

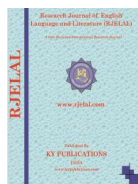


## BLINDNESS OR VISION: AN ANALYTIC STUDY OF HUMAN NATURE IN JOSE SARAMAGO'S 'BLINDNESS'

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### Abstract

From the earliest times to the present, epidemics have afflicted human history in myriad ways. The aftermath found expressions in assorted modes of writings across varied nations and cultures and transcripts the precarious experiences. The magnificent literature of epidemics responds to natural disasters and counts on methods to heal and survive. Authored by the Nobel Laureate Jose Saramago, *Blindness* is regarded as one of the great instances of epidemic writing, and provides the research questions for this paper. The narrative is about a white blindness that interrupted the lives of people in an unfamiliar city like never before, escorting turmoil, misery, despair but also offering an unparalleled insight into life or the world. The outbreak of blindness unmasked the disguised facets of human nature restrained by the facade of civilization. The study intends to investigate the erratic human behavior, moreover exhibits the best and worst exemplar under extreme settings. To examine the frailty of human civilization, moreover features the moral choices that exist in a damaged world and are available to all beings are the prime motive of the article. The study divulges on the theory of survival, the prime nature of all human. Furthermore, Saramago has applied metaphoric blindness to confer an insight to look into things already present around but imperceptible with physical eyes.

Keywords: Epidemic, Civilization, Blindness, Society, Vision, Human behavior

The world has witnessed numerous plagues and epidemics since time immemorial. These unfortunate incidents overwhelmed every human being on this planet in some way or another. The affliction alters the globe geographically, culturally, politically, financially, and psychologically furthermore. Writers and poets have been depicting these shifts via fictitious and non-fictional accounts of epidemics that span across a multitude of eras and geographies. Albert Camus, José Saramago, Mario Bellatin, Stephen King, John M. Barry, Michael Willrich and Indian writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Premchand, Suryakant

Tripathi 'Nirala are among the most efficacious chroniclers of epidemic occurrences. Covid-19, the current global pandemic has piqued the public's interest in epidemic writings. In discernment of the current predicament, literature has been proved a potent apparatus. "Literature, in responding to epidemics celebrates the enduring range of human responses, the gamut of feelings that rage against the onslaught of disease and death," (Banerjee) Albert Camus's *The Plague*, Jose Saramago's *Blindness* Mario Bellatin's *Beauty Salon*, Stephen King's *The Stand*, John M. Barry's *The Great Influenza*, Margaret Atwood's *The year of the Flood*

and Ling Ma's *Severance* are some of the finest precedents of contagion Literature. The reoccurring topic of epidemics has a long history of being used to illustrate discrete themes like divine punishments in earlier times or to make moral criticism on the individuals in the narrative or of the society in which they lived in. It bestows vision to examine our contemporary cultural and critical milieu. These narratives compel us to reassess ethical norms and to some extent the touchstone for critical evaluation.

An eminent Portuguese writer, Jose Saramago is best known for his plays, poetry, short stories and unrivaled novels. In 1998, he earned the Nobel award for literature and was acknowledged as the most influential living writer of Portugal. However, he is best remembered for his allegorical compositions which emphasize the complexities of human nature. His most famous works include *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, *The cave*, *The Double*, "*Baltasar and Blimunda*", and *Blindness*. Being adapted into multiple languages, his works has been welcomed planetary. Like his all other creations, *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* or *Blindness* was written originally in Portuguese in 1995 and translated into English by Giovanni Pontiero. Although the novel revolves around the blindness, a contagious disease that sprawled over the unnamed city or the whole microcosm around, but also cater acumen into human attributes and existent countenance of human life that remain overlooked with physical eyes. The Times's Lisa Jardine writes:

Saramago writes a prose of particularly luminous intensity, brilliantly rendered into English by Giovanni Pontiero. The themes he chooses are sweepingly ambitious.....the work recall Garcia marquez for their epic reach and primo Levi for their insight into the fragility of human nature under adversity. (Saramago)

In the present fiction, Saramago demonstrates his extraordinary vision of individualism, susceptibility of the civilization and collapse of law and order in rise of epidemic. Outwardly it enfold the outbreak of blindness, but allegorically layout a contrasting life with and

without physical sight. As parabolic contrivance, Blindness has been applied to impart a vision delves into the extant human behavior. The frequent expressions of the characters accentuate that when they could see, they were blind to the world around them". They were "already blind the moment we turned blind." They had to physically go blind in order to perceive the manner of living well. Saramago has triumphantly applied the plot of blindness to stage a true portrayal of human nature while also exposing civilization's flaws.

The endless course of blindness began with the man who goes blind sitting in his car and waiting for traffic light. The words "I am Blind" popped out. Throughout the novel, the phrase echoes multifariously and swiped the anonymous city or the integrated populace with a bizarre infection often termed as "white devil". "The blind man raised his hands to his eyes and gestured, Nothing, it's as if I were caught in a mist or had fallen into a milky sea. But blindness isn't like that, said the other fellow, they say that blindness is black, Well I see everything white." (Saramago 03) The disease has left only the Doctor's wife to incur additional burden of civilization on her meek shoulders. Nobody is impervious to the virus. This inexplicable infection has engulfed people regardless of race, creed, religion and socio-economic framework. However, Saramago picked figures from many walks of life pre-meditatively and outlined them not by name but by their peculiarities. He emphasizes the fragility of social structure which got broken as soon the chaotic situation arises. The only thing that persist is the moral characters human born with. Being a good guy, the Car thief offers help to the first blind man and drop him at the home but as soon he realize the helplessness of the first blind man takes advantage of the situation. The incident displays the real persona of the car thief and earned him this name. The physical affliction of blindness fundamentally changes the relationship of the characters with one another.

In *Blindness*, Saramago illustrates a palette of diverse physical and emotional changes among people who tried to prevent themselves from contamination of the mysterious disease. The administration create "a quarantine zone", "a

disused mental asylum at the edge of the city” to obliterate the outspread of the infection. Inside the containment milieu, the group of individuals begins to interact and cooperate with each other initially but insists on their own rights, demands, and adjudications, which finally lead to disintegration of social order, moral values, and appropriate behaviors. “In general, the story is about “powerless people who insult human dignity” (Guin) The filthy and congested institutions are also subjected to military indifference and are denied even basic medication. As a consequence, a simple infection takes on a life of its own, devastating the lives of many as some blinds are shot by troops. “The sergeant’s only comment was, it would have been better to let them die of hunger, when the beast dies, the poison dies with it.” (Saramago 83).

At the extreme, timely food supplies are impeded, due to the illegal intervention of a gang of opportunists who inflict fatal agony on vulnerable captives by controlling food supply. The quarantine center's blind goons plunder all the food aid and demanding sexual services in exchange. In sequences, which are quite reminiscent of Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*, sheer tyranny presides and a gang integrates to control the government-supplied food. Others, such as the detainees accelerating on the armed ward, may act "like archangels," (Saramago 205) as if divinely inspired. Women get ready to pay the ultimate price so others can eat, and men embrace it for their own survival. They were all brutally and repeatedly raped, resulting in the bereavement of one victim. The writer is outspoken in his criticism of civilization's so-called established conventions. He observes how, when pushed against a collapsing central structure of order, humans may engage in violent acts of brutality against one another. The doctor's wife kills the hoodlum's commander with her scissors and save the woman who said "Wherever you go, I go". In gratitude to the doctor's wife for murdering the hoodlums' leader and preserving her life, she discovers her power and changes the dynamic by igniting the fire that kills not only the hoodlums but also her. Amid the narrative's extraordinary conditions, these homicides and murders are justified:

She had blood on her hands and clothes, and suddenly her exhausted body told her that she was old, Old and a murderess, she thought, but she knew that if it were necessary she would kill again, And when is it necessary to kill, she asked herself as she headed in the direction of the hallway, and she herself answered the question, When what is still alive is already dead. (Saramago 192)

The enigmatic and dreadful virus spares no one in the nameless city and exposes society's fragility with the rapid diffusion of that social order and its standards. Through the state of contagious disease, the author depicts the contrasting persona of men and women, moreover their diverse reactions toward the infelicitous circumstances. It efficiently distinguishes the emotional manifestations of anxieties, phobias, attitudes, and inner voices. The book illustrates the egoistic and self-serving aspects of humanity via the prevailing society and political backdrop, which lacks trust, honesty, and collaboration amongst individuals, while the group founded by the doctor's wife, the little family portrays the favorable aspects of the humanity.

The devastating fire is a watershed moment that propels the captives out into the yard, where they discover there are no troops and they are free:

“They are terrified, they do not know where to go, the fact is that there is no comparison between living in a rational labyrinth, which is, by definition, a mental asylum and venturing forth, without a guiding hand or a dog-leash, into the demented labyrinth of the city where memory will serve no purpose. (Saramago 217)

Living standards quickly deteriorate, exacerbating an upsurge of insecurity and fear. As Bob Corbett points out, “How are we to imagine a world in which some central part of our meaning system suddenly disappears?” (Corbett) Blindness' main characters, who have banded together as a family in the face of such unprecedented tragedy, play a momentous role. It symbolizes the end of a feeble society afflicted with

blindness and a lack of compassion and cooperation, as well as the construction of a new civilization molded by blindness and identified by faith, integrity, and cooperation with one another. "They stay together, pressed up against each other, like a flock, no one there wants to be the lost sheep for they know that no shepherd will come looking for them." (Saramago 217)

It negates the underlying empathy of those who are solely focused on one another for sustenance. Even though, impeded by the loss of external senses of vision, this quest for survival does not appear to fall underneath the realm of existentialism or other post-modern philosophical doctrines. In a nutshell, the vision must emanate from within. The notion of faith is transmitted through the character of the doctor's wife and other individuals in a milieu that is not conducive to the blooming of hope. The tale has skillfully outlined the most natural impulses of human survival in terrible surroundings. The norms of survival suggests that individuals learn to survive in this new form of life without sight, including such counting beds to locate one's own bed in the psychiatric ward and learning to maneuver the post-apocalyptic streets. The primitive manner of existence and the inevitable destruction of human civilization are already apparent in the intuitive absorption of doctor's wife. In the face of a world that is drifting in the opposite direction, she preserves her solidity and resilience. It is written as "she must be endowed with a sixth sense, some sort of vision without eyes." (Saramago 201) Humans' intrinsic tendency is to combat for survival in the most egregious cases. The elderly woman, the ultimate survivor, epitomizes the notion eloquently through living upon uncooked bunnies and chickens that live in her side yard. She demonstrates that the animal impulse resides in every human being but is camouflaged underneath the veneer of sophistication until democracy collapses and an individual's morality is inexorably eroded.

Characterization is done consciously to support the storyline. In other sense, the narrative makes no distinction among characters who share one trait — Blindness. The doctor, his wife, the girl with dark glasses, the boy with the squint, the

man with the black eye patch and the dog of tears is emblematic of the little universe of striving survivors in the midst of seemingly insurmountable misfortune. It's worth mentioning that the novelist hasn't given any of these figures a proper name. Blindness does not necessitate a nomenclature - perhaps this is the implication Saramago is attempting to reach, as well as convey the occurrence of recognition through the narrator's words. A writer is living in the flat of first blind man and keeps writing with a pen and paper to chronicle the catastrophic situation. Saramago writes: "What is your name, Blind people do not need a name, I am my voice, nothing else matters, But you wrote books and those books carry your name, said the doctor's wife, Now nobody can read them, it is as if they did not exist." (Saramago 290) Most of the figures are designated based on their social standing and affiliations with one another; moreover they are often referred by their identity, which is correlated to eyes in some way. The doctor (the ophthalmologist), his wife, the first blind man, the first blind man's wife, the boy with the squint, the girl with the dark glasses, the old man with the black eye patch, the already blind accountant and the dog of tears indicates that they are all rooted to metaphor of vision and are equal in one facet that is blindness. Saramago's writing style, which incorporates no punctuation, no quotation marks, non-separated dialogues, and erroneously capitalized phrases, elicits a sense of ambiguity and leads the reader into a state of metaphoric blindness strenuously conveying the book's premise.

In contradiction, humanity is also embodied in the story in its generous spirit as benevolence. The car thief assists the first blind man in getting home, although subsequently taking this man's car. The Doctor's Wife has a strong personality. Even though she was immune to the infection till the end, but she embraced it willingly. She is extremely "close to her husband in everything." (Saramago 30) but when her husband sleeps with the girl with the dark glasses, she is neither enraged nor envious since she knows it will offer them both comfort. Instead of using her sight to take advantage of situations or dominate others, the doctor's wife does everything she can to aid everyone around her. The doctor's wife, on the

other hand, is not impervious to the character changes that their predicament induces, and after being mercilessly raped by the hoodlums, she attains the militancy vital to assassinate the hoodlums' leader with her secreted scissors. When she discovers that a multitude of blind people died because they followed the smell of the food she had found in the grocery basement, it tears her immensely to realize that even good actions can lead to fatal consequences. The doctor's wife fights tooth and nail to preserve her humanity and that of those she concerns for, and it is this endeavor that renders her the story's indelible protagonist. She states:

"Today is today, tomorrow will bring what tomorrow brings, today is my responsibility, not tomorrow if I should turn blind, What do you mean by responsibility, The responsibility of having my eyesight when others have lost theirs, You cannot hope to guide or provide food for all the blind people in this world, I ought to, But you cannot, I shall do whatever I can to help, Of course you will, had it not been for you I might not be alive today, And I don't want you to die now." (Saramago 252)

Subsequently, the girl with the dark glasses takes on the role of mother to the boy with the squint. They strive to cooperate "when put in extreme situations – social meltdowns in which conventional rules of behavior no longer apply." (Gioia) In their blind state, the true love between the girl with the dark glasses and the old man with the black eye patch blossomed. They progressively fell in love and were captivated to each other's qualities. Given their age gap, it's unlikely they would have fallen in love if they had their eyesight. The epidemic enables them to explore the inner personas that dwell underneath the fake veil of reason and societal norms. As the girl regains her sight and embraces her lover, Saramago accentuates this point. "Now," says the narrator, "we shall know what words are really worth." (Saramago 324) Accepting his wrinkles, baldness, and eye patch, she says, "I know you". For the characters, blindness offers a snapshot into the underlying realities of the world. Not only human beings, but animals may be true friends in desperate situations, as the doctor tells the old man with the eye patch, "Perhaps only in a world of the blind will

things be what they truly are." (Saramago126) The dog of tears appeared to be a confidante to the doctor's wife, consoling her in agony and empowering her to muster the fortitude to keep going onwards. He is witnessing the pandemonium in the city and offering protection to the group of seven since he is a "gruff, ill-tempered animal when he does not have to dry someone's tears." (Saramago 239) The author depicts "the strong animal imagery of the novel that implies and enhances the idea of the deterioration and loss of morality as well as humanity." (Aryan & Helali 63) Through her insight of the true of the self, the doctor's wife reacts to the facts in and around her. The affliction is implemented as a paradigm for the chaos, anarchy, and malfeasance that exists in this world. A direct link occurs between blindness and awareness. Their blindness evaporates when they progressively change from a notion of ignorance to a degree of empathy.

Saramago's epigram on Blindness is a quote from the Book of Exhortations. "If you can see, look. If you can look, observe". He has one of his characters exclaim at the denouement of the tale, when the blind people start restoring their vision. Saramago writes:

Why did we become blind, I don't know, perhaps one day we'll find out, Do you want me to tell you what I think, Yes, do, I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see. (Saramago 326)

Henceforth, these two quotations reflect the novel's moral and ideological intent. Throughout the narrative, the author manifests that there are no blind persons, simply blindness. Saramago's objective was "to demonstrate the fragility of human society" (Fetter, nfb.org). The value of human understanding, honesty, and compassion is reinforced by the author. Blindness is a phenomenon that reveals true picture of human nature. As the doctor observes, "I've spent my life looking into people's eyes, it is the only part of the body where a soul might still exist" (Saramago133).

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