



The Holy Disobedience Of Transgression: A Subversive Analysis Of Saramago's *The Gospel According To Jesus Christ*

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Abstract: The act of transgression has been defined as the process of “crossing-over”; passing beyond any law, either civil or moral. It implies crossing a boundary of acceptable conduct or exceeding a social limit. The act of transgression is closely related to the strategy of subversion. The present paper attempts to examine Jose Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* in the light of the transgressive idea. In the works of Saramago the discourse of transgression is located in theodicy which stands as the apparatus of oppression. The study also uses subversion as an analytical tool for expressing the concern of the unprivileged and the victimized.

Index Terms - Transgression, Subversion, Boundary, Gospel, Disobedience

INTRODUCTION

“Chaos is rejecting all you have learned. Chaos is being yourself”. These are the words of Emil Cioran, the Romanian philosopher, quoted from *A Short History of Decay*. When it comes to the domain of transgression, unlearning is a discourse of supreme significance. Taboos and restrictions predominantly form the major substance of societal framework. Though transgression has been a strong tendency from time immemorial, modern society has generated an unconstrained urge to transcend the margins of acceptability and customary social behavior. Seen from this angle, transgression is an all-pervasive phenomenon which incorporates fascination with sin and a desire to read the forbidden realm.

Jose Saramago, the Portuguese Nobel-laureate and a libertarian Communist of steadfast atheism, is globally recognized for his themes of blatant non-conformity and outspoken literary experimentations. His rebellious preoccupation with the Biblical images has radically contributed much to the controversial reception of several of his works. Though a critical reconstruction of the New Testament theme, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* chronicles the life of the Christ figure in an altogether different light. As the characters and events relinquish their mythical status by transgressing the already ‘well-established’ trails of their original Biblical positions, the narrative undergoes an iconoclastic and subversive transformation. By positioning the Christ figure as the centre, the study aims to perceive the ultimate other side of the biblical myth. The Biblical Christ is acquiring a strange transmutation in this novel by becoming an epitome of transgression, violating and juxtaposing the ‘sacred’ as well as well-knit order of the ‘grand’ narrative. The postmodern resistance towards metanarratives, or the ‘incredulity towards grand narratives’ could be examined here. The novel revolves around Saramago’s never-ending revolt against the ‘authority’ of God; or rather symbolically, against the injustices of the world.

Blasphemy was once regarded as contrary to normality, corrupted, vile, against the progress and prosperity of humanity; but today people are willing to view it largely as freedom of expression despite religious dogmatists who view speaking against the divine authority as unnatural and hence transgressive. So are the issues of patriarchy and homosexuality. In *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* Saramago depicts a world filled with sarcasm and negation. The holy figure of Jesus Christ is analyzed in a deconstructive light - he is presented as an ordinary human being with the thoughts, feelings and passions of a commoner.

THE WORLD OF SARAMAGO

In all ages, writers have dealt with the idea of transgressing boundaries through explicit and implicit methods; confronting negative forces and subverting repressive authoritarian structures are not uncommon in literary works. Viewed from a prototypical plane, from the rebel hero to the quest motif, transgression has always been a pivotal substance of literary insights; of moving from an ordered coherent state to an unordered and incoherent state. In the Biblical tradition, Adam's violation of the divine command by eating the forbidden fruit is a classic example of a transgressive act. In the contemporary era, with the advent of postmodernism and rational thinking, transgression is enormously significant as it instigates the idea of 'crossing' the limits.

Every rule/boundary carries the probability of its own rupture - transgression is the built-in constituent of the 'limit'. It is a vibrant energy in the process of cultural regeneration and restoration. Transgression can be broadly classified into different types – social (violating a social norm), legal (a crime committed by the breach of law), religious (violation of divine principles, precisely a 'sin') and relational (where people violate implicit or explicit relational rules). In all known literary manifestations, be it the Epic of Gilgamesh or the Promethean myth, transgression challenges the authority of the 'centre'. As Foucault observes, a boundary could not exist if it was categorically 'uncrossable'; in other words, transgression would be pointless if it merely traversed a border full of illusory shadows. Consequently, transgression turns substantial through the disclosure of its 'imminent exhaustion'. Saramago's God is based soundly on the Bible and his point, ultimately, is that the god of Judeo-Christian tradition is cruel, selfish and power-crazy Jesus does not die for our sins – he dies for the sins of the father, the sins of God.

On a broader scale the idea of transgression intersects the sensitive areas of racism, gender politics, ethnic rivalries, majoritarian terror and totalitarianism. Twenty-first century has witnessed random shifts in the acceptable norms of religious, political, economic and social ideologies which bear the elements of transgression. The snowballing adherence towards rational and evidence-based ideas, constructive critical stance towards law and order along with defusing the animosity of war, which have been happening radically in the contemporary socio-political arena, are all the outcomes of transgressive actions. Challenging the normativity of legal systems, toxic jingoism, xenophobia, racial injustice, gender-based prejudices and regressive anti-human values augment the visibility of such deeds; with the assistance of a parallel historical reading of the context, the behavioral plurality of the 'individual' can be effectively deciphered. Saramago's novel handles depictions of ancient Jewish life in a splendid manner - the role of women being completely subservient to men: first to their fathers, then husbands, and ultimately to their own children, and the effect this had on their relationship with their families. It also depicts honestly the ritual of quotidian animal sacrifice - the absolute savagery, cruelty and waste of this practice, which is often overlooked when we think about that culture and that time.

Fluid and unstable in nature, transgression challenges the forceful implementation of rules in every possible way that ultimately blurs the distinction between "good" and "bad". Saramago's Christ exemplifies the postmodern idea of collapsing the distinction between the high and the low. He personifies the violation of conventional codes through deviation, disobedience, aberration and at times self-destruction, is an ironic display of demolishing 'stagnancy'. Jesus is portrayed as a human being with questions, doubts, and desires. Many of the gospel stories that we know are told from a very different perspective. Emphasizing on the socially and historically constructed nature of value systems, he exposes the transcalar plane of human actions.

TRANSGRESSION: THE HOLY DISOBEDIENCE

The act of transgression is closely related to the strategy of subversion. Subversion is the disruption of the power and authority of an established system or institution. Subversion is characterized by the crux of possibilities, of revitalization, of the tearing down of old forms and formations of new ones. The postmodern and poststructuralist traditions attempt to subvert the dominant cultural forces - this multifarious application of subversion owes much to the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, who stressed the varied impact of 'cultural hegemony'.

In the novel Jesus questions himself, his status as the son of God, the idea that he may be the divine Messiah of the Jewish people, and even God's own grand plan (revealed to Jesus as a stunning display of hubris, arrogance, and selfishness) - but always remains steadfast in his devotion to Mary Magdalene, with whom he lives freely and openly in a sexual relationship outside the bonds of marriage, and whom he treats as equally as any man. Here, subversion can be understood on two levels – firstly, it destructs the decorum. Secondly, it constructs the 'other' notion. It is a narrative technique which can conjecture itself simultaneously as the representation and reconstitution of the ultimate 'other'. In it, the eventuality of transformation from order to disorder intensifies the inevitability of hierarchical dissolution.

The historical placing of subversion- a process that goes 'against the grain' of its surrounding culture has been an element of curiosity for several writers. Subversion as a literary tool is helpful in turning the hierarchies upside down – it posits a juxtaposition of order on a broader level. Historically, it has been a significant component of all realms of literature ranging from social realism to dystopian futurism. Several significant works of the twentieth century like 1984 by George Orwell and Satanic Verses by Salman Rushdie have dealt with the nuances of subversion as the resultant manifestation of transgressive acts.

The human condition is an incessant process evolving through the violent disentanglement from the established notions of societal structures. It is a strange combination of deference and defiance reveling in labyrinthine predicaments concerning the sense of identity. The characters who exhibit transgressive inclinations are the many versions of the mythical Sisyphus in whom negation and affirmation exist simultaneously- they not only pose as victim figures but also as rebels in the quest for solutions, though presuming failure yet revealing the sublimity of resistance in the face of absurdity and incoherence. Estranged in a world in which they don't 'fit' in and suspended between the contradictory pressures of the environment and the self, such characters suffer from the introverted inclinations resulting from their interior conflict.

Deviating from the modern doubt concerning the essence of self, postmodernity assumes the politicization and problematization of identity as crucial in addressing the need for regeneration – focusing on the minority in its relationship with the majority. In the novel, Satan makes an appearance as a character, but Saramago fashions him as a much more interesting, multifaceted figure, possessed of depth, humor, and perhaps not as evil as he's often cast. He and God are posited to be old friends, not necessarily enemies, and in a mutually dependent relationship of sorts in an arrangement to preserve the others' power. Besides foregrounding the autotelic dimension of transgression, the multidimensional aspects concerning the sense of identity could be analytically examined – the influences and counter-influences that shape one's perceptions form the crux of identity development and identity crisis. These psychosocial operations could be strategically appropriated by the technique of subversion. Instead of philosophically speculating on the external manifestations of events, introspective episodes have largely served for contextualizing the agonies and anguishes of characters. In this context, the notion of intertextuality can be relied upon. The shaping and transforming of transgressive patterns represent the intertextual nature of identity formations – both literary and non-literary.

Saramago presents a world of ordinary human beings and common surroundings instead of anthropomorphic entities and superhuman figures. His Christ raises questions that have not been answered for centuries. The conundrum of good and evil assumes an enigmatic shape in the novel's quests. "Holding the lamb in his arms, Jesus watched the people file past, some coming, some going, some carrying animals to be sacrificed, some returning without them, looking joyful and exclaiming, Alleluia, Hosanna, Amen, or saying none of these things, feeling it was inappropriate to walk around shouting Hallelujah or Hip hip hurrah, because there is really not much difference between the two expressions, we use them enthusiastically until with the passage of time and by dint of repetition we finally ask ourselves, What does it mean, only to find

there is no answer.”(pp. 134) Christ lives the life of every common man – he undergoes the agony and the dilemma of being a human body with all its aspirations, limitations and forbidden passions. The Son of God becomes the instrument of unveiling the dark side of holiness. Paradoxically, Satan is represented as an individual who comprehends things in a sensible way. The Biblical conversation between God and Satan is portrayed in a sarcastic yet reasonable manner.

In the works of Saramago, identity, sexuality and body politics of feminine representations are revolutionized in such a way that they grow out of the proportions of the grand narrative; the characterization of Mary Magdalene in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* and Lilith in *Cain*, is intended to debase the codes of sexuality that relegate women to the normative heterosexual roles.

The novel focuses on how transgression works on different planes – the corporeal expressions, consequences, and the constitutive transformations of the transgressive act in diversified contexts. It is primarily based on the assumption that resisting the powers of despotic authority – be it divine, mundane, racial, legal, military, sexual, active or passive -- involves the courage to transform oneself, which in turn becomes the ‘context’ for scrutiny. By destabilizing and reversing the hierarchical positions of power, the centrality of the privileged ‘context’ is critically interrogated in the work. Authoritarian symbols – be it an ‘anthropomorphic’ God or ‘anthropogenic’ institutions – assume the position for scrutiny. In this regard, subversion equates identity with performativity, the subject not different from the action. Resulting from this plurality of perspectives, the novel exposes the formation of identities – the dichotomies of self/world and individual/group identity. In this light, Saramago proclaims, “I know nothing about God, except that His pleasure is as terrifying as His displeasure.” (pp. 153)

CONCLUSION

The novel presumes that a multidisciplinary exploration of subversion is able to bring out the proclivities – both positive and negative- constituting cultural evolution. The indisputability of socio-judicious systems needs to be revisited and refined in the wider context of global acculturation. The dehumanizing overtones of racial violence that annihilate the body and psyche of victims have to be identified and debased. The political proportions of warfare, or broadly unlimited human violence, be it of nuclear tactics, bio-weapons or big data – have to be recognized and destabilized. The characters are forced to work through difficult moral situations and in doing so bring to light the absurdity of the various doctrines of the religion. The patriarchal discursive operations behind the social construct of gendered identity need to be revisited.

Through dismissing, delegitimizing and disrupting the supreme symbol of authority ever made by human consciousness, the mythical omniscient ‘God’ or the collective cultural inheritance of the ‘grand’ narratives, the study seeks to decode the psychological factors and rational acclimatization pertaining to belief systems. Saramago succeeds in turning Christ’s last message from the cross into a cry for human dignity against the war and suffering caused by religion: “Jesus realized then that he had been tricked, as the lamb led to sacrifice is tricked, and that his life had been planned for death from the very beginning. Remembering the river of blood and suffering that would flow from his side and flood the globe, he called out to the open sky, where God could be seen smiling, Men, forgive Him, for He knows not what He has done.”(pp. 103)

The novel also focuses on the fluidity of time which pervades through all the major events. From a historical angle, the novel is set in mythical or pre-historic time. Also, the timelessness of transgressive elements is projected through the foregrounding of contemporaneity - which almost all the novels of Saramago represent in a methodical way.

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July 2021.