

The Dark Side of Illness: Jose Saramago's Critique of Human Nature in *Blindness*

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Abstract: *Illness has often been portrayed as a unifying force, bringing individuals together through mutual care and support. However, in his novel, Blindness, Jose Saramago subverts this traditional cultural value by depicting illness as a demoralizing agent that breeds anarchy, chaos, and mayhem in society. Saramago's narrative explores the effects of a mysterious epidemic that renders its victims blind and exposes the fragility of human morality in the face of adversity. Through his characters, Saramago illustrates the breakdown of social order and the emergence of primal instincts that lead to cruelty, exploitation, and dehumanization of the sick. This study aims to analyze how Saramago's Blindness challenges conventional beliefs about the virtues of mutual care and support for the sick. By examining the themes of morality, power, and identity, this study seeks to understand how Saramago uses illness as a vehicle to critique the flaws in human nature and expose the dark side of society. This paper will draw on literary analysis and critical theory to provide insights into Saramago's artistic vision and its relevance to contemporary debates about healthcare, ethics, and social justice.*

Keywords: Affliction, Blindness, Human Nature, Moral Loss, Demoralizing Impact, Good and Evil

Introduction

Jose Saramago, a Portuguese author, born in 1922 and considered “ the most gifted novelist” by Harold Bloom, is famous for his controversial books that offer “ subversive perspectives on historical events, emphasizing the theopoetic human aspect, and some of his works can also be interpreted as allegories. *Blindness*, one of his well-known works, won the 1998 Nobel Prize in Literature. *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*, the work's original title, recounts an unknown epidemic of blindness, which causes anarchy and dehumanization over the entire world (due to fear). It illustrates how an affliction can make people forget their morality and humanity.

Affliction is regarded to be caused by heavenly intervention in some circumstances and human agency in others. It is believed that family and community should play a significant role in treating any kind of affliction. The idea that disease or affliction presents an opportunity for social solidarity by reinforcing shared loyalties and beliefs has very much come to be accepted as true. Reintegrating the affected person into her/his social group itself acts as a reminder of the group's identity.

This study looks at the novel *Blindness* in terms of how it portrays the failure of the system and the community by not offering the suffering individuals any sort of consolation. People must exhibit solidarity with one another when they are afflicted, but in the story, it is the opposite that occurs. It illustrates how unfairly the sick are treated. Nobody has a clue as to why or how this sickness develops. No one appears to have expressed worry when the first occurrence of blindness occurred. Everyone on the road starts to chastise the blind man for stopping the traffic as he panics after losing his sight. They have no idea that they could also contract the illness themselves and suffer the same outcomes.

Detailed Analysis

Jose Saramago's novel *Blindness* presents a world where people get afflicted with a disease called blindness. He transports us into a civilization where a sudden pandemic of blindness quickly spreads, causing havoc among the populace and institutions. The strengths and flaws of people and the community

are magnified by this new reality. The first case of blindness occurs on the road where suddenly the whole traffic stops and a man begins to shout "I am blind, I am blind".

The other drivers are irritated at the slight inconvenience of being stopped at the light, indicating that they prioritize efficiency and convenience over aiding their fellow humans, rather than feeling sorry for and assisting the man. The driver's fear of turning blind is a reflection of the truth that there will always be aspects of the world that we are unable to comprehend or explain. He begs them to take him home but nobody is ready. He feels like "as if he 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,). He says that "I see everything white,"(4). He begs them to accompany him to his home and finally a fellow driver agrees. After dropping this old man at his home he steals his car. Here the author shows how human beings forget their humanity and how quickly their evil side comes out. (It shows that people are as capable of evil as they are of good and that people are often blind to one another's true intentions or capacities). When he informs his wife she doesn't believe him because his eyes look perfectly fine but then she starts crying and gets him ready to take to the hospital for a checkup. When she doesn't find the car she informs her husband that "He took advantage of your confusion and distress and robbed us, And to think I didn't want him in the flat for fear he might steal something yet if he had kept me company until you arrived home" (10). Afterwards the car thief goes blind. This mysterious white blindness is highly contagious and even the doctor himself goes blind and the science remains unable to explain this mysterious blindness.

Saramago's criticism of conventional morality is shown by the stark contrast between the police's treatment of the car thief and their treatment of the girl with dark glasses. In other words, while the authorities are unaware of the car thief's true crime and view him as a sad victim, they consider the girl's consensual sexual relationship to be beyond redemption and treat her as a criminal who has to be arrested. It becomes evident that society's conventions are actually enforcing the antithesis of morality because the reader is aware that it is actually the other way around. While the blindness has caused him personal tragedy, the doctor, on the other hand, appears to act out of a private moral impulse to save others. He only considers the societal implications of a potential epidemic. The doctor, on the other hand, appears to act out of a personal moral drive to save others: even if the blindness has caused him a personal tragedy, he only considers the societal consequences of a potential epidemic and is not at all bothered with his own well-being.

These blind people are no longer seen as vulnerable members of society who require protection, but rather as collateral damage by the government or the ministry of health. This demonstrates how quickly and readily even allegedly democratic and fair governments may turn against a section of the populace by branding them a threat and positioning them against the country as a whole. In spite of the fact that it was the doctor who initially informed the Ministry of Health about this outbreak, even the doctor himself now is viewed as a threat that needs to be controlled. Since "it is the most convenient and least disruptive venue for the government to employ", all of the blind people are being transported to the abandoned mental institution with crumbling infrastructure. It is obvious that blind people are losing their rights and becoming captives. It also alluded to the social exclusion and isolation the quarantined patients would experience, comparable to how people with mental illnesses are sometimes excluded from society.

After some time, the government issues some draconian rules/regulations for the blind internees, which include the patients, must take care of and organize themselves, and the lights will always be kept on. Anyone who leaves will be killed. Additionally, they must burn whatever they use because otherwise, neither if they start a fire nor if they contract an illness, will anyone assist them. They must bury their own dead (33). The blind internees inside the asylum are regarded as untouchables by the troops manning the gate. They make an announcement that their food will be delivered at the entrance and they have to carry it on their own with the help of a rope. They feel isolated there as The doctor said, "The orders we have just been given leave no room for doubt, we're isolated, probably more isolated than anyone has ever been

and without any hope of getting out of this place until a cure is found for this disease”(34). A group of blind unnamed people get adjusted in one ward and only one person among them, the doctor's wife, retains her eyesight. Nobody knows each other's names. They are just identified with the defect they have. As the doctor's wife says “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 recognizes 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, as for the rest, features, colour of eyes or hair, they are of no importance, it is as if they did not exist”(43-44).

They are now responsible for looking after one another on their own. However, the blind thief who begins to harass the girl wearing dark glasses while they are walking to the bathroom illustrates once more the evil side of human nature. “He begins to bleed heavily after she kicks him in the leg with her heels” (38). Even though the doctor's wife takes care of his wound, it continues to deteriorate. “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”, the soldiers on duty reply when she requests them to give the injured car thief medicine because the infection may soon prove fatal (48). When the injured blind car thief could no longer bear his excruciating pain and went outside to beg the troops for help and medicine, they shot him dead as soon as they noticed him, displaying the height of cruelty. ‘The car thief is already dead when the other soldiers show up, lying in a pool of his own blood that the sergeant warns could be contagious. The sergeant orders a group of blind people who were watching the ruckus outside to retrieve the body of the car thief’(58). The situation inside the hospital is getting worse. The doctor's wife requests the soldiers to bring them a shovel so they can bury the car thief's horrifically deformed body. Ironically, the Government did not offer a shovel because one of its policies requires that internees bury their own bodies. Its inability to plan a coordinated response shows that it is making up its policies as it goes along, which raises the possibility that its power is unjustified and not deserving.

The Government's failure to provide a shovel is somewhat ironic, since one of its rules is that the internees must bury their own dead—its failure to coordinate its response demonstrates that it is making up its policies as it goes along, which suggests that its power is arbitrary rather than deserved.

Further deteriorating the situation in the hospital is the fact that the government doesn't even give them enough food to survive. The troops only give out small pieces of food that can barely feed a few individuals, not realizing that more patients are being admitted to the hospital every day. They beg the soldiers to give them more food, but they ignore them. “We're locked up here, We're all going to die in here, This isn't right, Where are the doctors we were promised, this was something new, the authorities had promised doctors, medical assistance, possibly even a complete cure,” the newcomers cry(52). One day when the food is delayed, some of the blind come out in the hallway because they couldn't control their hunger and wanted to eat it as soon as it arrived or because they believed that the food was served “first come, first served”. The troops discover the blind patients waiting nearby as they provide meals. They get alarmed as though they have seen a ghost, and two of the soldiers “respond admirably” by firing indiscriminately at these patients, whose bodies are piling up outside the ward. ‘One of the troops declares he would never enter the building again as the others flee outside. Ironically, the narrator adds, this man soon becomes blind himself. The sergeant announces over the loudspeaker that the soldiers have subdued a “seditious movement” by killing the patients in the hall and that they cannot be held responsible for their actions. In reality, he secretly wishes that the blind would just starve to death. The army will eventually just leave the food outside the hospital and shoot anyone who approaches them too closely, the sergeant said. They have no one to confront them about their behaviour or the life of these blind individuals, so they are free to make up any excuse to justify their violence.

The troops' indiscriminate shooting frightens the blind internees, who believe that their time is running out and that the government has chosen to execute them all. They hesitate in fear, not knowing whether to choose the food or drag away the body pile. They jumped onto the (blind's) food boxes, but hunger eventually overcame them. No one is present to supervise them when they divide the supplies, so some people receive double portions while others go without food. As four of the victims were from their ward, the blind internees who are housed in the doctor's cabin opt to bury the dead first. Large numbers of internees choose to eat first so they would have energy to bury the deceased. However, after eating, they refuse to bury the remains, and the hospital's condition worsens due to the stench of the dead. The (blind) doctor using the restroom and stepping in someone else's feces illustrates the powerlessness of the blind interns. There is no toilet paper, so he wonders how the place is. The doctor begins to cry in disgust. He locates the door and leaves, but on the way out he feels dirty and that he is "becoming a beast". His wife helps him in cleaning up back in the ward when everyone else is sleeping.

He got lost twice on the way and was in some distress because he was beginning to feel desperate and just when he could hold back no longer, he was finally able to take down his trousers and crouch over the open latrine. The stench choked him.... He felt unhappy, disconsolate, more unfortunate than he could bear, crushed there, protecting his trousers which were brushing against that disgusting floor, blind, blind, blind, and, unable to control himself, he began to weep quietly (70).

Some of the patients wait in the corridor while anticipating being shot since they are starving and the military have promised to leave food outside. It demonstrates how their sense of self and emotional health is shaped by fear and uncertainty. Although they maintain that they won't do it until after they eat, the men from the other ward have still not buried their deceased. Each side argues that the other's suggestions for equally rationing the food are unfair. Their disagreements over food reveal their attempts (and failures) to create an organized society in which they can come to an understanding of a concept that enables them to put the interests of the group before the interests of each individual. Soldiers mock the blind people when the meal is delivered, and they decide it would be best to shoot them all to stop the spread of the disease. This demonstrates how dehumanizing a person can turn out to be. When one of the blind guys succeeds in reaching the containers, the others swarm him in an effort to lift the food inside for themselves. While leaving the others starving, some of them fled with food containers. The blind residents of the asylum formed this groupthink in an effort to rule over the inmates from other wards. The military are forcing two hundred newcomers into the hospital even though they are aware that there is a limited amount of room. Still, they lead this disorganized crowd inside the hospital, where they stir up a sort of frenzy-like atmosphere in quest of a seat to sit down.

The elderly man with the eyepatch who just arrived into the asylum tells that the blindness epidemic has caused a "panic" in the city. In an effort to find a cure, the government conducted medical conferences, but everyone in attendance also became blind. Soon, it became impossible to isolate all the blind individuals, but it was also impossible to ask them to quarantine themselves at home. People lost their vision abruptly while crossing the street, and entire families lost their vision at the same time and were left unable to take care of themselves. Anyone who provided care for the blind also became blind. Transportation fell into disarray as a result of bus drivers and commercial pilots going blind on the job, which resulted in terrible accidents. The city is now filled with abandoned cars, which turned into impediments for the blind individuals roaming the streets. It gets pitiful and intolerable inside the hospital. It is crowded and unbearably filthy. The bathrooms overflow, and the interns begin urinating in the halls and courtyard. These areas quickly fill up with human waste that people have stepped in. The doctor's wife is desperately trying to end this nightmare, but he cautions her that the hospital is a "harsh, cruel, implacable kingdom" and that those without eyes are similar to those without souls.

The nasty and repulsive yet essential aspects of human life are what Saramago wants his readers to address. Human society was created with the express purpose of removing and concealing body functions.

But as civilization breaks down, these fundamental biological truths about who we are—the things that tie us to the rest of nature's "kingdom"—become inevitable. A bunch of robbers who have started to control other internees inside the hospital and are equipped with clubs, sticks, metal rods, and a gun represent the height of cruelty and inhumanity. Food is seized, and they stop others from taking it. They establish their kingdom in one ward, stash food there, and demand that other internees turn over “all their assets” if they want to survive or eat in this madness. Even when some of the prisoners speak out against the cruelty and unfairness, the guards beat them and force them to leave. The soldiers on the ground might have intervened and stopped them from making such a fuss, but they choose to ignore the protests and the blind internees in the hopes that they will murder one another, which would reduce the number of contagious persons in the area.

After a week passes, the thugs demand that the others deliver them women, and if they don't, they'll stop supplying food. “How much despicable human beings may be, much inferior to animals,” is demonstrated by the trading of women for food. They mock and make fun of these women every night, laughing like wild beasts while claiming that “there will be three males for every woman”. All the ladies who at one point considered leaving and allowing the military shoot rather than going to the thug's ward, where they must endure gruesome abuse, are savagely raped by the gang leader and his followers. The doctor's wife observes the women in the other wards “curled up in their beds like animals” on the way there; they are so disturbed that they scream if anyone approaches them (131).

One of them passed away on the way back to their ward, so the doctor's wife prepares to fight back after they spent the entire night enduring “everything that can be done to a woman while yet leaving her alive”. The thugs stop by the protagonists' ward a few days later to insult the women while they are on their way to another ward. One of the goons dismisses it as insignificant when the doctor's wife reveals that one of them has passed away. The doctor's wife sardonically remarks, “It wasn't much of a loss,” causing the goons to halt and look perplexed before pacing off. The thugs are shocked to learn that the doctor's wife made fun of the woman's passing since they had imagined that only they could be as heartless and callous as they are. The doctor's wife compels them to recognize her as an equal by momentarily agreeing with them, forcing them to reject the role they have assigned her—that of a beaten victim. She mimics the thugs' position in a way to make them consider everyone else's perspective and to show that she is prepared to fight back. She grabs the scissors and stabs the leader in the throat as he is raping another woman one night because she wants to spare the women the pain they must endure every night. Thugs and internees in other wards begin to engage in a form of war. They've used beds to block the doorway to their ward and hidden food inside, making other individuals who are already hungry suffer much more. They go two days without eating before deciding to attack the ward of these thugs, who in response fire a shot that kills one of their companions from the doctor's ward. In the midst of the pandemonium, a blind woman who had packed a lighter for a smoke crosses over to the thug's ward and lights the mattresses that are blocking the door on fire. The goons and the woman who started the fire are both killed as the blaze spreads quickly. Some of the blind, who are terrified, run for the hospital's entrance while tripping over one another. Some people jump out of their open windows and into the courtyard. The doctor's wife has just escorted her ward's residents out into the hallway when the blind start shouting for her. The patients choose to “get out” despite the risk posed by the military because the other side of the facility is on fire. Better to be shot than to be burned to death, says the man with the eyepatch. The convicts had been suffering from anxiety and despair for weeks when the blind woman's swift, definite move was taken, but now that it is literally life or death, they flee from a known danger and head toward an unknown one. She acts on behalf of everyone. The detainees are brought by the doctor's wife along the smoky hallway and onto the hospital's front steps, where she calls for the soldiers. However, neither a light nor any soldiers are there. Just as the hospital's roof collapses, she announces the release of the prisoners. Some of the prisoners escape, but the majority are crushed by the falling structure or crushed

by the throng fleeing and perish within. The narrator declares, “The gate is wide open, and the madmen flee”.

When they leave this asylum, they discover that everything is the same outside. The roadways are empty and strewn with decaying corpses. In addition to consigning the blind to a horrible death, this epidemic also exemplifies the general sense of powerlessness and helplessness among people.

Conclusion

The sufferings that blind people endure as a result of their condition serve as a stark example of how depraved a person might turn out to be. It is crucial to maintain one's morality during such crises as evidenced by the chaos and uncertainty they experienced without somebody to lead them. Through this work, the author hopes to make the point that as people; we should constantly stand up for one another. This textual analysis is a reflection of what happens when we let self-interest rule our decisions. It can be concluded that this novel turns the traditional values of mutual care and support to the sick upside down and presents the illness as a demoralizing agent.

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