



Contagion as Metaphor in Blindness by Jose Saramago

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Abstract -

The aim of the present research paper is to examine Jose Saramago's Blindness as a metaphor of modern civilization. The story of the novel revolves around the epidemic of white blindness that makes everyone go blind in an unnamed city and its aftermath. This blindness in the novel functions at two levels—physiological and metaphorical. The metaphorical blindness represents the social, psychological, political, moral, and spiritual blindness of a typical modern society. It demonstrates the fragility of modern civilization. Throughout the novel, the concept of seeing and blindness is presented in such a way that it represents the general human condition. Saramago suggests that if modern civilization has to survive, it must be rooted in reason. According to him, moral strength, hope, compassion and intelligence can defeat this blindness.

Keywords - Blindness, Contagion, Epidemic, Quarantine.

Introduction -

Jose Saramago was born on November 16, 1922 in Portugal. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1998. He was the first Portuguese author to win this honour. He has been a successful author of poems, plays, novels, short stories and essays in Portugal. He is known for writing religious and political satires. He has published many critically acclaimed novels, but his best known is *Blindness*, published in Portuguese in 1995 and translated into English in 1997 by Giovanni Pontiero. The sequel *Seeing* was published in English in 2006. *Blindness* is an allegorical novel. It is an allegory of the total breakdown of modern civilization. The novel has no specific setting, no proper names for characters and even chapters don't carry any title. It is written in Saramago's own style of using little punctuation marks and long run-on sentences.

Jose Saramago's Blindness -

Jose Saramago's *Blindness* is the story of an unexplained epidemic of white blindness that spreads in an unnamed city and the devastation that follows it. The novel opens with an epigraph from the Book of Exhortations, "If you can see, look. If you can look, observe". In the beginning of the novel, a man sitting in his car and waiting at a traffic signal suddenly goes blind. When he is taken to an ophthalmologist, the ophthalmologist is not able to find out the cause of this sudden blindness. While researching on this mysterious blindness, even the ophthalmologist loses his sight. This is followed by a series of similar cases of blindness in the city and soon the blindness spreads like an epidemic. Only the ophthalmologist's wife is immune to the blindness miraculously and witnesses the gradual fall of the city due to blindness. The ophthalmologist informs the ministry of health, and they quarantine the blind people in an empty asylum to contain the further contagion. The ophthalmologist's wife, though not infected, pretends to be blind and goes to the quarantine centre with her husband.

The quarantine centre is guarded by armed soldiers. Authorities declare the rules and regulations of quarantine that must be followed to avoid further contamination. Armed forces threaten to kill anyone who tries to escape the quarantine and they even shot dead those who waited for food delivery in the yard. The only sighted character, ophthalmologist's wife, emerges as the leader of the group. The number of infected people increases day by day in quarantine centre and so the problem of living, nutrition, medicine and sanitation there. The spread of influenza causes more panic and the arrival of blind thugs in the quarantine centre worsens the situation. They overpower and exploit the remaining people in every possible manner. They demand money and valuables in exchange for food and later they also want women for the same. After much violence at the quarantine centre, it is burned down and quarantined people come out in the city, only to find out that the entire city has gone blind.

These blind people wander in the city in search of food. The entire social system has collapsed in the city. There is no law and order, no government, no food and water and social services functioning there. The city is full of dead bodies to be buried, some people have died due to lack of care at quarantine centres, some of the starvation, some of the violence and accidents in their blindness. The ophthalmologist's wife arranges food for her group and takes the group to her house. In the church, the ophthalmologist's wife realizes that the eyes in all the images in the church are covered and she discusses the symbolic meaning of it with her husband. By the end of the novel, sight returns to all blind people mysteriously as they have lost it. People celebrate the return of their sight and the doctor's wife remarks, "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."

Epidemic as Metaphor -

The opening and closing lines of the novel clearly indicate its metaphorical connotations. The novel is a critique of contemporary society. It is symbolic of general disorientation of the present civilization. Through the spread of the epidemic of blindness, the novelist brings out the complete picture of social breakdown. The unnamed city in the novel is just the microcosm of it. The novelist wants to suggest that social disintegration is even possible in modern societies. In order to make his point clear, he takes the example of an epidemic of blindness. Like the epidemic blindness in novel, any catastrophe



can disturb the well-established social order anywhere in the world. Therefore, Saramago appeals to readers to build moral conscience to deal with such tough times. He reminds readers that peace is handed down in modern societies from previous generations and those who have not struggled to achieve it must be taught its significance. The societies that have peace, social order and structure must maintain it with utmost care because in times of crisis it can be disturbed completely. Saramago teaches us to enjoy the activities of everyday life that we always take for granted because during catastrophes even these little things are far-fetched.

Blindness as a critique of modernity, talks about a new kind of blindness. In the novel, blind people are sightless not because of the darkness in their eyes, but what they can see is only impenetrable whiteness in front of their eyes. The literal blindness in the novel is symbolic to metaphorical blindness endemic to the modern world. The literal sight is responsible for visual perception and an important aspect of human existence. The loss of sight makes the individuals start losing their humanity. Saramago emphasises the point that how people capable of literal sight are metaphorically blind about the nature of their own existence. They are blind with ignorance, deception, selfishness, intolerance and most importantly when it comes to others, they are blind to what is happening in front of their eyes. Saramago makes use of figurative language when he says, "Illnesses may differ from one person to another, but what is really killing us now is blindness". He invites his reader to reflect on this blindness deeply by removing their sense of sight. Many characters in the novel admit that their blindness is the result of their own spiritual malaise. In the novel, there are many situations in which there is the test of humanity and moral conscience of characters. Thus, Blindness exposes the various evils of modern society.

Blindness also questions the strengths and weaknesses of human nature. The purpose of the novel is to make a statement about human conduct. It brings out the best and the worst in human nature through the reactions of various characters to the epidemic. The best kind of response is seen in the character of the Ophthalmologist's wife, who tries her best to lead the group and guides them back to civilization. While the worst kind of behaviour is visible in the treatment of blind thugs who leave no opportunity to exploit the same group. The worst kind of response to the epidemic is evident in the form of government. When it fails to control the epidemic, the government does not care to protect its people and provide them the basic medical facilities in quarantine. It doesn't take into consideration that infected people are also human beings. The condition of people in asylum are similar to those in concentration camps used by Nazis during World War II. Hence, the novel criticises the totalitarian governments. Quarantined people in asylum like victims of concentration camps undergo a process of dehumanization. All of them begin to lose what makes them human. The ophthalmologist in asylum feels as if he is becoming an animal. According to a reviewer, Craig Nova, epidemic blindness addresses almost all the horrors of the twentieth century like concentration camps, the excesses of capitalism, bureaucratic aloofness, militarism, and the endless darkness of the human heart.

Conclusion -

Pestilence, epidemics and pandemics have played a major role in storytelling in literature. These narratives reflect on human behaviour, examine responses to the fear of contagion, and show how humans have survived such catastrophes in the past. It also offers an opportunity to contemplate on morality, justice, and redemption. Often the outbreak of disease gives rise to greed, corruption, irrationality, and selfishness. Such dehumanizing aspects of contagion lead to political anarchy and social disintegration.

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