

## Question of Identity in Jose Saramago's *Blindness*

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### Abstract

In the fold of literature, identities are storylines having a psychological grounding related to the author and the social, political, economic, moral, and ethical realities of a nation. In Jose Saramago's novel *Blindness*, such an overstretched identity is pronounced to the core wherein globalized identity is so burdensome on the localized realities. The common link generated by the identity of blindness leads to many characters in the novel *Blindness* explores or delves deep into their multiple identities culminating in themselves finding out the hidden unconscious identities inherent in them. The contraction of blindness keeps the situation in the space of wide-open nature moving the society towards coming out with an identity of non-compromising nature when it comes to the resolution of a problem. The identity of a society in a brutal state of affairs is amply demonstrated here, with all stakeholders doing things going against the grain of humility and humanity. The heartless human souls obtain the identity of tender ones. The identity born out of institutionalization makes the foot soldiers within it to commit murders without any prick of consciousness. When people become part of a structured framework, they forget the cardinal or basic emotion ruling human society that is compassion, pity, and mercy towards fellow human beings.

**Keywords:** identity, blindness, white disease, humanity, emotions, pandemic, quarantine.

Until the 19th century, Portuguese literature was unknown and unstudied outside of Portugal. Since medieval times, literature in Portugal has been influenced by many different nationalities and languages. In its earliest days, Hebrew and Arabic were spoken, and the first book ever published in Portugal was written in Hebrew. After the Renaissance, Castilian (a form of Spanish) and Portuguese became the main language of the country. English and French also influenced literature in Portugal, the slow but steady globalization in Europe, and other factors. Although there seem to be many outside influences at play in Portuguese literature, it's fair to say that it has a style that is uniquely its own.

There is a lingering sadness in Portuguese literature that can be traced back from the very beginning. Themes of love loss, religion, loyalty, the sea, and loneliness are present throughout. Much of Portuguese literature can be described as lyrical, and this style is present in Portuguese writing from its beginnings in the 12th century until the present day.

Jose Saramago brought Portugal quite a bit of attention in literature during the 19th and 20th centuries, respectively. He was known as a naturalist and realist who sought to influence the Portuguese political and social systems through his writing. The worldwide spotlight shone on Portuguese literature, however, when Jose Saramago won the 1998 Nobel Prize in Literature. He also won

Portugal's most prestigious literary award, the Camoos Prize, in 1995. The most famous of all his books (of which there were possibly more than 13) was *Blindness*, the story of a plague that strikes the members of a community blind.

Jose Saramago was born in Azinhaga, a small village northeast of Lisbon, in 1922. In 1924, Jose's family moved to Lisbon, where, although he was a good student, Jose had to leave school for financial reasons. Eventually, he began working as a translator and a journalist for the paper *Diario de Noticias*. He eventually married Ilda Reis, with whom he had a daughter in 1947. In 1988, Jose Saramago remarried Pilar del Rio, a journalist who is also the official translator of his books into Spanish. He died in 2010.

In a 1998 book by Nobel Prize winner Jose Saramago, an unnamed city is beset by an epidemic of the "white sickness," a disease that instantly turns everyone blind. Everyone, that is, except for one woman. The novel follows seven people who are quarantined along with 300 other people in an abandoned mental hospital. These seven are forced to band together to survive not only the horrors of living in a blind world but also the basest elements of humanity that take hold in the quarantine.

Once out of the quarantine, the band must try to make their way in a completely blind city, where humanity has all but descended into animal chaos. Only with the help of the woman who has miraculously been saved her sight, the

band can hold on to some shred of humanity and recognize what it is to be human.

*Blindness* was first published as *Ensaio Sobre a cegueira* in Portugal in 1995. The English translation was released in 1998. This book has been Saramago's most widely read book, partly because of the 2008 release of the movie, directed by Brazilian director Fernando Meirelles, based on the novel. Jose Saramago tells the story of a society that's been struck by a virulent epidemic of blindness. This postmodern, apocalyptic novel was originally written in Portuguese. When Saramago won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1998, *Blindness* was listed as one of his qualifying works.

The plot of *Blindness* follows the onset—and the fallout—of a highly contagious epidemic that causes people to go completely blind. The first chapter opens with a traffic jam caused by a man who has gone suddenly blind. A Good Samaritan drives him home—the blind man is now totally dependent on others. When the first blind man's wife gets home and sees her husband's predicament, she schedules an appointment with an ophthalmologist. The two taxi to the appointment because the Good Samaritan was a car thief who stole their car. After an examination, the doctor tells the first blind man, whose vision has gone completely white, that his eyes are biologically fine.

The next portion of the plot follows the contagion of the disease. The blindness—known as the “white sickness”—spreads to many of those with whom the first blind man had contact including the car thief, a girl wearing dark glasses in the ophthalmologist's waiting room, and the doctor himself. The doctor soon realizes that he is at the center of an epidemic. He tries to report it to the government, which does not initially believe him. When patients start showing up at local hospitals exhibiting the same “dazzling white” blindness, people start to take him more seriously. The government works swiftly to transport all the “infected,” who is now completely blind, to a quarantine facility in an old, rundown insane asylum. They also decide to move anyone who has had contact with the infected, now known as the “contaminated,” into the same facility.

Those in quarantine experience worsening conditions, and the doctor's wife, who is immune to the disease,

pretends to be blind to join the doctor in quarantine. People sleep in the hallways among excrement, and dead bodies go unburied for days. The delivery of ration becomes more erratic until everyone is unsure of when the next one will be. Armed guards begin shooting those who try to escape, and a gang of hoodlums forms that prevents resources from getting to that inside.

At first, the hoodlums demand trades of valuables for food, but people soon run out of items to trade. The hoodlums begin to use force and demand that women have sex to receive medicine and food. Initially, the internees resist, but when the hoodlums start starving everyone, the women volunteer to sacrifice themselves for the greater good, and a series of gang rape becomes the norm.

The doctor's wife, who has found a pair of scissors in her belongings, decides to take matters into her own hands. She silently joins the next group of women, and as the men start raping them, she sneaks up behind the leader and slits his throat. Unfortunately, the hoodlums do not dissolve—instead, a “naturally” blind man seizes power and doubles down on their tyrannical rule. When an internee uprising against the hoodlums fails, all seems lost until one blind woman takes the initiative. She returns to the hoodlum's ward, which they have barricaded off with mattresses. She pulls out her cigarette lighter and sets the mattresses on fire, which not only kills the hoodlums but manages to burn the asylum down in the process. Some of the blind escapes, including most of the first ward blind people. When they make it out of the building, they realize that there are no soldiers guarding the perimeter, and they make their escape.

The doctor's wife leads her group into town to try and find supplies and shelter. All institutions are in ruins. Families have been separated and cannot find each other. The breakdown of society is almost complete. The group eventually settles into the doctor's apartment, which seems to be one of the last clean spaces in the city. Unfortunately, the group's supplies start to run out. The doctor's wife, who has become the de facto leader of the group, decides to return to a supermarket she looted when the group first entered the town. When she arrives at the supermarket with the doctor, there is no food left: In fact, all that the doctor's wife finds are piles of dead bodies. The

horror makes her ill, and her husband helps her to a church to recover, which is also filled with blind people. While there, she remarks that all the statues have their eyes covered with cloth, which causes a panic; people flee the building. She and her husband scavenge leftover supplies, but they realize they will soon have to leave the city for the country if they hope to survive.

When they return to the flat that night, the doctor's wife starts to read a story to everyone. The first blind man, who is lying down with his eyes shut, suddenly has his vision go from stark white to complete blackness. He cries out, "I am blind" (322), only to open his eyes and find his vision returned. The doctor hypothesizes that the disease has run its course, which is supported as other group members recover their vision. The doctor's wife breaks down in relief, especially as the streets become filled with others who have recovered. The novel concludes with the doctor's wife standing on her balcony, overlooking the city as the epidemic lifts.

The question of identity has obtained an international dimension rather recently in which the true identity of an individual has come into the domain of a question mark. The question who is global? And who is local? are very difficult to deal with or tackle head-on today because all are globalized locals in their identities, genders, customs, traditions, cultural heritages, sexualities, affiliations, and differences.

In the fold of literature, identities are storylines having a psychological grounding related to the author as well as the social, political, economic, moral and ethical realities of a nation. In the novel *Blindness*, such an overstretched identity is pronounced to the core wherein globalized identity is so burdensome on the localized realities.

The common link generated by the identity of blindness leads to many characters in the novel *Blindness* explores or delves deep into their multiple identities culminating in themselves finding out the hidden unconscious identities inherent in them. The contraction of blindness keeps the situation in the space of wide-open nature, moving the society towards coming out with an identity of non-compromising nature when it comes to the resolution of a problem. The identity of a society in a brutal state of affairs is amply demonstrated here, with all stakeholders doing things going against the grain of

humility and humanity. The heartless human souls obtain the identity of tender ones. The identity born out of institutionalization makes the foot soldiers within it commit murders without any prick of consciousness. When people become part of structured framework, they forget the cardinal or basic emotion ruling human society that is compassion, pity, and mercy towards fellow human beings.

The novel offers a challenging commentary on the injustices of Portuguese society in particular and capitalist life in general. The meaning of the Portuguese word 'ensaio' is a test, a kind of rehearsal, or an experiment. The Portuguese title for *Blindness* includes this word, and it produces multiple meanings, and even it represents multiple identities in connection with different characters of the novel. Moreover, *Blindness* is a test or an experiment that guides all of us to a world of anxiety, depression, and even chaos. It also poses a question of what would happen if we all become blind. The final chapters of the novel *Blindness* guide the readers to a situation where we find that the characters ended up loitering through an apocalyptic world. The characters ended up feeling blind in their eyes and blind in feelings. Saramago's assessment of humanity is clearly articulated in the final chapters. In *Blindness*, residents of an unidentified country additionally invoke a metaphorical identification, and they may be struck through a transient epidemic of blindness, and restricted to an intellectual or mental asylum, in which some people try to maintain ethical standards inside the face of this social collapse. Here blindness functions as a metaphor and the citizens are supplied as powerless. Metaphorically they're the colonized, oppressed, and marginalized class of human beings.

*Blindness* is Saramago's harrowing novel. It is originally published in the Portuguese language as *Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira*, which means "Essay on Blindness". The emergence of new identities is a drift of the novel. Here the society is tormented by blindness, and new societies are shaped by using blindness. The term identity does have deep-rooted meaning in the present juncture wherein even all aspects of life in our society are controlled by it. The assertive identity of today spills over into the realm of political, economic, social, religious, ethical, and psychological fields of life.

The marathon race to establish one's identity brings forth unexpected conflicts and tensions in our society. In the novel *Blindness*, the various characters are representatives of these variegated identities playing out one after another, such as individuals struggling to reconcile with their surroundings, the confinement of people in a concentration camp type of situation, and their woes in it, the diametrically opposed people trying to find a common thread to survive in this world, the chaotic structure of governance system that is built up parallel to one's identity and the fluctuations in the fortunate riding upon the backs of multiple identities.

*Blindness* has several stylistic elements that are characteristic of Saramago's work. Firstly, the premise of his book is somewhat fantastic. In the novel, the entirety of society is stricken by an epidemic of blindness that turns everyone's field of vision into a milky white instead of the usual black. No amount of quarantining, disinfecting, or vaccines can stop the spread of the disease—many citizens think is spread by eye contact. Secondly, Saramago avoids the use of personal pronouns of any kind. This gives the novel a sense of floating without any concrete reference to reality.

The experiences of Saramago's quarantined characters were thrilling. He was a writer who had gotten it right and had nailed human nature so precisely that the real world was mirroring what his imagination had conjured, under slightly different circumstances, years before.

Saramago describes disaster's potential to bring out both the best and worst of people, from the misguided

actions of the city government to the clear-headed ministrations of a blinded doctor and the bravery of his sighted wife, who has feigned blindness to stay by his side when the blind is shut away from the seeing world.

The concepts of blindness and insight are serious concerns of the novelist in the novel *Blindness*. Through the character the doctor's wife, the reader is provided an added perspective of a bleak situation. Hence, she has a genuine identity that shapes the formation of other characters as well. Moreover, it is through the doctor's wife that the other characters discover one another, and they search for a renewed identity where hope and optimism move hand in hand. A new understanding and a new lifestyle emerge and a new journey from the harshness of asylum to the world of humanity, and empathy begins there.

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