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The multiple and complex meanings of hunger in the novel *O quinze*, by Rachel de Queiroz: a historical-literary analysis

Os múltiplos e complexos significados da fome no romance *O quinze*, de Rachel de Queiroz: uma análise histórico-literária

Abstract

Introduction: The novel *O quinze*, by Rachel de Queiroz, published in 1930, is a landmark in the literature on drought in Brazil. **Objective:** To conduct a historical-literary analysis of the novel *O quinze*, seeking to identify the meanings of the concept of hunger, as well as to understand how the author portrayed aspects of the food environment, habits, and food practices in the temporal context and setting of the work. **Method:** The analysis was based on a theoretical-conceptual framework from the field of Nutrition, complemented by a bibliographic review. **Results:** The word "hunger" was used with multiple and complex meanings, the most frequent being: dying of hunger due to food deprivation (caused by drought and misery); a momentary biological sensation of not having anything to eat; chronic or long-lasting hunger; hunger as a subject or evil entity; and hyperbolic meanings: growling stomach from hunger, crying from hunger, drunk from hunger, and going mad from hunger. The description of the biological and social consequences of hunger denotes the author's affinity with the literary movements of naturalism and social realism. The author accurately addressed the basic diet of families of migrants from the backlands. Using resources of literary realism, in a simple and colloquial way, the writer sought to portray the degrading consequences of hunger and misery. Therefore, she followed the path of novels that inaugurated the drought literature. **Conclusion:** Although not explicitly stated the historical, social, and political determination of hunger and its forms of challenge in the state of Ceará in the framework of the 1915 drought, the novel seeks to address the subject from a critical-social perspective.

Keywords: Hunger. Nutrition. Food Insecurity. Food Deprivation. Literature. Brazil.

Resumo

Introdução: O romance *O quinze*, de Rachel de Queiroz, publicado em 1930, é um marco da *literatura da seca* no Brasil. **Objetivo:** Realizar análise histórico-literária do romance *O quinze*, procurando identificar os significados do conceito de fome, bem como compreender como a autora relatou aspectos

do ambiente alimentar, dos hábitos e práticas alimentares no contexto temporal e ambientação da obra. **Método:** A análise fundamentou-se em referencial teórico-conceitual do campo da Nutrição, complementada por revisão bibliográfica. **Resultados:** A palavra “fome” foi usada com múltiplos e complexos significados, sendo os mais frequentes: morrer de fome por privação alimentar (em função da seca e da miséria); sensação biológica momentânea por não ter o que comer; ter fome crônica ou de longa duração; fome como sujeito ou ente maligno; e significados hiperbólicos: roncar de fome, chorar de fome, embriagar-se de fome e enlouquecer de fome. A descrição das consequências biológicas e sociais da fome denota a aproximação da autora com os movimentos literários do naturalismo e do realismo social. A autora abordou com precisão a dieta básica das famílias de sertanejos retirantes. Utilizando recursos do realismo literário, de forma simples e coloquial, a escritora procurou retratar as degradantes consequências provocadas pela fome e miséria. Portanto, seguiu a trilha dos romances que inauguraram a *literatura da seca*. **Conclusão:** Embora não explicita a determinação histórico-social e política da fome e suas formas de enfrentamento no contexto cearense da seca de 1915, o romance procura abordar a temática dentro de uma perspectiva crítico-social.

Palavras-chave: Fome. Nutrição. Insegurança Alimentar. Privação de Alimentos. Literatura. Brasil.

INTRODUCTION

In Brazil, hunger, conceived as the partial or total deprivation of adequate food to meet individual or population nutritional needs and, consequently, bound to cause death, is a recurring, cyclical phenomenon that has been studied since the mid-19th century.¹⁻⁶ From the 1930s onwards, with the studies of physician Josué de Castro (1908-1973) and his peers, the conception of hunger as a phenomenon of an essentially biological (individual) nature and of natural determination gained new meanings, incorporating social and political dimensions. In addition to developing concepts in the food area – endemic hunger, epidemic hunger, and undernutrition – Josué de Castro understood hunger as a historical, political, economic, and sociocultural phenomenon.^{1,5,6} Over the years, this perception of hunger disseminated by Josué de Castro has been reproduced, revised, and updated by scholars from different fields of knowledge. The philosopher Ricardo Abramovay, in the early 1980s, argued that hunger has a biological dimension, but that it is a fact of social order, resulting from the form society is organized, where the extremes of misery and opulence permanently touch each other.⁷ Physician Flávio Valente, also in the 1980s, formulated the theory of the social determination of hunger/malnutrition, in which he claims that hunger is the “manifestation at the working class level of the economic exploitation and consequent social deprivation to which it is subjected under the capitalist mode of production”⁸ (p. 107). In turn, nutritionist Marchia do Carmo Soares de Freitas, in the early 2000s, using a phenomenological approach, argued that the hermeneutical meanings of hunger transcend the bodily image of food deprivation, being slanted towards other conceptions sustained by a system of symbols and generated by the concrete food insecurity experienced by the individuals in their intersubjectivity.⁹ In the field of History, the study by Sordi & Leme¹⁰ revisited the conception of endemic, epidemic hunger and malnutrition disseminated by Josué de Castro,¹ in an attempt to understand its “function as an instrument of denunciation and social demand” in the agenda of public policies of the Brazilian neoliberal state, implemented from 2016 onwards. In the field of Social Work, Teles et al.¹¹ recovered the historical-dialectical materialist approach to hunger that circulated in the 1980s and stated that hunger is

[...] A project implemented by the bourgeoisie and driven by state inaction, which perpetuates systems of social (lack of) protection and is structured on the naturalization of inequality, inherited from colonial slavery and institutionally enhanced in dependent capitalism (p.158).

Over the past twenty years, significant hunger or severe food insecurity (FI) rates have been recorded in Brazil. Thus, between 2003 and 2014, with the implementation of the Zero Hunger Program and the Brazil Without Poverty Program, and the institution of other structuring social and economic policies, a reduction in poverty rates and a consequent improvement in the living conditions of the Brazilian population were observed, which enabled the country to be removed from the hunger map of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in 2014.¹² In 2004, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), approximately 14 million Brazilians (7.7% of the population) lived in a situation of hunger or severe FI. In 2014, the prevalence of people in a situation of severe FI was 3.2% (7.2 million Brazilians).¹³ Between 2016 and 2022, with the advancement of neoliberal economic policy, with a far-right ideological bias, the process of dismantling public policies and instances of social control in the country were intensified. Furthermore, with the Covid-19 pandemic, starting in 2020, the economic, financial, and political crisis in Brazil was intensified, causing an increase in unemployment, poverty, and extreme poverty and, consequently, in food insecurity and hunger rates.¹²⁻¹⁴ Therefore, between June 2017 and July 2018, severe food insecurity (hunger) affected approximately 10.3 million Brazilians, corresponding to more than 5% of the country's population, a situation that caused Brazil to be included again in the FAO's hunger map in 2018.¹²⁻¹⁶ In 2022, according to FAO reports, 17.2 million Brazilians were affected by severe food insecurity

(hunger). From 2023 onwards, with the change in the political landscape, economic and social improvements have been observed, including a reduction in unemployment, an increase in income and wages, an increase in public social protection policies, and consequently, a reduction in poverty and food insecurity rates. In this connection, severe food insecurity conditions dropped affecting 2.5 million Brazilians in 2023.^{2,17} In addition, according to FAO, between 2022 and 2024, the average prevalence rate of people experiencing hunger was 13.5 million of the Brazilian population; however, FAO once again removed Brazil from the hunger map, since it presented a rate of undernourishment below 2.5%.⁴

On the other hand, narratives about the hunger issue in Brazilian literature emerged between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, when the so-called "*literature of drought*" came into being. This literary movement had a first phase between 1875 and 1903, with the publication of works characterized by the exploration of drought subjects and hunger in the northeastern backlands, such as: *O Sertanejo* (1875), by José de Alencar; *O Cabeleira* (1876), by Franklin Távora; *Os Retirantes* (1879), by José do Patrocínio; *A Fome: Cenas da Seca no Ceará* (1890), by Rodolfo Teófilo; *Os Sertões* (1902), by Euclides da Cunha; and *Luzia-Homem* (1903), by Domingos Olímpio. In turn, the second phase of the *drought literature* corresponds to the period from 1928 to 1946, in which the following works stand out: *A Bagaceira* (1928), by José Américo de Almeida; *O quinze* (1930), by Rachel de Queiroz; *Menino de Engenho* (1932), by José Lins do Rego; *Vidas Secas* (1938), by Graciliano Ramos; *Terras do Sem Fim* (1943), by Jorge Amado; and *Sagarana* (1946), by Guimarães Rosa.¹⁸⁻²³

The novel *O quinze*, published in 1930, is a landmark of the Brazilian regionalist and modernist literary movement of the 1930s and 40s, and is considered the masterpiece of the Ceará-born writer Rachel de Queiroz (1910-2003).^{24,25} This novel seeks to portray the phenomenon of the 1915 drought in the northeastern hinterland and its biological, psychological, environmental, and socioeconomic consequences.²⁵ *O quinze* is one of the novels of the second phase of Brazilian modernism,²⁴ whose main attributes recognized by literary critics are: connection to regionalism (valorization of the northeastern regional reality, focusing on the drought); identification with social realism (narrative centered on the misery and hunger in the social context); use of simple and colloquial language; social criticism; valorization of the hinterland space/environment; highlighting and valuing the role of women in Brazilian literature; causal determinism of the phenomenon of drought, misery, and hunger; and linear narrative.²⁶⁻³⁵

Over the past ten years (2015-2025), at least ten articles published in scientific journals were found that reviewed the novel *O quinze*, by Rachel de Queiroz, seeking to investigate specific themes and under different theoretical-conceptual approaches.²⁶⁻³⁵ Three of these studies are from the field of Biological Sciences;^{30,32,35} two from the field of Literature;^{27,33} two from Medicine;^{29,34} one from History;²⁶ one from Geography;²⁸ and one from Law.³¹ One of these works addressed the issue of hunger,³³ although it is not from the field of Nutrition.

Although Rachel de Queiroz's work has been revisited in the last ten years due to the relevance and timeliness of the subject of hunger,²⁻⁴ studies with a specific focus on the field of Nutrition are still considered scarce, justifying the issuance of this article. Therefore, the objective of this article was to carry out a historical-literary analysis of *O quinze*, by Rachel de Queiroz, seeking to identify the meanings of the concept of hunger, as well as to understand how the author portrayed aspects of the food environment, habits and food practices in the temporal context and setting of the novel.

METHODS

This is a historical-literary analysis of the novel *O quinze*,²⁵ by Rachel de Queiroz. According to Antonio Candido,³⁶ this type of study is based on the search for an understanding of the historical context, the political, social and cultural situation of the time in which this literary work was published.

The methodological procedures for conducting the historical-literary analysis of *O quinze* consisted of six sequential steps, described as follows: 1) meticulous reading, analysis and understanding of the work; 2) identification of passages, scenes or text narratives where the word "hunger" appears as well as its meanings; 3) identification of other words associated with the word "hunger," such as feeding, food, meals, eating, names of specific foods (sugar, meat, coffee, flour, beans, fruits, vegetables, corn, etc.); 4) number of time the words retrieved were detected in order to verify the frequency of use by the author; 5) preparation of an analytical summary, seeking to understand how the author reported aspects of the food setting, habits and food practices within the temporal context and the setting of the novel; and 6) discussion regarding the relevant literature on the subject investigated.

A PDF (portable document format) file of the work was captured using the Google® platform for the development of steps 2, 3, and 4, described here in above. In the procedures for identifying and mapping words in the work, the search tool (Ctrl+L) in the PDF file was used.

In the procedures to review and understand the meanings of the word "hunger" and of the other words associated with aspects of the food environment, eating habits and practices, within the temporal context and setting of the work's issue, a theoretical framework from the Nutrition field was used. Thus, the concept of hunger was assessed based on its multiple dimensions: biological, social, psychological, economic, political, and cultural, as well as vernacular, etymological, and literary.^{1,5-11} The concept of food environment was based on the work of Glanz et al.,³⁷ and the investigation of aspects associated to eating habits and practices was based on an anthropological approach to food and nutrition.³⁸

A bibliographic search on the subject was performed in two electronic databases: SciELO and Google Scholar. The bibliographic search which was not exhaustive, aimed to outline the state of the art of the studies previously published on the *O quinze* work; it was also used to develop a theoretical basis for the historical-literary analysis. We point out that out of the studies retrieved those published in scientific journals were selected with priority. Books, dissertations, theses, undergraduate theses, and papers presented at scientific events were excluded.

The meanings of hunger in *O quinze*

The novel *O quinze* is composed of 26 chapters that seek to portray the consequences of the 1915 drought in the Northeast Region of Brazil. The plot is set in the state of Ceará, particularly along the route between the city of Quixadá and the capital Fortaleza (approximately 165 km), a journey performed on foot by the family of the main character, the cowhand Chico Bento, his wife Cordulina, and their three children²⁵

Throughout the novel *O quinze*, the word "hunger" was used 35 times, taking on multiple meanings,^{1,5-11} the most frequent being dying of hunger from food deprivation (not having food to eat due to drought and misery); being hungry or very hungry (momentary or circumstantial biological sensation consequence of not having anything to eat); hunger as a subject or evil entity; chronic or long-lasting hunger; and intense food deprivation causing various sensations in the body, such as: rumbling from hunger, crying from hunger, becoming drunk from hunger and going mad from hunger.

O quinze follows the footsteps of novels that inaugurated the *literature of drought* or *literature of hunger* in Brazil,¹⁸⁻²³ seeking to address the drastic consequences of periodic and prolonged droughts in the semi-arid Northeast region, particularly the conditions of hunger and misery of the backlands migrants. In this sense, one of the first scenes in which the word "hunger" is used occurs at the beginning of chapter 5, when the author narrates the exit plan that the character Chico Bento presents to his wife. In this first excerpt, the word hunger is used with the meaning of "dying of hunger," because there is nothing to eat due to the drought and misery:

Now, Chico Bento had no other option but to leave. Without plant food, without work, without any means whatsoever, **he wasn't going to starve to death while the drought lasted.** After all, the world is big and there's always rubber in the Amazon"²⁵ (chapter 5, p. 15 – author's emphasis).

In their journey on foot to the capital, Fortaleza, the author narrates a number of scenes from the tragic saga of Chico Bento and his family, and their strategies for survival in the face of drought, hunger, and misery. In one passage, the cowhand's family encounters other migrants who were about to eat the fetid meat of a heifer they found sick and nearly dead. To avoid this kind of embarrassment or human hardship of those migrants, Chico Bento decides to share the little food he was carrying for his family's survival with the other migrants. This scene occurs in chapter 7, when Chico Bento's family seeks rest in the shade of a large jujube tree found along the road, where the other migrants had stopped. The word "hunger" is used metaphorically as a subject capable of provoking uncomfortable sensations or unease, whether physical, emotional, or mental.

As far as the eye can see, no other tree was within sight. Only that old, ravaged, thorny jujube tree offered its hospitable green canopy amidst the desolate gray landscape. Cordulina was gasping for breath from exhaustion. Limpá-Trilho whimpered and stopped, licking its burned paws. The children whined, begging for food. And Chico Bento thought: **"Why, in children, do restlessness, heat, and tiredness always appear under the name of hunger?"**

— Mom, I want to eat... give me a little piece of *rapadura* (unrefined sugar cane candy)!

— Oh, damned rock! What a terrible stumble! Daddy, shall we eat together with those people under this tree?"²⁵ (cap. 7, p. 19 – author's emphasis).

One of the most tragic scenes caused by hunger was the death from food poisoning of Chico Bento's son, Josias, after eating raw cassava root, as narrated in chapter 10. A review of the scientific literature conducted by Carmo et al.²⁹ aimed to analyze aspects of acute and chronic poisoning caused by the consumption of raw cassava (*Manihot esculenta* Crantz), drawing a parallel with Rachel de Queiroz's narrative. The review mentioned that cassava contains cyanogenic glycosides with the potential to form hydrogen cyanide and cause acute poisoning, with various general symptoms, and can be fatal. Treatment consists of antidotes such as cobalt complexes and met hemoglobin-forming oxidants. The authors concluded that the symptoms presented by Josias are typical of an episode of the aforementioned food poisoning, indicating the scientific accuracy of the literary record made by the author. Let's look at the scene:

"In the afternoon, **as they walked, very hungry**, they had passed an abandoned field, with a cassava stalk here, another there, still buried in the soil.

Josias, who came behind, distanced himself. He saw his father, careless, only thinking about finding a shack; his mother, with the little boy on her hip, was Marching further ahead.

He then fell behind, entered the field, dug in a hollow of the ground with a small stick, where a manioc dry stem was sticking out; with difficulty, injuring himself, he managed to come across a root, cut in half by the hoe.

Hitting that root against a stone, with effort, he more or less tore off the bark; and buried his teeth in the yellow, fibrous pulp, which was already turning into wood at one end.

He eagerly gnawed the whole bitter, dry piece until his teeth gnawed on the hard fiber²⁵ (chapter 10, p. 24 – author's emphasis)

On the long road to Fortaleza, enduring the suffering caused by hunger, thirst, and exhaustion, the cowhand Chico Bento found a goat on the road and killed the animal to feed his family. However, as he began to butcher the goat, the animal's owner surprised him, reclaiming it and accusing him of being a thief.

Falling almost to his knees, his eyes red and full of tears that ran down his rough face, he pleaded, hands clasped together:

— "My lord, for God's sake! Let me have a piece of meat, a small chunk at least, enough to make some broth for my wife and children! **It was for them that I killed! They've already collapsed from hunger!**...²⁵ (chapter 12, p. 29 – emphasis added).

In several passages of *O quinze*, the author uses hyperboles to emphasize the intense hunger suffered by her characters: growling with hunger; crying with hunger; drunkenness with hunger; and madness with hunger. Let's look at some excerpts of these hyperboles:

Distressed, Chico Bento patted his pockets... not a single tarnished coin... He remembered the new, large, striped hammock he had bought in Quixadá on behalf of Vicente's voucher. It had been reserved for the trip. But he'd rather sleep on the floor than see the children crying, **their stomach rumbling with hunger**²⁵ (chapter 9, p. 22 – author's emphasis).

Josias remained there, in his burial site by the roadside, signaled by two tied sticks cross, made by his father. He was at peace. He no longer had to **cry from hunger** along the road. He no longer had a few more years of misery ahead of him, only to fall into the same hole, in the shadow of the same cross²⁵ (chapter 12, p. 27 – author's emphasis).

Vicente was now telling the story of an acquaintance who had gone mad when she saw her children dying from lack of food.

Dona Inácia observed:

— **Perhaps she has also gone mad from hunger. Too much hunger takes away one's judgment**²⁵ (chapter 14, p. 32 – author's emphasis).

Shadows overcome by misery and despair that dragged unconscious steps, **in the final intoxication of hunger**²⁵ (chapter 13, p. 30 – author's emphasis).

In chapter 18, already in Fortaleza, in a scene where he talks with Dona Inácia and her granddaughter Conceição, Chico Bento recalls the sad and painful events he experienced during his departure:

Sitting in the small room on São Bernardo Street, his old hat between his legs, a rough strip of hair obscuring his eyes, Chico Bento talked with Conceição and his grandmother about the future, his uncertain future which the cruelty of a drought had consigned to the vagaries of the road and the miserable promiscuity of a makeshift camp for the destitute. **Sadly, he recounted all the hunger he had suffered and the resulting miseries**²⁵ (chapter 18, p. 40 – emphasis added).

In one of the scenes in chapter 25, the author describes some clinical signs of the biological consequences of hunger on the bodies of children from the backlands, demonstrating her affinity with the literary movements of naturalism and social realism:

And at the doors of the huts, the little children who played and hurried in curious groups, at the sight of the little chair, **still had the Marchk of hunger sadly etched on their small, bony faces with a sulfurous yellow color**. They had to wait for the beans to sprout, to branch out, to flower; for the corn to open its ears, to stretch its tassel, to curl up, and for the kernel to slowly harden; and for the cassava taking many more months to deepen its dark roots in the earth... **All this was slow, and they still had to suffer several months of hunger**²⁵ (Chapter 25, p. 57 – emphasis added).

The food environment, eating habits and food practices in *O quinze*

Regarding the foods and other terms investigated in the novel *O quinze*, by Rachel de Queiroz, a small and not very diverse list of words related to the subject investigated was observed, and the frequencies found were: coffee (n=21); flour (n=13); meat (n=10), including goat meat and dried meat; milk (n=10); *rapadura* (unrefined brown sugar candy) (n=9); cassava (n=3); beans (n=2); corn (n=2); bread (n=2); sandwich (n=2); liqueur (n=2); sugar (n=1); vegetable (n=1); fish broth porridge (n=1); *beiju* (tapioca crepes) (n=1); to eat (n=17), including “de-comer” (for eating) and “o comer” (the food); food (n=8); dinner (n=4); lunch (n=3); thirst (n=3); to drink (n=3) and foods (n=1).

Throughout their journey on foot between Quixadá and Fortaleza, the author describes the initial basic diet of Chico Bento's family: goat meat, dried beef, flour, unrefined brown sugar candy, coffee, and water. Therefore, we have selected a scene from a meal the family ate on their first night of the journey, which is described in chapter 7:

On the first night, they camped in a dilapidated shack that they found by the roadside, like a kind soul having set up shelter there for the migrants. The cowhand went to the saddlebags and came back with a piece of dried goat meat and a sack full of cassava flour, with chunks of brown sugar candy mixed inside. The women had already improvised a tripod and were lighting the fire. And the meat was roasted over the embers, sizzling and crackling with salt. Putting the first piece in his mouth, Chico Bento spat it out: — Ugh! Pure salt! Just like *lepia* (extremely salted food)

Mocinha explained: — There wasn't any water to wash it...

Without any concern about the salt, the boys put their hands in the flour, tore off chunks of meat, which they swallowed, licking their fingers.

Cordulina asked: — Chico, see if you can get some water for coffee... Despite the fatigue of the long day's March, Chico Bento got up and left; "His throat was dry and burning, as if it had fire inside, and it also begged him for water"²⁵ (cap. 7, p.18).

Coffee was the food (drink) most frequently mentioned in Rachel de Queiroz's narrative in *O quinze*. Its use was observed in the very first scene of chapter 1 of the novel, when the characters Dona Inácia and her granddaughter, Conceição, have supper (their last meal of the day):

On the large dining table, where a starched red checkered tablecloth was spread out, two cups and a teapot, under an embroidered cover, announced supper:

— "Aren't you coming to have your coffee with milk, Conceição?"

The young woman finished braiding her hair, stood up, and began to eat her supper, silent, absorbed in thought. The old woman said something else, took a sip of coffee, and went to smoke in her room²⁵ (chapter 1, p. 8).

Another scene we highlight regarding coffee consumption in *O quinze* occurs in chapter 19, involving Chico Bento's family:

Cordulina was already waiting for him, somewhat uneasy. Ever since Josias had died and Pedrinho had run away, she had been filled with these terrors of death and abandonment. It was enough for Chico Bento to be delayed even a little for her to become distressed, anxious, trembling at any new misfortune that might arrive without knowing how. **He brought bread, brown sugar candy, and a little coffee.** And the commotion of the children who welcomed him and snatched his purchases well compensated him for the sad hours of the day, bent over the shovel, on the verge of dying from heat and exhaustion"²⁵ (chapter 19, p. 41 – author's emphasis).

And here's another scene on coffee consumption by the characters in *O quinze*, this time taken from chapter 21, involving the characters Lourdinha and her brother Vicente. In the scene, the author uses literary devices to draw the reader's attention to the organoleptic characteristics of the coffee beverage:

And when Lourdinha came in with the coffee, very hot and fragrant, he was laughing heartily at his cousin's story, feeling a sweet atmosphere of appeasement and affection wrapping him, where his weary soul found solace and rest²⁵ (chapter 21, p. 49).

In chapter 19, the narrator makes one of the rare, and perhaps only, records of a typical meal – lunch. The scene describes the feeling of pleasure and, simultaneously, bitterness that the character Chico Bento expresses as he has his first meal at the job he gets in the government program to assist victims of the drought:

Chico Bento worked hard all day at the dam construction site. He only stopped occasionally to catch his breath, feeling his poor chest tired and his muscles aching. And lunch at midday, where a fragrant piece of meat appeared alongside the porridge, barely lifted or cheered him up. His hunger was so long lasting, so deeply ingrained, that it would run away at the first dish of beans, at the first sliver of meat!...

And the taste of that meat even made him bitter, reminding him that Cordulina, at that hour, was perhaps swallowing a meager remnant of flour, and beside her, having devoured the meager ration, her children were crying for more... But in the afternoon, when he felt the jingle of his earned day of work in his pocket, a new feeling animated him. He finally had some money—only two nickels, it's true! —, but money earned through his effort, with the wear and tear of his arms that would help him feed his hungry children...²⁵ (chapter 19, p.41).

The term "food" was used eight times throughout the novel, mostly related to the government's food assistance program for drought victims who were based in the migrants' concentration camp in Fortaleza. One of these instances is in chapter 14, in a dialogue between the characters Dona and Inácia and Vicente:

- "Why doesn't Conceição show up?
- She is at school; that is, at this hour she must be at the Concentration Camp.
- Doing what? — She's part of a group of women who distribute food and clothing to the drought victims"⁸ (cap. 14, p. 31).

Another scene in which the term "food," refers to the concentration camp for the victims of the drought in Fortaleza, involves a dialogue between Dona Inácia and a migrant woman who knocked on her door to beg for alms, which occurs in chapter 23:

- And they don't give food in the Concentration Camp anymore, do they? They say nobody dies of hunger there!
 - Oh, if they don't die! That place is a famine corral, my little lady!
- Dona Inácia went to the kitchen. When she returned, with a plate in one hand and a spoon in the other, the girl was laying the child, whose condition had worsened, on the couch,
- Here, to help you regain your strength...
- Hungrily, the woman devoured all the food. Then, putting the spoon on the empty plate, she wiped her lips on the rags of her arm:
- God bless you, you my little lady! ...²⁵ (chapter 23, p. 52).

Finally, in what is her first novel, Rachel de Queiroz reproduces accounts of episodes of anthropophagy or cannibalism already recorded in works of the drought literature that preceded *O quinze*, such as *Os retirantes*, by José do Patrocínio³⁹ and *A fome: cenas da seca do Ceará*, by Rodolfo Teófilo.⁴⁰ In other words, using resources of literary realism, in a simple and colloquial way, the writer seeks to portray in her novel, the most degrading and extreme consequences caused by hunger and misery in the context of the 1915 drought in the Ceará backlands. The scene was narrated in chapter 14, involving the characters Dona Inácia, Conceição and Vicente:

- Tell what? A story about the drought? They say a black man over there near Morada Nova killed a boy, salted him, and ate the pieces little by little.
- Dona Inácia joined her hands, horrified. Conceição looked at him in astonishment:
- Really?

- They say... And have you seen much horror in the Concentration Camp?
- Horrible things! But I haven't seen anyone eating people yet...²⁵ (chapter 14, p. 32).

CONCLUSION

The historical-literary analysis of the novel *O quinze* led to the following conclusive synthesis:

1. Rachel de Queiroz followed the path of novels that inaugurated the *literature of drought*, seeking to address the drastic consequences of the periodic and prolonged droughts of the semi-arid Northeastern region of Brazil, particularly the conditions of hunger and misery of the backlands' migrants.
2. The word "hunger" was used with multiple meanings, the most frequent being: dying of hunger due to food deprivation (caused by drought and misery); momentary biological sensation of not having anything to eat; chronic or long-lasting hunger; hunger as a subject or evil entity; and hyperbolic meanings: growling stomach, crying from hunger, becoming drunk from hunger, and going mad from hunger.
3. The food environment was poorly portrayed in the novel, expressing in itself the actual conditions of food insufficiency experienced by the migrants. The author accurately addressed the basic diet of the backlands' migrant family: dried goat meat, cassava flour, *rapadura* (unrefined sugar cane candy), coffee, and water.

Although it does not explicitly describe the historical, social, and political determinants of famine and its forms of confrontation in the context of the 1915 drought in Ceará, the novel seeks to address such subject from a critical-social perspective.

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