

HYPERBOLIC APOCALYPTICISM AND COGNITIVE ESTRANGEMENT IN JOSÉ SARAMAGO'S NOVEL *BLINDNESS*

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José Saramago's international visibility and fame have amplified since he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1998. He is qualified as a staunch and stalwart defender of the pivotal role of literature as an effective weapon of the oppressed groups. Literature is a genuine medium used to valiantly and concertedly challenge the perverse and ruthless series of oppression, confinement and abusiveness exercised by coercive and despotic regimes. As such, the literary text can be seen as an operator to enhance the reader's visualization and consciousness vis-à-vis the misleadingly discursive fabrics and constellations. In his thought-provoking novel *Blindness*, José Saramago unflinchingly examines the imperfections and pervasiveness of obscurantist apparatuses and fabrics. Such fabrics never-endingly aim at naturalizing some discursive formations and ideologies. They impulsively subdue and discipline people's minds so as to create docile and submissive individuals. Although Saramago's novel may seem to have a thoroughly tragic, apocalyptic and defeatist dimension due to its tendency to depict a world fraught with pessimism and negativity, the novel is allegorically structured in such a way that it offers a critique of power relationships and represents a call for agency and autonomy. To word my idea differently, his novel mainly has a twofold purpose: first to portray the defeatist, tragic and wretched condition that engulfs the modernized world, second to offer an unflinching critique of the depraved and labyrinthine coercive absolutes by focusing on the allegorical dimension that is saliently discernible in *Blindness*.

Saramago has a taste for alternative realities, for the use of fiction as a form of speculation and questioning of the prevailing and officially-sanctioned fabrics and absolutes. His novel aims to evidently evince "That an individual is always-already a subject, even before he is born" (Althusser 119). The bureaucratic agents attempt to spread the belief about the noble and righteous tasks of the government and its apparatuses so as to attain the contentment of the populace. Because of the ideological state apparatuses, to borrow from Louis Althusser's nomenclature, we acquire our identities by seeing ourselves mirrored in ideologies which aim at transforming us into obedient and docile subjects.

The novel revolves around a disease of white blindness which is a strange and fathomless contagious epidemic that: "does not mean being plunged into banal darkness, but living inside a luminous halo" (*Blindness* 90). It suddenly engulfs a nameless city¹ and baffles doctors and bureaucrats whose knowledge and apparatuses are limited to eradicate and rid the city of its perils. The sudden and hasty change is willfully used by Saramago to question and examine the validity and soundness of bureaucrats who are expectantly the first agents to respond to any unexpected distortion.

To hold the infectious pestilence at bay, bureaucrats resort to quarantine whereby they keep blind people in closed places so as not to jeopardize other people's sight. Because of the sudden occurrence of "white blindness", infected people are to be confined and kept in deserted and very old asylums. José Saramago creates an exceedingly apocalyptic and incongruous world which unexpectedly turns to be the no man's land. The choice of blindness portends Saramago's attempt to question the validity of authoritative measures to face unexpected calamities. He questions the ability of the State to smoothly deliver citizens from the repulsive state of blindness to their former state of normalcy.

As the fathomless disease that is massively killing people continues to cause havoc and hardships among the quarantined blind internees whose exile-enclosure is still deepening, The captives' tragic quarantine is spelled out as living in "the hell of hells" (196) for they nearly went savage and uncivilized, David Frier highlights that:

The picture of humanity in *Blindness* is an abject one, with little left towards the end of the text to distinguish the human beings from the scavenging dogs around them in the streets of the city. It is therefore tenable to suggest that the author's decision not to name his characters is not only a choice intended to make this a novel of any city in any country but also a realistic reflection of the loss of humanity in a society that has lost its sense of compassion and solidarity (Frier 104).

The internees are divided into numerous antagonistic gangs. They fiercely compete to satisfy their needs ranging from the food supplies which become sporadic because "the strong cruelly took the bread from the mouths of the weak" (*Blindness* 211) to the most strikingly enforced prostitution and erotic libertinage.

Owing to the moral panicⁱⁱ caused by the breakdown of order, the populace's survival is deplorably at the realm of uncertainty. In fact, the asylum proves to be a miniature of society outside. All citizens are overwhelmingly beleaguered and besieged by the desperate tragedy. The quarantined internees fled the asylum only to plunge into the quagmire of society where all people aimlessly wander the ruined and devastated city "like ghosts" (242). The city has become the very icon of primitivity and chaos for people are reduced to "being primitive hordes" (256).

Hyperbolic Apocalypticism is felt when the plague of "white blindness" disrupts the usual pattern of social life and when a state of anomie which portends: "the loss, on the part of an individual or group, of norms to guide social interaction" (Edgard and Sedwick 22) also engenders an atmosphere of depression and cataclysm. Saramago is adept and proficient at describing the end of the world and the destruction of life. One of the most frightening aspects of *Blindness* lies in the brutal crimes that the reader sees perpetrated within the asylum and the total degradation into which the city has fallen. In this respect, George Monteiro contends that:

In *Blindness*, José Saramago turns everyday actuality into an extraordinary reality in which a breakout of a batch of sudden, unexplainable, mysterious blindness triggers widespread fear and terror, leading immediately to the exercise of the institutional power to coerce, segregate, round-up, intern and punish. (qtd in Mendes 271)

Apocalypse, moreover, implies decadence, for the apocalyptic writer's emphasis often falls upon the present decay, the precariousness of life and the imminence and nearness of disaster. Saramago uses many apocalyptic, disturbing and horrifying scenes where characters are faced with supernatural and mysterious obstacles. He displays the governmental ineptitude and inefficiency to run and monitor any unexpected calamity that may occur.

Saramago's greatest talent lies in his ability to mix the horrific with the ordinary. His Apocalypticism is emphatic enough to become a primary motif in his novel which features normal, everyday people who encounter the unworldly and the bizarre. Apocalypticism is also felt when the people of the nameless city express the erosion of their confidence in the ruling authorities. Not strangely, they, out of moral panic, fall into a state of societal disintegration and destabilization. Moreover, Saramago's writing proves to be a marvelous way of engaging the reader. His novel is quintessentially unconventional, for the context is perfectly reinforced by careful text creation. Saramago who chooses "plunging into the ambivalent waters of postmodern metafictional poetics" (qtd. Mendes xviiⁱⁱⁱ), seemingly highlights the fact that the context or the message that he relentlessly wants to convey to the world readership is of a paramount importance. Undeniably then, the excess of Apocalypticism and cataclysm in his novel aims at attaining "cognitive estrangement" through which Saramago shocks and alienates the reader.

Cognitive estrangement renders the content of the fictional stories somehow strange. Estrangement refers back to two significant theorists Shklovsky and Brecht. The concept is closely related to two terms known as "Defamiliarization" and "alienation". In his essay "Art as Technique", Shklovsky defines estrangement^{iv} as the breaking up of established habits of reception. He contends that in order to truly see things again one must overcome his/her "blind" perception and this is only possible when they are made strange again.

Cognitive estrangement is a concept signifying a specific way of perceiving or realizing an already automatized phenomenon. Fredric Jameson asserts that estrangement effect is a political one in the most thorough-going sense of the word. He maintains that estrangement effect is "to make you aware that the objects and institutions you thought to be natural were really only historical; the result of change" (Jameson 58).

The different artistic devices deployed by José Saramago ranging from magical realism to allegory encourage the reader to think anew on familiar topics and to grapple with the unknown. They help attain a “renewal of perception” (Jameson 51). Terry Eagleton seconds Shklovsky’s view stating that:

In the routines of everyday speech, our perceptions of and responses to reality become stale, blunted or as the Formalists would say “automatized”. Literature, by forcing us into a dramatic awareness of language, refreshes these habitual responses and renders objects more “perceptible”. The world then is vividly renewed. (Eagleton 3)

The hyperbolic Apocalypticism used by Saramago to depict the blindness surrounding the modern world does not merely aim to mirror the state of decadence and defeatism that characterizes the world, but it also has a political strategy the target of which is to question the ideological and hegemonic apparatuses. The horrific story of Blindness is an allegory of the modern world which is blatantly blinded and distracted by the absolute power of the political forces. The fantastic elements deployed by the Portuguese novelist in Blindness represent “deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal” (Hume xiii) because fantasy is importantly “a mode of radical skepticism” (Sandner 276). It intends to solicit the participatory role of the reader^v so as to grasp the allegorical impulse of the novel. The reader is considered the co-writer of Saramago’s text. Moreover, the novel under study helps push the boundaries of imagination. It abruptly shatter accepted concepts and absolute truths by presenting direful and frightening views of what reality can truly be. Therefore, the shock value in the novel is quite pivotal to alienate the reader and make him wake up to the fact that our blindness lies in our submissiveness and willing compliance to the hegemonic bureaucratic tools.

The novel is characterized by an Orwellian atmosphere referring back to George Orwell’s novel 1984^{vi}. It aims at revealing the perverse tyranny which is perceived “not only as an alien threat but as the product of an insidious and corrupt mindset that can install itself in the here and now” (Rollason 117). Characters understand that they have been caught in a prison-like city which is led by the despotic system of the government. They also deduce that people “ die of illnesses, accidents, chance events, and now we shall die of blindness, we shall die of blindness and cancer, of blindness and tuberculosis, of blindness and AIDS, of blindness and heart attacks, illnesses may differ from one person to another but what is really killing us now is blindness (Blindness 296).

By transcending the surface meaning of Blindness, the reader would certainly deduce that the excess of cataclysm in the novel is a medium to critically engage in the disclosure of the totalitarian ramifications and absolutes of the government. The deep meaning of Blindness is uttered by one of the characters in the very end of the novel deducing that: “I don’t think that we did go blind, I think we are blind, blind but seeing, blind people who can see but do not see” (Blindness 326). Blindness can be read as that “passive acceptance of authoritarian values by the mass of people. Consequently, those who go blind in Saramago’s narrative were already blind all the time or living in a society where the blind lead the blind (Rollason 105). The characters realize that their physical blindness helped them discover their ethical as well as their spiritual blindness. They woke up to the truth that true blindness lies in their ignorance, unawareness and blind dependence on their ruling authorities.

The cognitive estrangement which remarkably characterizes Saramago’s narrative aims at enhancing and stimulating cognitive awareness and comprehension. The novel ends with the characters’ reunion and recovery. They start to reassess their behaviors and rethink their social assumptions and political apparatuses. Saramago’s novel may not be a perfect plan of action to change human nature but it perfectly discloses the destructiveness and bestiality of hegemonic forces. Freedom and libertarianism necessitate one’s willingness to act responsibly and autonomously to become a free-willed agent because agency is nothing but a prelude to complete liberation and self-recovery. Through cognitive estrangement, José Saramago managed to make his reader perceive the gap between Blindness and insight.

ⁱ It is pivotal to mention that in Blindness as well as its sequel Seeing and many other novels, Saramago willfully does not use proper character names. Characters are instead referred to by descriptive designation such

as “the doctor”, “the doctor’s wife”, “the girl with the dark glasses”, “the first blind man” and so forth. Isabel Pires de Lima states that many of Saramago’s novels provide no information whatsoever about the place and the time of the action. We find ourselves in the midst of a nowhere and no-when along the fact that characters do not have proper names: they are merely the doctor, the doctor’s wife (De Lima 128).

ii Moral panic: societies appear to be subject every now and then to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests, sometimes the subject of the panic is quite novel (P74). See:
Padley, Steve. *Key concepts in contemporary literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

iii See book: *On Saramago: Portuguese literary and Cultural Studies*. Ed by Victor J. Mendes, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, 2001.

iv According to the Russian formalists, literary art devotes itself to the making strange (the defamiliarising or estranging) of our accustomed perceptions. At the same time, art exposes its own formal devices, estranging the techniques of representation. The purpose is to make life newly interesting as, or through, art: to get us to experience it as if for the first time.

See: Mikics, David. *A New Handbook of Literary Terms*. Yale: Yale University, 2007, p 83.

v For Stanley Fish, reading is not a matter of discovering what the text means, but a process of experiencing what it does to you. What the text does to us is actually a matter of what we do to it.

See: Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2008.

Wolfgang Iser highly valorises the “co-partnership” between the reader and the text. Terry Eagleton states that: “Iser permits the reader a fair degree of freedom, but we are not free simply to interpret as we wish. For an interpretation to be an interpretation of this text and not of some other, it must be in some sense logically constrained by the text itself. The work in other words, exercises a degree of determinacy over readers’ responses to it, otherwise interpretation would seem to fall into total anarchy (Eagleton 73).

vi Saramago clearly warns the reader that as long as there is totalitarianism, there is undoubtedly a danger that lurks behind its vague and obscurantist strategies because: “If 1984 constructs an allegory not of any single historical instance of totalitarian rule, but of the potential descent of any contemporary society into totalitarianism, then a similar reading of *Blindness* is made by Harold Bloom, who interprets it as a “parable of the perpetual possibility of the return of fascism, or its advent”. Yet while for both Saramago and Orwell, totalitarianism is always close at hand, to say that totalitarianism begins at home in this text and its sequel *Seeing* requires us to determine where, if anywhere, “home” might be”.

See *Essays in Comparative Literature*, eds. Mark Sabine and Adriana Alves de Paula Martins, Manchester: University of Manchester, 2006, pp. 105-120

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