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## **Pandemic, Space and Environment in *Blindness* by José Saramago**

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### **Abstract**

Mentioned and praised even by the Noble prize committee, in 1998, *Blindness* (published in 1995) is a complex novel dealing with the human nature and behaviour in the context of a crisis generated by a sudden and unknown disease. The relevance of reading this book these days, when the entire humanity (and I daresay our planet as an interdependent system) is facing a terrible viral pandemic, is obvious and helpful. The present paper aims to explore José Saramago's novel from a combined geo-ecocritical perspective, emphasizing the interrelatedness of humanity, space, and surrounding environment. The main research questions of this study are: how do humans interact with the places they live in and the ecosphere during a pandemic? and how does a pandemic affect the human behaviour? The geo-ecocritical approach is due to the interdependence between space and environment, one can hardly explore one of the previously mentioned components of the fictional world without referring to the other. Another aspect that this essay will touch is the alteration of people's emotions due to the difficulties they face during pandemics and the importance of emotion management in these extreme situations. For the proposed analysis the following methods will be indispensable: close-reading, ecocriticism, geocriticism, and narratology.

**Keywords:** *Blindness*, Ecocriticism, Geocriticism, José Saramago, Pandemic.

### **Introduction: Epidemic/Pandemic as a *Koinos Topos* in World Literature**

People usually refer to a rapidly spreading disease as an *outbreak*, *epidemic* or *pandemic*. There is a geographical distinction between these three medical terms:

[...] outbreak is usually reserved for a localized occurrence of a disease that is not typically present in the population (such as an outbreak illness due to *Escherichia coli*), while epidemic is reserved for more widespread conditions. [...] A pandemic is an epidemic that has spread beyond national boundaries. (Boslaugh, 2008, p. 315)

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, people worldwide have paid more and more attention to viruses and spreading diseases. Thus, naturally, scholars started researching the topic of epidemics and pandemics in literature. Consequently, there have been published numerous studies regarding the representations of different contagious diseases in world literature.

There are some well-known literary works concerned with the topic of epidemics or pandemics in different national literatures: Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, *Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe, *The Plague* by Albert Camus, *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez or *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood. If the literary works published prior to the XX<sup>th</sup> century are concerned with the plague or the cholera pandemics, the later texts deal with a broader range of diseases (either real or imagined). Thus, one can

assert that epidemics and pandemics represent *koinoi topoi* of world literature.

This study will explore the novel *Blindness* by José Saramago from a geo-ecocritical perspective, analysing the relation between disease, space and environment. The analysis will make use of narratology, close-reading, geocriticism and ecocriticism.

## **1. The Blindness Pandemic and Its Moral Roots**

*Blindness* (published in 1995), often referred to as a “dark novel” (Bloom, 2005, p. xvii), is one of the most celebrated books written by the Portuguese writer. Its original title is *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (*Essay on Blindness*) and it was mentioned by the Nobel Prize Committee, in 1998, as an outstanding literary work. The novel is focused on a sudden blindness outbreak that soon becomes a pandemic, spreading all over the country. The first person affected by the unknown disease is a man who lost his sight while he was driving home. He is helped to reach his home by a stranger, a thief who takes advantage of the situation and steals the blind man’s car. Then the first affected man is taken to an eye specialist who cannot identify the new disease and calls it “the white blindness”. Soon after that, the doctor, the first blind man’s wife, and the patients of the eye specialist become blind. The government takes rapid measures and puts them in quarantine in a mental hospital. The doctor’s wife follows her husband to the quarantine place and pretends to be blind too in order to help him. The number of patients is rapidly increasing and the hospital will be soon full. The army guards the building to prevent eventual escapes. Soon the problems start and the doctor’s wife will have to find solutions as she is the only unaffected person: the hygiene is lacking due to the inhuman conditions inside the hospital, the promiscuity (people having sexual relations freely), the food is insufficient and generates the agglutination of an oligarchic group that rationalize the food given by the government. This last problem is solved by women after being raped by the violent oligarchic group of men: the doctor’s wife killed the leader and, after that, another woman set fire to their room, and, consequently, the entire establishment is burnt to ashes. When the blind people escape the burning hospital they notice the absence of soldiers and find out the next day that everybody is blind. The image of the city is distressing: blind people are wandering everywhere in search of food, the entire town is a large cesspool full of trash, corpses and excrements, the air is barely breathable, and the majority of houses are broken. The doctor’s wife is the guide of the group which includes his husband’s former patients and they settle in her house. The blind people recuperate in the same order they had lost their sight.

The narrator is a heterodiegetic one and the narrative point of view is omniscient, the reader mainly “view” the action through the eyes of the group led by the doctor’s wife. The text is full of analepses and prolepses, and the peritext of the book consists of a dedication (to Pillar and the writer’s daughter, Violante) and an epigraph, a quotation from the *Book of Exhortations*: “If you can see, look. If you can look, observe.”

Even though the eyes of the blind people are healthy, they cannot see and doctors have no explanation for this awkward pandemic: “[...] I cannot find any lesion, your eyes are perfect [...] your blindness at this moment defies explanation” (Saramago, 1999, p. 8). The so-called “white blindness” is a pseudo-epidemic as blindness is not a contagious disease: “[...] blindness does not spread through contagion like an epidemic, blindness isn’t something that can be caught just by a blind man looking at someone who is not, blindness is a private matter between a person and the eyes with which he or she was born” (*ibidem*, p. 13). Thus, this pandemic has not a physiological cause, but its source might be a moral one, taking into account the bad behaviour of the majority of people that reaches its peak during the quarantine. Another element that the author emphasizes is the transitory character of human life, as Bloom noticed: “Saramago’s deepest insight is that our mundane existence is profoundly fragile, dependent upon givens that may be withdrawn any instant” (Bloom, 2005, p. xvii).

Andrew Laird stressed the complexity of this dystopian novel and linked it with the works of some other European writers and thinkers, emphasizing its double dimension – moral and political:

The title (*Essay on Blindness*) signals that this work is something more than a dark fantasy. It may be tempting to liken this achievement to the fictional-satirical scenarios of Voltaire, Swift, or Samuel Butler, but as an exploration of moral and political behaviour, Saramago's work is not a polemic with an obvious target. (Laird, 2005, p. 121)

Therefore morality plays an important role in the allegory conceived by José Saramago in this uncanny text with long and intricate sentences which defy punctuation.

## 2. Space and Emotions

The second part of the XX<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by a “spatial turn” which marked a shift in literary studies (and humanities, as well) from *time* to *spatiality*: “[...] after the Second World War, space began to reassert itself in critical theory, rivalling if not overtaking time” (Tally Jr., 2007, p. ix). The importance of space in literary studies during the last few decades is related to an increasing interest in geography manifested by scholars and researchers from different domains of humanities and social sciences:

Human geography over the last two decades has undergone a profound conceptual and methodological renaissance that has transformed it into one of the most dynamic, innovative and influential of the social sciences. The discipline, which long suffered from a negative popular reputation as a trivial, purely empirical field with little analytical substance, has moved decisively from being an importer of ideas from other fields to an exporter, and geographers are increasingly being read by scholars in the humanities and other social sciences. (Warf & Arias, 2009, p. 1)

Not only *space* has gained paramount importance in literary criticism, but *place* as well, and Sten Pultz Moslund has sketched a *patial* or *topopoetic* manner of reading a text, which represents “a reading not for the plot but for the setting, where the setting of the story is not reduced to an expendable passive or ornamental backdrop for the story's action” (Pultz Moslund, 2011, p. 30).

This topopoetic mode of reading can be easily applied to *Blindness*, which is a highly *patial* novel. One can classify *space/place* in Saramago's text into two main categories: *domestic space/place* (represented by homes) and *public space/place* (all the other public institutions: the square, the streets, the supermarket, the church or the mental hospital). The characters' movement from home to any public space is somehow an alienation process, only in a time of crisis they voluntarily accept to move to a hospital, some of them are brought there by force. The quarantine itself is an act of alienation, either voluntary or imposed by an authority.

One's home is his/her territory, a comfort zone where he/she feels safe and confident: “He knew he was in his own home, he recognised the smell, the atmosphere, the silence, he could make out the items of furniture and objects simply by touching them [...]” (Saramago, 1999, p. 2). *Polysensoriality* is one of the most important features of the analysed text, as almost all characters are blind, they have to use their touch, smell, hearing and taste for orientation and for living. The domestic *space/place* signifies the familial bonds and the characters want to be taken home when they become blind or after escaping the hospital: “The blind man pleaded, Please, will someone take me home” (*ibidem*, p. 1), “[...] the girl with dark glasses has already asked that she should be taken to her home as soon as possible” (*ibidem*, p. 79).

The reader witnesses a *reterritorialization* process when the blind patients demarcate their own space in the hospital: “Here, each person’s real home is the place where they sleep, therefore little wonder that the first concern of the new arrivals should be to choose a bed, just as they had done in the other ward, when they still had eyes to see” (*ibidem*, p. 22). This activity represents a break similar to the aggregation rites. *Multifocalization* is another feature of the novel, as the doctor’s wife is the only person who can see, she has to confirm some of the other characters’ view/memory of different places. For instance, she describes the situation of the streets after the quarantine, she tells her companions what she can see, she depicts the stench and the squalor that dominated the city, facts they can feel through their other senses.

The mental hospital is a central place in the action of the analysed novel. It is a place of sin, taking into account the cruelty manifested by some of the blind people inside it, and purgatory at the same time, as people have to face a lot of difficulties and shortcomings in that place of terror. The image of the hospital is conceived in contrast with its surrounding garden, if inside the building everything is dirty and has a noisome smell, outside the patients can breathe fresh air. By burning the hospital to ashes the author recycled the biblical myth of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The streets, after quarantine, represent a chaotic space full of blind people wandering here and there searching for food, sharing the same dirty space with animals, especially dogs. The doctor’s wife can hardly navigate on the distressing streets after the quarantine and she uses some maps of the city in order to reach her group: “[...] she saw herself bent over a map of the city, searching with the tip of her finger for the shortest route, as if she had two sets of eyes, one set watching her consult the map, another perusing the map and working out the route” (*ibidem*, p. 83). The relationship between narratives and maps has been intensely discussed and acknowledged as they collaborate with readers’ imagination to conceive new worlds or to imagine an unknown or unseen yet territory:

It is therefore not surprising that maps have long been associated with stories, another powerful catalyst of imaginative activity. When narrative uses the dual modalities of language and maps, each of these modalities expresses what the other cannot do by itself—or can only do very inefficiently. Maps, because they represent a vertical, disembodied perspective—what philosopher Thomas Nagel has called a “view from nowhere”—are not well suited to express a subject’s lived experience in an environment, while language-based narrative, because it relies on a temporal medium, is not well suited to convey a mental image of what we have called “strategic space” in an earlier chapter, namely a network of relations between objects. But when language and map complement each other, space can be represented in both its emotional/phenomenological and strategic dimensions. (Ryan, Foote and Azaryahu, 2016, p. 45)

The intricate geography of the city resonates with the complexity and the entanglement of the emotions of characters, thus, the author established a symmetry between their outer and inner worlds.

### **3. The Relationship between Environment and Human Health**

The environmental issues generated by the anthropic activity have been noticed long ago, and, consequently, scientists and scholars raised their voices in order to find solutions for these problems, but some people denied them: “This ‘cornucopian’ position is, therefore, in an important sense, not environmentalist at all, and is in some cases financially supported and disseminated by anti-environmentalist industrial pressure groups” (Garrard, 2004, p. 16). The environmental awareness generated the environmental movement which soon touched the majority of the research fields; in cultural and literary studies it engendered a new direction: ecocriticism. This approach is suitable for a plethora of texts that deal with nature and environmental crises. Only the ecological problems or catastrophes bring nature to public

attention:

Most of the time, it seems, ‘nature’ stands in the background, a more-or-less picturesque backdrop to the main drama of human activity. Often the public takes particular notice only when the natural world encroaches upon the human in such ways as to enable visceral evidence of the dangers consequent to various carelessly or intentionally exploitative actions, at which point there is some collective resolve to take action to combat the problems. (Tally Jr. & Battista, 2016, p. 5)

*Blindness*, as a complex novel, presents some moral, social, political, topographical, and environmental implications. The environmental problems are more obvious towards the end of the novel after the imposed quarantine ends. The striking image of the streets full of trash, excrements, and decomposing human corpses, emanating a sultry smell, has a significant impact on the reader, raising his/her environmental awareness:

The rubbish on the streets, which appears to be twice as much since yesterday, the human excrement, that from before semi-liquified by the torrential downpour of rain, mushy or runny, the excrement being evacuated at this very minute by these men and women as we pass, fills the air with the most awful stench, like a dense mist through which it is only possible to advance with enormous effort. In a square surrounded by trees, with a statue in the middle, a pack of dogs is devouring a man’s corpse. (Saramago, 1999, p. 95)

People are affected by *solastalgia* or the distress generated by environmental change, being disrupted from their normal life and being displaced from their homes is a cause of severe psychological problems: they are nervous, the majority of them become highly immoral and violent. But even when the characters come back home, after the burning of the hospital, they feel something is missing, the pre-pandemic life, and the doctor’s wife is the most affected as she can see the horrible landscape caused by the pandemic. Glenn Albrecht coined the concept of *solastalgia* and defined it as such:

*Solastalgia* exists when there is recognition that the beloved place in which one resides is under assault (physical desolation). This can be contrasted to the spatial and temporal dislocation and dispossession experienced as *nostalgia*. *Solastalgia* is the lived experience of the loss of value of the present and is manifest in a feeling of dislocation, of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the immediate and given. In brief, *solastalgia* is a form of homesickness one experiences when one is still at home. (Albrecht, 2006, p. 35)

“The animal turn”, which occurred in humanities and social sciences lately, represents a consequence of *speciesism*. This recent direction is a natural one if one takes into consideration the interdependence between humans and other animals and the ways in which the man-animal relations have shaped the human society:

In general, this turn entails recognition of the fact that human and animal lives have always been entangled and that animals are omnipresent in human society on both metaphorical and practical, material levels. Animals play a crucial role in cultural metaphors, myths, and identity-making, in which they function as both objects of fear and desire. (Andersson Cederholm, Björk, Jennbert & Lönngrén eds, 2014, p. 5)

Dogs are represented by Saramago in two opposite hypostases: a man’s friend (*The dog of tears*) and a man-eating animal. This canid’s double status reflects its complex nature and the important role it has played in human history. The narrator attributes human features to the dog of tears in a kind of an anthropomorphization process referring to it as “an animal of the human type” (*ibidem*, p. 97); *anthropomorphism* is considered “the second, probably more recognisable, way we can encounter an animal’s standpoint” (McHugh, McKay & Miller eds, 2021, p. 6). Other species of animals represented in *Blindness* include rabbits, hens (which are eaten raw) and rats (only two times). The garden where the old woman keeps a few rabbits and hens and grows some vegetables is an oasis in the middle of a highly polluted city. Plants grew freely and transformed the garden into a “vegetal chaos”. But soon, this last pure place is contaminated by humans who use it as a defecation area or as a burial place. The same scenario

was applied to the back garden of the mental hospital. Thus, the author emphasized people's destructive impact on the environment.

The end of the pandemic should represent the beginning of a new life for humans, in which people accept and promote the interdependence between all living creatures viewed as a universal symbiosis, in Glenn A. Albrecht's terms, a shift from the *Anthropocene* to the *Symbiocene*:

I argue that the next era in human history should be named the Symbiocene (from the Greek *sumbiosis* or companionship). The scientific meaning of the word "symbiosis" implies living together for mutual benefit, and I wish to use this profoundly important concept as the basis for what I hope will be the next period of earth history. As a core aspect of ecological thinking, symbiosis affirms the interconnectedness of life and all living things. (Albrecht, 2016, p. 13)

Only rain can purify the city and humans by washing away the rubbish and all the dirt from the streets; people also take advantage of the rain and take a shower, a symbolical act of purification. One of the conclusions that one can draw from Saramago's book is the paramount importance of the balance between nature and human society. Therefore, *Blindness* might contribute to the rise of environmental awareness among readers.

## **Conclusion**

*Blindness* is a complex novel that explores numerous aspects of human society: social, moral, political and environmental issues are analysed by the hypercritical narrator. The book can be considered as cli-fi as well, as it entails some environmental issues and the incapacity of humans to properly overcome them. The relevance of Saramago's text in the current pandemic context is obvious, and people can draw a basic conclusion from it: humans can protect themselves by preserving the environment, and by being aware of their real needs. All in all, the individual, the social and the environmental crises are generated by a lack of self-discipline in humans; an emotional balance will be reflected in harmony in society and nature.

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### **Bio-note**

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