

'Blindness' as a Trope: Probing the Metaphorical Illness and Understanding the Socio-Political Reality in José Saramago's *Blindness*

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Abstract

The paper aims to explore the epidemic of blindness as an allegory to comment on human weakness and immorality in José Saramago's *Blindness*. Saramago created a more timeless and universal description and critique of human behaviour, of humanity and its civilisation. In *Blindness*, Saramago transports us into a society in which an unexpected epidemic of blindness (whose mode of transmission is unknown) spreads quickly, leading to chaos between citizens and institutions.

The study of epidemics always helps us understand the socio-economic structures, politics as well as personal relationships. Epidemics have affected human civilisation in multiple ways - culturally, politically, financially, demographically and biologically. The Covid-19 pandemic shines a light onto the vulnerable social and economic systems, thereby clearly pointing out the flaws of a capitalistic society. The novel presents us with the harsh fact that our political and health systems are incapable of dealing rapidly with an epidemic, and criticises and unmask a rotten and disengaged society.

Blindness by José Saramago becomes a kind of Tiresias (the soothsayer in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*) of the Western civilisation which is falling apart. According to Saramago, "Western societies, became increasingly blind; because instead of tackling the big problems, we preferred to see less."

Keywords: Epidemic. Blindness. Allegory. Homogenisation. Authoritarianism. Violence. Moral Depravity. Western Civilisation.

Human history is basically defined by the fight against the outbreaks of innumerable deadly diseases, pandemics and epidemics. Since time immemorial, humans have been constantly dazed with the unpredictable emerging and re-emerging of contagious diseases, incommunicable diseases and genetic diseases. The abrupt global movement of people, hasty urbanisation, challenging health care systems and environmental degradation resulting mostly from climate change have pushed fatal infections to spread worldwide at unprecedented rates. We need to thoroughly understand the rise and fall of the past pandemics and take lessons from the mistakes committed that risked human lives, in order to prepare ourselves for future pandemics. The study of epidemics has always helped us to understand the socio-economic structures, political impact on communities as well as changes in personal relationships. Epidemics have affected human civilisation in multiple ways politically, culturally, economically, demographically and even biologically. From the first plague epidemic caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* that broke out in 541 CE killing nearly 50 million people; to the delirium, coma and death due to the Yellow Fever which led to the success of the Haitian Revolution; to the epidemics of cholera among workers and poor resulted from the Industrial Revolution; to the global influenza of 1918, caused by the H1N1 virus that recorded nearly 6000 deaths each day; to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic of 2019 which have claimed a couple of million deaths, making it one of the deadliest pandemics in human history. Diseases during an epidemic can be transmitted very quickly, both within and across countries. It is essential to execute a calculated response to the initial outbreak. The phenomena of urbanisation and climate change has elevated the risk of epidemics. Human beings living in close quarters due to urbanisation escalates the chances of transmission of contagious diseases.

Blindness is a story about a disease that causes widespread blindness. We follow a society in which for seemingly no apparent reason people start going blind. The novel begins with a driver who remains stopped at an intersection in front of a traffic light and fails to advance after the light turns green. He has suddenly gone blind, but his blindness is not a typical

one where the world turns dark. His entire vision turns milky white, thereby introducing the sudden “white blindness.” The narrative follows the doctor at a clinic and his wife. Only the wife of the doctor can see but pretends to be blind to not leave her husband behind. The government is overwhelmed by all the blind people. So, to protect the ones with sight, they quarantine the blind in insane asylums. Narrated from the wife’s point of view, the story describes what matters if blindness makes things like money and jewellery not important anymore and people essentially relapse to their basic survival instincts. The characters of *Blindness* have no names, only roles - the doctor, his wife, a girl with dark glasses who is a prostitute by trade, a child with the squint, an old man with the black eye patch, the dog of tears, the car-thief, the leader of the thugs, the Ministry of Health, a distant and faceless entity called the Government and so on. Saramago does not convey the location of the blind city to create a timeless and universal story. He stages a scenario of fate where people don’t know what to do anymore and they are reduced to their basic human instincts, and are strictly divided by good and evil.

The story shows how people all too soon degenerate into animal behaviour. But some of the characters rise above the squalor and terror that surround them. The doctor’s wife, for instance, is truly inspirational when she helps the injured car-thief. Other characters show signs of true humanity, such as the girl with the dark glasses who becomes a mother figure to the boy who squints. The most haunting image is that of the church at the end of the book where all the statues and the pictures of Christ and the saints have their eyes covered. It strikes as a rebellion against God, who watches humanity suffer, but does nothing, leading to a demonstration of lost faith and open aggression towards the idea of the divine. As Saramago puts it, “Western societies, became increasingly blind; because instead of tackling the big problems, we preferred to see less.” At the end of the book, the doctor and his wife have a conversation. The doctor's wife says, people didn't "go blind," they "are blind." "Blind, but seeing," her husband replies. "Blind people who can see, but do not see."

Though Saramago uses the unusual epidemic of blindness as a metaphor to reflect on human vulnerability and iniquity, he may have had the idea of the actual Cuban pandemic. Being a lifelong follower of Communism and a member of the Communist Party, Saramago was a close friend of Cuban leader and President, Fidel Castro and has openly admired the Cuban government. It would be quite reasonable to associate the Cuban Epidemic Optic Neuropathy of the late 1991 to 1993 which had affected more than 56,000 people in Cuba, as a source of Saramago's work of fiction. The Cuban Epidemic Optic Neuropathy caused visual loss, peripheral neuralgia and other neurologic symptoms, thereby affecting almost 0.5% of the entire population of Cuba, and the greatest percent of those affected were men who smoked and consumed excess alcohol, having the worst toxic habits (Santiesteban-Freixas et al. 115). The epidemic neuropathy rapidly appeared throughout the country in a critical time of economic change due to the continuation of the embargo imposed by the United States and due to demise of the political systems of supporting socialist countries, which led to loss of a large part of advantageous commerce with Western Europe (Santiesteban-Freixas et al. 115).

The strange blindness in the novel diminishes the physical interaction of the blinds with the world of being, colours and things. This very characteristic feature creates a kind of contemporary homogenisation. The disappearance of identities, names, colours, thoughts and all kinds of uniqueness are similar to what happens in a homogenised internationalised world, in which the acculturation of individuals with various origins occurs, be it cultural, regional, personal and political. Pandemics are a mirror for humanity which reflects the moral relationships that people have towards each other. It has affected human civilisations throughout human history and have had significant impacts on shaping human society and politics. *Blindness* can be viewed as an allegory for a world where we neglect what is around us. In the novel, the Government immediately creates the policy of 'us versus them' between the vulnerable newly blind and the horrified seeing. Violence and moral depravity in the abandoned mental hospital reaches new depths. We are drowned in the terrifying world of

violence, hate, obscenity and hopelessness, where the true adversary is not their ailment or the suffering but people themselves. The nameless city has become a microcosm of social and moral degradation. *Blindness* conveys Saramago's fright of buried threat that modern society might experience shared or cooperative blindness when an entire community becomes blind. In his 1998 Nobel Lecture titled, "How Characters Became the Masters and the Author Their Apprentice," José Saramago wrote,

Blind. The apprentice thought, "we are blind", and he sat down and wrote *Blindness* to remind those who might read it that we pervert reason when we humiliate life, that human dignity is insulted every day by the powerful of our world, that the universal lie has replaced the plural truths, that man stopped respecting himself when he lost the respect due to his fellow-creatures (Saramago 1998).

Blindness has been glorified and repeatedly worshipped in the canonical texts like *Oedipus Rex*, *King Lear*, *Madame Bovary* and *Paradise Lost*. The blind prophet Tiresias in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is the sole person in a world of seeing and thinking people who can comprehend the truth and reveal it unflinchingly. This very demonstration evolved the counter-notion concerning blindness that the blind can achieve a deeper insight, refined intelligence and creativity as well as a deeper meaning than the sighted, who are forever consumed in the material values rather than spiritual existence. William Shakespeare depicts blindness in accordance with the version established by Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex*. Shakespeare dramatised the human experience of blindness as well as the social construction of its meanings. In *King Lear*, when Gloucester laments, "I have no way, and therefore want no eyes; / I stumbled when I saw," Shakespeare made the metaphor of blindness straightforward. Both Gloucester and Lear suffer from the lack of insight and wisdom, thereby leading the discourse toward metaphorical blindness. The two characters make fatal errors in judgment and they barely understand, see or know things around them. The blind beggar in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is presented

as a realistic character who makes prophecies without knowing that he does so, as Flaubert utilises the character of the beggar to portray Emma Bovary's drowning into corruption. The beggar is Emma's character foil in the novel, reflects on her inner state and his indicating presence becomes more prominent in the novel as Emma Bovary's situation gradually becomes uncontrollable. And, John Milton revives the idea of prophetic vision from Sophocles, but believes that God has afflicted blindness upon him and he views himself as a part of a larger community with ultimate faith and hope in God. Through *Blindness*, José Saramago becomes a kind of Tiresias of the Western civilisation which is gradually crumbling and forces us to contemplate the deepest of moral questions that might arise from a harsh social structure due to the outbreak of a mysterious epidemic.

Blindness is firmly established in the history of 20th century authoritarianism and fascism, with its focus on the specific political history of Portugal during the times of José Saramago (mainly from the 1930s to the 1970s). In Portugal, the military coup of 28 May 1926 ended the First Portuguese Republic (1910-1926) and established a right-wing corporatist military dictatorship known as *Estado Novo* or the "New State" or the Second Portuguese Republic under the leadership of statesman and economist Antonio de Oliveira Salazar. The "New State" was based on conservative, nationalist and clerical principles (Tapalaga). His New State was commended as an instance of a 'good dictatorship': one that kept away most of the tyrannical and infidel factors of Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. Due to propaganda, the Portuguese *Estado Novo* was particularly not remembered as being an aggressive dictatorial regime. In power for 41 years, the *Estado Novo* systematically promoted itself as a distinct manifestation of authoritarianism, which was rooted in accessibility and benevolence. To its European citizens, the state positioned itself as a strict, but paternal, figure; to the colonised peoples in Africa and Asia, it posed as a 'good coloniser', a purveyor of advanced civilisation and evangelisation (Ferraz). Salazar had a political programme in mind – the foundation of a new political, economic and social order, based on an authoritarian state (Oliveira 1990). In

order to preserve such a “new order” and to exert its authority as wide as possible, *Estado Novo* fashioned and implemented different societal structures, which functioned as the “keepers of order”. Among those, three were central to trigger the activity of armed organisations in Portugal: 1) the absence of political freedom, represented by the existence of a single party – the National Union; 2) the absence of freedom of expression, represented by the censorship; and 3) the existence of a political police, responsible for the institutionalisation of violence and for the forced labour camp (Silva and Ferreira 28). The persona that Salazar cultured was of a restrained, moralistic and non-metropolitan dictator. It was a persona that dominated until his death, and also the one which he never strived to change. Salazar was an educated absolutist who meticulously followed global politics and ideas of the times. During Salazar’s rule as the Prime Minister of Portugal, the government fundamentally neglected public interest and exercised as a corporation. Saramago was an atheist and an anarchist communist who was deeply concerned about the system of centralised political power. He believed in the abolition of the state and thought that individuals should make their own sort of smaller collectives or work on an individual basis. He was also a supporter of direct or pure democracy in which people don’t vote for a candidate who has a number of policies but very directly on policies themselves, so really having a lot more control to the individual. He became a member of the Portuguese Communist Party in 1969 during the pinnacle of the Salazar regime. The Party was a vocal opponent to Salazar and his authoritarian policies. The torture and imprisonment of the Communist Party members or anybody opposing the regime were highly common. With Saramago’s established reputation as a master storyteller and for the pessimistic portrayal of political organisations in his works, he inspired a trend that anticipated the reformist views later in the Soviet Union by Mikhail Gorbachev (Nash).

The novel has become a powerful political metaphor. There is a fear of loss of democratic freedom and the feeling that this loss may happen rapidly from almost one day to the other. It also presents us with a harsh fact that our political and health systems are incapable

of dealing rapidly with an epidemic. At the very beginning of the novel, blindness is seen as a medical epidemic which would require people to quarantine themselves with other precautions in order to contain it. But this very epidemic soon becomes less sensible in terms of medical nomenclature and gets more connected to social surveillance, philosophical reflection and critical political commentary. The mental asylum is representative of the prisons and detention camps where political prisoners were kept during the autocratic regime of Antonio Salazar in Portugal. The Government in the novel exercises its powers arbitrarily and cruelly over the blinds, which represents Saramago's suspicion of centralised political power. This allegory of blindness reflects the idea of past, present as well as future authoritarianism and Fascism which would come as a threat to the social order by suppressing the opposition to justify violence against them. As Harold Bloom notes, "the open nature of the allegory in *Blindness* allows the reader to wonder if this is not another parable of the perpetual possibility of the return of Fascism, or of its first advent" (Bloom xviii).

The structure of *Blindness* is highly relevant. Sentences in the novel run on, mostly bumping into each other, as if language and its articulation itself has become blind. Saramago's trademark narrative style, embedding dialogue within the main body of the paragraph, superimposing multiple voices amid descriptive and reflective passages, takes some getting used to, but is remarkably well suited to the kind of story he chooses to tell (Gwyn). People are incapable of efficiently saving lives without excessive restriction of freedom and cannot deal in a reasonable way with the dilemma of saving lives and the planet or just saving the economy. *Blindness* is politically so contemporary as it criticises and unmask a dreadful and disengaged society. This awfulness is because the Western societies became increasingly blind (metaphorically, not literally) as instead of tackling big problems, they preferred to see less and even in present times they prefer not to look. The Covid-19 pandemic shines a light onto the vulnerable social and economic systems, thereby clearly pointing out the flaws of a capitalist society. Pandemics and epidemics can cause economic damage through multiple channels, and

in countries with fragile social institutions and legacies of political uncertainty, contagious diseases can increase political pressure and tension. In such grave circumstances, measures to tackle the disease such as quarantines and forced lockdown have sparked violence and created bitterness between the states and its citizens. Global warming, growing dangers of epidemic, forced migrations, social differences and political unrest are seen as a clear consequence of capitalism. In an interview from 2008, Saramago claimed, "I don't see the veneer of civilisation, but society as it is. With hunger, war, exploitation, we're already in hell. With the collective catastrophe of total blindness, everything surfaces - positive and negative. It's a portrait of how we are." The crux is "who has the power and who doesn't; who controls the food supply and exploits the rest" (Saramago). Precisely, *Blindness* confronts our predetermined impression about a certain community as well as the individual who is a part of it. The fundamental message of the novel is one that advocates the obligations of the individual towards the wider society. In its editorial review of Saramago's *Blindness*, *The New Yorker* wrote "Saramago's surreal allegory explores the ability of the human spirit to prevail in even the most absurdly unjust of conditions, yet he reinvents this familiar struggle with the stylistic eccentricity of a master."

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