuel's disoriented perception of society invites readers to engage with the complexities of his environment. The protagonist's fragmented understanding reflects the broader ambiguities of the spaces he inhabits, which oscillate

⁴ A popular term in Brazil, often used pejoratively, to refer to Afro-Brazilian religious practices such as Candomblé and Umbanda, although it can also describe magical or spiritual rituals outside these contexts.

⁵ A traditional form of Brazilian popular poetry, typically presented in small booklets with woodcut illustrations, characterized by rhymed verses and storytelling that often blends folklore, history, and social commentary.

⁶ A historical phenomenon in Brazil involving bands of outlaws and rebels in the northeastern sertão during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, often seen as both symbols of resistance and social banditry.

⁷ A political and social system in Brazil during the late 19th and early 20th centuries where powerful landowners, known as “coronéis”, controlled local politics and economies through patronage and coercion.

between the real and the surreal. Through this portrayal, Acioli (2014) crafts a text that challenges readers to question their own perspectives and relationships with isolation, community, and the supernatural.

Fantastic literature, as employed in Acioli's (2014) novel, provides a unique lens through which to examine human subjectivity. By framing Samuel's experiences within an absurd and fictionalized world, the narrative bridges the gap between the real and the unreal. The protagonist's restricted social and spatial mobility further emphasizes existential conflicts, as he navigates space marked by tension and the uncanny.

The interplay between social and psychological spaces is central to the novel's criticism of sociocultural issues. On one level, the narrative exposes rural violence and confinement, illustrating how harsh realities render certain individuals invisible within their own communities. On the other hand, it underscores the resilience of cultural traditions, particularly those tied to faith and folklore. The text juxtaposes the oppressive conditions of rural existence with the enduring influence of myths, such as those associated with Father Cícero and the tradition of *romeiros*⁸. These elements position Acioli's (2014) novel within the broader genealogy of Northeastern popular narratives, creating a rich tapestry of social and cultural commentary.

Ultimately, the novel examines the loss of individuality and autonomy in the face of societal and spatial deformations. By invoking the duality of the "real-imaginary" and intertwining myth with contemporary issues, Acioli (2014) constructs a narrative that transcends its local context, inviting readers to reflect on universal themes of displacement, power, and the resilience of cultural identity. Through Samuel's journey, *A cabeça do santo* presents a profound exploration of human existence within a complex sociocultural landscape.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how Socorro Acioli's (2014) *A cabeça do santo* employs elements of fantastic and spatial ambiguity to criticize sociocultural dynamics while exploring themes of marginalization, resilience, and identity. Through its portrayal of uncanny spaces and the protagonist Samuel's disoriented journey, the novel bridges the real and the imaginary, offering a rich narrative that intertwines faith, folklore, and technological

⁸ Religious pilgrims in Brazil who travel, often by foot, to sacred sites or shrines to fulfill vows, seek blessings, or express devotion, deeply rooted in the country's Catholic traditions and cultural practices.

transformation. The analysis highlighted how the tension between modernity and tradition, coupled with the polyphonic structure of the text, reveals systemic violence and the invisibility of marginalized communities.

By situating Acioli's (2014) work within the broader framework of magical realism and sociocultural criticism, this study emphasized the narrative's ability to reflect existential struggles and societal hierarchies while celebrating the enduring influence of cultural traditions. As such, the novel invites readers to reconsider the power dynamics inherent in spaces of displacement and the potential for transformation through resilience and creativity.

Ultimately, *A cabeça do santo* underscores the capacity of contemporary Brazilian literature to address both local and universal concerns, offering a narrative that is as engaging as it is critical. Future research might further explore how Acioli's (2014) narrative strategies contribute to evolving discussions on regional identity and the global relevance of magical realism in addressing complex sociopolitical issues.

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