



BLINDNESS: BECOMING AN ANIMAL IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC

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Abstract: Pandemics are a mirror for humanity which reflects the moral relationships that people have towards one another. The pandemic studies examine the ways in which the outbreaks have shaped politics, socio-cultural relations and gender discriminations. It has altered the society and thereby affects the natural world in which we live. They also reflect our relationships with the environment—the environment that we create and the natural environment that responds. The pandemic makes the society vulnerable and to study the society is to study its structure, political priorities and standard of living. It shows not only the dystopian vision of life but also altruistic and humane values. Jose Saramago's *Blindness* is considered to be one of the most outstanding literary achievements. A speculative parable reminiscent of Albert Camus' *The Plague*, *Blindness* examines the mysterious social and moral breakdown in a typical modern society. The novel narrates the literal blindness of all the inhabitants of the unnamed city as a political, psychological and spiritual metaphor. Saramago uses blindness as a metaphor for moral depravity, filth, and social collapse.

Keywords: Blindness, Internee, Morality, Pandemic, Quarantine.

I. INTRODUCTION

Jose Saramago, born in Portugal in 1922, was awarded the Nobel prize for Literature in 1998. His breakthrough came in 1982 with *Memorial do Convento*, which translated into English in 1987 as *Baltasar and Blimunda*. *Blindness*, published in 1995, is an allegory in which an unexplained epidemic of blindness causes chaos to descend on society. Pandemics have afflicted civilizations throughout human history and have had significant impacts on human society.

Pandemics have had great influence in shaping human society and politics throughout history. From the Justinian Plague of the sixth century to the Covid-19, pandemics have triggered the collapse of empires, weakened pre-eminent powers and institutions, created social upheaval. The epidemic is a recurring theme with a long tradition in literary history. Literature, throughout human history to date, has reflected different societies grappling with a wide range of issues including political, social, environmental, gender, educational, religious and psychological conflicts. Literature also shed light on the spread of various diseases and epidemics. Every story of the epidemic is a story of illiteracy, lack of humanity, morality and social degradation. In the literature of pestilence, the greatest threat is not the loss of human life but loss of values that make us human. We perceive the world by means of an elaborate set of distinct modality-specific receptor systems. Therefore, the loss of a sensory modality (blindness) introduces significant challenges in activities of daily living, occupational tasks and social interactions. Saramago uses blindness to represent personal misfortune, social catastrophe, restrictions on society and the struggle of the individual against social conformity. The novel illustrates the disconnect between the world of the sighted and that of the blind and the challenge of adjusting to a life without sight.

Throughout the tradition of literature, the blind person is the one who can see the best. From Tiresias and Oedipus onwards, the lack of sight has brought figurative vision. Those without sight in the society of the seeing become its true visionaries. Blindness becomes a metaphor for insight. In the light of blindness, Saramago's *Blindness* enables us to see anew through blindness. The parable of blindness gives an insight into our wasteland. The novel depicts a nameless city, with nameless citizens, stricken with blindness. Blindness has engulfed everyone that leads the city to a state of ruin. The city has become a microcosm of social and moral degradation. The novel is a dystopia of broken infrastructure and squalid conditions, the morbid existence of the blind leading the blind.

II. JOSE SARAMAGO'S *BLINDNESS*

The novel presents a mysterious epidemic of blindness. The first incident of blindness occurs at the traffic light, as the lights change from amber to green, the man on wheels says "I am blind" (3). In an effort to cope with the epidemic, the authorities imprison the blind victims in an asylum. The breakdown of morality reaches its nadir with the rise of a group of blind men who humiliate other prisoners through theft, rape and terror. Within this collapsing society, a group of people work together to create a space for humanity. The leader of this group is the Doctor's wife, the only person who has sight in the novel. She has accompanied her ophthalmologist husband to the asylum, even though she is not blind. Her eyesight gives her practical and moral advantages. Through this character, Saramago tries to explore not only the meaning of blindness but also the meaning of vision.

Blindness is associated with the death of the heart and with the loss of concern for human beings. A group of blind people and 'a dog of tears' are led by the doctor's wife through the streets where all the systems by which people feed and govern themselves have collapsed. As more and more blind people are brought into the asylum, the condition becomes worse and thereby living conditions and morale degrade horrifically. The people have memories but lack knowledge about themselves as the doctor's wife puts it,

we're so remote from the world that any day now, we shall no longer know who we are, or even remember our names, and besides, what use would names be to us, no dog recognises another dog or knows the others by the names they have been given, a dog is identified by its scent and that is how it identifies others, here we are like another breed of dogs, we know each other's bark or speech. (23)

The deterioration of humanity is depicted by analogies made between the people and animals. The blind internees are compared to "pigs" and the "soldiers" "shoot down those imbeciles moving before their eyes like lame crabs" (39). The doctor's wife says that the human beings with no sense of rationality "will soon turn into animals, worse still into blind animals" (50). The internees in the quarantine, though they are in the "implacable kingdom of the blind" are urged by the doctor's wife that "if we cannot live entirely like human beings, at least let us do everything in our power not to live entirely like animals" (45). To the soldiers, the blind citizens are nothing but beasts that need to be contained. They do not address people by their name but only refer to them by their condition. When the doctor and the wife seek help for the injured car thief, the sergeant replies: "if the infection should get worse which looks all too certain, it could soon prove fatal, That isn't my affair, Then contact your superiors, Look here, blind man, let me tell you something, either the two of you get back to where you came from, or you'll be shot" (25). The sergeant comments: "it would have been better to let them die of hunger, when the beast dies, the poison dies with it" (33). Her words transformed into a maxim, a dictum, a doctrine and a rule of life.

Sexual violence against women predominates in the novel- "the women had passed from one man to another, from humiliation to humiliation, from outrage to outrage, exposed to everything that can be done to a woman while leaving her still alive" (68). While the doctor's wife raised the dislocated body of the blind woman suffering from insomnia, "the legs covered in blood, her abdomen bruised, her poor breasts uncovered, brutally scarred, teeth marks on her shoulder" (68). The people in the streets are compared to dogs because we can see "some of the dogs here are eating another dog" (97). The trading of women for food highlights the animosity of human beings- "either you suck me, or you ward won't see another crumb of bread" (67). The abuse of women by hoodlums can be associated with the profession of the girl with black glasses. Saramago tries to show how much abject human beings can be, much inferior to animals. Both the quarantine and the world outside look like a cemetery and "there is no difference between inside and outside, between here and there, between the many and the few, between what we're living through and what we shall have to live through" (90). The novel takes us to a world of anxiety, depression and even chaos.

Saramago does not provide supernatural or dramatic qualities but instead exposes humanity's deepest flaws. The novel suggests that blindness does not destroy an existing morality, but it exposes evil tendencies which are already present but hidden beneath social structures. *Blindness* suggests that people descend into an animalistic state in the absence of social structures, as in the voice of the subjective omniscient narrator, "When we are in great distress and plagued by pain and anguish that is when the animal side of our nature becomes most apparent" (94). As the blind internees are separated from the social structures of their old lives, they are forced to confront primitive problems and consequently lose their sense of humanity. The doctor reflects on his loss of dignity after a lavatory visit leaves him filthy with human excrement.

He had the impression of having stepped on some soft pulp, the excrement of someone who had missed the hole of the latrine or who had decided to relieve himself without any consideration for others ... the doctor had pulled up his trousers. Then he lowered them, when he thought he was alone, but not in time, he knew he was dirty, dirtier than he could ever remember having been in his life. There are many ways of becoming an animal, he thought, this is just the first of them. (36)

The man with the black patch rightly describes the situation: "We're going back to being primitive hordes, with the difference that we are not a few thousand men and women in an immense, unspoiled nature, but thousands of millions in an uprooted, exhausted world" (95). The decay of the familial unit is clearly exemplified by the author when he says, "The worst thing is that whole families, especially the smaller ones, rapidly became families of blind people... and it was clear that these blind people, however caring a father, mother or child they might be, could not take care of each other" (47).

The doctor's wife, "a king with eyes in the land of the blind" (95) muses that the outbreak of blindness not only dooms the blind to a terrifying death but also manifests the helplessness that has prevailed among human beings. When the doctor remarks that many of the houses contain rotting bodies and what the blind need the most is organisation, his wife says: "the human body is an organised system, it lives as long as it keeps organised, and death is only the effect of disorganisation. And how can a society of blind people organise itself in order to survive. By organising itself, to organise oneself is, in a way, to have eyes" (109). She accounts for her unimpaired eyesight as indicative of her ability to organise the group as well as her obligation to bear witness to the horrors. Her sight enables her to bring about liberation of the group from the hospital.

The Doctor's wife manages to secure safety for her group by leading them to her apartment, the site of both literal and spiritual cleansing. The social conditions deteriorate with increasing scarcity, disorder and confusion. It is at this point the Doctor's wife wanders into a church filled with those praying for rescue and consolation. She realises that all the eyes of the statues of religious figures in the church are covered. The blinding of the religious images has deprived the icons of the spiritual solace that they represent. It is equivalent to the unfeeling, unthinking and blinded people who worship them. When the doctor's wife tells the congregation that the holy images lack sight, the people abandon the sight and soon regain their eyesight. Vision allows the people in the city to begin to restore order. The powers associated with the images in the church have been transferred to humanity. The people become empowered to use their own moral and spiritual resources - their own eyes.

III. CONCLUSION

History offers lessons on how epidemics transform society and how diseases leave their imprint on the world's social and political fabric. Epidemics bring out the worst, and sometimes the best of humanity. Saramago describes the physical and psychological struggles of the newly blinded as a parallel to people who have lost sight of reason, humanity and the very idea of human society. In *Blindness*, José Saramago transports us into a society in which an unexpected epidemic of blindness spreads quickly, disseminating chaos between citizens and institutions. This new reality acts as a magnifying glass highlighting the weaknesses and forces of individuals and community. The underlying belief in human goodness gives a food for thought to the readers that "we are blind, Blind but seeing, blind people who can see, but do not see" (120). The anthropological failure in *Blindness* is a metaphor of a threatening near-future social and urban catastrophe.

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