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ON

DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



Blindness: Representations And Misconceptions In

Jose Saramago's '*Blindness*'

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Disability has always been treated as one of the significant themes in literature of all times and every civilizations. The interesting thing is that among the various kinds of disabilities, the most conspicuous and persistent one in the context of literary environment is 'visual disability'. The visually challenged were powerless to question the stereotypical images and misrepresentations produced by the mainstream authors. Lack of awareness about the original experience of the visually challenged led the writers into such misrepresentations.

The general misconception about blindness as ignorance and darkness is as old as the origin of civilizations and it is fundamental to all our major perceptions and constructs about the visually impaired in our common idioms and popular literature and films. Cited people feels anxieties, fear, alienation, the horror and other frustrations in darkness. These feelings are wrongly considered as the experiences of visually challenged. A normal person cannot experience the original state of visual impairment. In his thesis entitled 'REPRESENTATION AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE VISUALLY CHALLENGED IN SELECTED FICTION' Dr. Habeeb points out that "The representation of the visually impaired in literature is the confrontation between the actual experience of the challenged and the imagined and more often enforced experience of the literary world." (chapter 1 page 2)

Most of the authors follow the conventional practice of referring to the visually impaired by the adjective 'Blind'. They simply reduce the identity of their visually impaired characters into a nominal existence. In most literary works, if a character suffers from



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visual impairment, he or she is presented as blind man, blind boy or blind girl. Thus it focuses the bodily disability of the characters and neglects their individuality, potentiality, tastes, and preferences and peculiarities. For instance, in the novel 'Poor Miss Finch' by Wilkie Collins, the visually impaired heroine, Lucilla is depicted through the adjectives of 'blind girl', 'Blind Lucilla', 'Blind face', 'Blind creature' and so on. such adjectives often play a significant role in sentimentalizing the entire narrative .

Being a victim of unexpected blindness, in this paper, the researcher tries to analyse the representation and misconceptions about blindness in the novel, 'Blindness' by Portuguese writer and Nobel prize winner Jose Saramago in the light of genuine experience and real knowledge about blindness. The novel tells the story about an unnamed city where people are affected by the epidemic of white blindness. The epidemic has no identifiable cause, nor known mode of transmission. Unexpectedly the cited citizens of the city becomes blind and their mental world created by visual images is completely shattered and they enter into unexplained trauma or confusion. Gradually auditory signs take the role of visual signs and their perception and experience are mainly constructed by the sound images and past memories of visual signs.

By contradicting the conventional notion of blindness as darkness, the author introduces a new type of blindness with milky whiteness. The white sickness is presented as a different kind of disease in that it disables the infected without killing them. Here white blindness is the painless state in which the infected are not even truly blind in the traditional sense, since they can see a cloud of whiteness around them. Thus it rejects the general notion of disease as being something which inflicts pain, and death.

By rejecting the binary oppositions of dark and white, it can be stated from the real experience of researcher that past memories of colours and figures provide an imaginary vision in persons with accidental blindness. Thus unlike blindness by birth, victims of unexpected blindness connects auditory signifiers with imaginary visual images formed from the past experience of vision. The sense organ of eye is the harmonious blending of physical vision



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and psychological vision. If a person loses his physical vision, his mental eye becomes active and he gets an imaginary vision. But in the case of total absence of sight by birth, the persons cannot understand darkness, as he does not know what is light.

In a 1963 article entitled 'The Role and Status of the Blind Person' Berthold Lowenfeld states that "In an abbreviated way, let me repeat that society has regarded and treated the blind in three distinct ways: as liabilities, as wards, and as members" (112). Among the above mentioned three distinct stages of social attitude, the novel 'Blindness' gives attention to the first stage of visual disability as a curse and social burden. By isolating the blind people in quarantine and considering them as social burden, the novelist sheds light on uncivilized primitive community which had treated physical strength or ability to hunt as the supreme ability and disabled children had been thrown into the river or dark forest.

The soldiers in the quarantine consider blind people as animals or monsters. On several occasions blinds are killed almost indiscriminately as is the case with the killing of the car thief who is trying to ask for medicine for his infected leg. Soldiers also massacre a group of blind coming to claim their food. These incidents clearly mark the exclusion of blinds from the category of human. In order to exchange food ward of hoodlums demands the right to rape the women of other wards. This calculated exploitation undoubtedly states that human nature is worse than animal nature in the novel 'Blindness'. The task of the internees to bury their own dead is, a reflection of the fact that they are a separate society from the outside world. It becomes more and more apparent that the outside world fears and hates the blind internees in the quarantine. This inhuman narration of blindness misrepresents technically advanced and professionally skilled blinds in the present society.

Instead of using names novelists presents the characters with their physical appearance or profession. First blind man, first blind man's wife, The girl with dark glasses, old man with black eye patch, boy with squint eyes, blind accountant etc are major characters



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depicted through their disability of blindness. Here blindness gives identity to the characters and their individuality, tastes, preferences, peculiarities and potentiality are marginalized. Here the role of the characters is limited to their bodily function. In the modern scenario, the term 'blind' is a culturally unacceptable adjective, which is indiscriminately used by the author.

Most of the characters in the novel do not try to overcome the trauma of unexpected blindness. Instead of thinking of possibility, they continue in the darkest world of pessimism. For instance, in spite of being blind, the writer, one of the characters in the novel, writes absurdly with pen and paper. He is not ready to use brail script or any other technological support to continue his profession. The highly skilled doctor is the other example who fails to use his medical knowledge and ability through alternative means in the blinded condition. It also shows the impotence of medicine. In the novel, medicine functions as a metonymy for the whole of modern life. Medicine is the discipline where all of the benefits of modernity are brought to bear on the most fundamental problems of human life. All of the other aspects of modern life, modern government, culture and economy are useless without life and health.

But by misbehaving girl with dark glasses, the car thief repeats his criminality even in the quarantine. The accountant, blind by birth is depicted as the most efficient person in the blinded society who is skillful in using brail and walking stick. But he did not take any step to help and integrate the victims of accidental blindness. Instead of discussing about organization and creative actions to overcome the crisis, the blind people talk only about prophecies and omens. This kind of pessimistic characterization of the author misrepresents the visually challenged community as unskilled, impotent and useless.

The old man's radio acts as the symbol of knowledge and information which helps the blinds in the quarantine to know details about the outside world. The silence of the



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radio strengthens the alienation in the quarantine and it marks the decay of communication system. Thus the scene intensifies the pessimistic background of the novel.

When the cited society turn into blind society, the doctor's wife, the only character with vision becomes the central figure and organizer, and all other characters are marginalized. Through this decentering of power, the novelist considers vision as supreme and ultimate meaning, and blindness as ignorance and meaningless.

The novel exhibits the tragic plight of blinded society in which they moves back to the uncivilized primitive society and they becomes nomadic and starts hunting and fighting for food. An unnamed old woman in the novel appears as the fine example of the decay of the humanity. She is completely descended into animal survival mode, eating raw rabbits that she catches with her hands. She also lives in complete filth, her house filled with half-eaten carcasses and excrement. She seems to be human in name only. This woman has lost almost all semblance of humanity except her ability to speak.

Hence, by presenting lack of human values in society filled with blinds, the author consciously or unconsciously states that vision is the basic pillar of progress and advancement, and no development is possible in case of blindness. But in reality, our blind sisters and brothers occupy the roles of teachers, professors, advocates, singers, musicians, software engineers etc. Today new technologies are developing for improving the facilities of visually challenged. The visually impaired writer, Christine Faltz Grassman has written the novel '*The Sight Sickness*' to express his anguish over the dehumanization and nullification to which the visually impaired were put in the Nobel prize winning novel Jose Saramago's '*Blindness*'.

The novel can be analysed in three dimensions of blindness such as personal blindness, social blindness and political blindness. Personal blindness indicates the trauma faced by the characters as the result of accidental blindness. It also includes different



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attitudes and behavior patterns of characters while they facing the problem. On the other hand, social blindness reveals utter failure of interaction and communication system, collapse of social hierarchy, tyranny and oppression as the result of spreading of epidemic. It marks the transition of society from modern civilized order to primitive uncivilized order. Political blindness sheds light to the shifting of power in which those who have power in the cited society moves to margins in the blind society. As a result, Upper class loses its supremacy. The accountant, blind by birth, is the fine example of shifting of power. He was considered disabled man in the cited society. But in the blind society, he is the most efficient man who knows how to use brail and walking stick.

It may be summarized that Being a victim of unexpected blindness, here, the researcher tries to analyse Saramago's handling of the theme of blindness in the light of genuine experience and real knowledge about blindness. It is also a comparative study of factual and fictional aspects of accidental blindness. The present paper makes a humble attempt to question the depiction of blindness as ignorance, lack of organization, and impotent, and to focus on the possibilities and potentialities of blindness.

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