

Saramago's *Baltasar and Blimunda* as a historiographic metafiction

Dr. S. Maran

Associate Professor of English and Head

M. R. Govt. Arts College, Mannargudi, Tamilnadu – 614 001

rathidevamaran@gmail.com

Abstract

Postmodern literature has many characteristics like intertextuality, pastiche, maximalism, irony, hyperreality, paranoia, fragmentation and historiographic metafiction. Metafiction makes awareness in the readers that it is fiction. In a metafiction, there is a story within story or there are obvious references to the narrative. But in a historiographic metafiction, history is fictionalized and fiction is historicized and it also functions as a metafiction. In *Baltasar and Blimunda*, Saramago uses the history of King Dom João V and fictionalizes it by mixing the romance of imaginary characters like Baltasar and Blimunda.

Key words: Historiographic metafiction, historicize, fictionalize, enunciator, eponymous.

Baltasar and Blimunda is not completely a historical novel but there are elements of history in it. King Dom João V, known as the “Magnanimous”, who ruled Portugal from 1689 to 1750, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço de Gusmão (1685-1724) a Portuguese priest, naturalist and a heretic, also known both as the “Flying Man” and Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757), the Italian who fingered the keyboard of the harpsichord, are all very much in the novel. Besides, Dona Maria Ana Josefa (1683-1754), the Archduchess of Austria, and the Queen of King Dom João and her daughter, Bárbara, to celebrate whose birth Dom João built, during the years 1717 to 1755, the Convent at Mafra, are also there. When a reader comes into contact with

these historical characters, this novel, *Baltasar and Blimunda*, impresses him as a historical novel.

Historical novels, in general, have for their main purpose the reflection on historical data and historical characters. Here the writer has retrieved the past, mixed it with fiction and made the fictional world get closer to reality. It will not be easy for the reader to see where the historical part ends and where the fiction begins. Fiction creates and recreates, sometimes omitting facts, to make the characters convincing. The author creates an alternative reading of the past. The reader may not know history and to him not everything may be believable as the relationship between history and fiction is complicated. Literature built on history gives the reader a sense of having already experienced the present situation. The historical contextualization in the literary narrative makes possible an aesthetic phenomenon. The aesthetic phenomenon is built through the yearnings and the worldview suggested by the characters and the period chosen by the writer. It is common to find texts that unite fiction with reality. Through this way of creating literature is sustained as a system. At the same time it functions as an element of identity constitution and expression of identities, may be regional, national, ethnic, racial, sexual or social identity. The question of the constitution of identity is dealt with by Saramago.

In *Baltasar and Blimunda*, Saramago proposes to count for the construction of a convent in Mafra. Though there are important historical figures such as King Dom, João, Saramago makes Blimunda Sete-Luas or Seven Moons, as one of the protagonists. This woman, an exceptional character, like the doctor's wife of *Blindness*, represents the town in a historical account attributed to the King Dom João. Saramago does not change the identity of the king. But through an ironic treatment, he creates Blimunda an ordinary woman, to be an important woman to get rid of the social conventions and historical records which praise only the kings and the

rulers. The events of the eighteenth century are portrayed by the character of Blimunda, who can see what really is in the world. Thus, the reader may understand the church's historical and moral slips and the excesses of the nobility.

When the reader encounters a historical character in a novel, he/she realizes that the identity of the character is often not rational or stable as it is expected through history. So it is with Dona Maria Ana Josefa, always narrated as the queen, fulfilling her role as such. In Saramaguian narrative, she is a normal woman with carnal desires as her marriage complies but with protocol. This makes the queen fulfill her desires through the night dreams she has with her brother-in-law. She becomes weak when she feels this desire and for this reason she lives to pray. The Queen is ready, waiting and she knows that her husband is on his way. Immediately the narrator says, "Let her wait." The King and the Queen wear long dress which drags by the ground but only the king's dress is embroidered and the queen's dress is half a foot longer so that no one can see big tiptoe of the queen. The King guides the Queen by the hand to the bed, like a gentleman leading his partner on to the dance floor.

The narrator says that all these "marriage obligations" have a purpose to beget the desired son to ensure succession to the throne. The story of *Baltasar and Blimunda* is told emphatically. The names, *Baltasar and Blimunda*, complement each other as if closing a circle: the sun and the moon, the day and night which make up all lives, the clarity and mystery which govern them and which are the components of this novel. A reader may think of Blimunda as a completely fictional character, totally rooted in the fictional world of the narrative. But there are documents that prove the existence, in the reign of D. João V, of a woman very much like Blimunda: the same beautiful, 'excessive' eyes, the same powers. Her name, however, was not Blimunda, but Pedegache. The name was changed, but the identities were kept.

The truth of history is systematically called into question through the introduction of judgments and fictional constructs which allow the emergence of the enunciator's ideology, either directly through the expression of sympathy towards a specific sign, or more subtly, through the opposition, often ironically constructed, to another ideologically connoted sign. Blimunda gathers up Baltasar's will as he burns to death in the Inquisition fires. Saramago has gathered up ours to accept his new heroes. This novel has been a world-wide success. And the consecration of Blimunda as the emblematic character in the eponymous opera, certainly testifies to the effectiveness of Saramago's message.

As for Blimunda, she is a warrior and does not fear the challenges imposed by the poor and unjust life that leads her to the side of Baltasar, her husband. The couple, Baltasar and Blimunda, unlike the king and the queen, represents love in a simple way and their love is not for any political or economic power. The young woman meets Baltasar, asks his name and begins to live with him as husband and wife: "What is your name, and the man spontaneously told her, thus acknowledging that this woman had a right to question him, Baltasar Mateus, otherwise known as Sete-Sóis" (BB 44). Baltasar and Blimunda live together and the narrator presents this union as a contrast to that of the king and the queen, in a way to mock the pomp of the nobility. This relationship is not like that of the King who makes programmed "twice weekly" visits to the Queen and of the Queen who thinks of her brother-in-law and lies with the King, praying all the time. In the descriptions of the amorous relations of this couple, the surrender is mutual and the love comes out in an inexplicable way.

The 'marriage' of Baltasar and Blimunda is solemnized by Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço de Gusmão. Once again, Saramago subverts history which talks about the pomp in the marriage of Dom João and D. Maria Ana. The reader is interested in the differentiation that the author presents between the protagonist and the secondary

characters. In this sense, Blimunda may be considered the protagonist of the novel, since her character is an autonomous character responsible for the progression of the sequences that lead. This is justified by the fact that “the protagonists will stand out from the other characters appearing in sequences that do not require reimbursement of other characters” (Vieira 241). The other characters do not have as much autonomy in the narrative. The clearest demonstration of a character’s autonomy occurs when Baltasar disappears in the flying machine. Then, Blimunda devotes her days to looking for his great love and her search for Baltasar has persisted for nine years.

D Maria Ana may be a queen but she is a woman and the society will only blame her for not providing an heir to the throne and the sense of guilt of the queen increases. Blimunda has no such guilt and she lives with Baltasar as happily as it is possible. Saramago mocks the monarch’s logical but heretical view of his genitals as a site of power by subverting the baroque monumentalist aesthetic.

The king is epitomized by the history the Mafra monastery itself. The poor people are employed to aggrandize God, the King and the institutions the King and the Church command. Saramago deflates monumentalist bombast representing Dom João and other characters in grotesque disproportion to the symbol of their alleged power. The contingencies of the royal and the allegedly divine powers are revealed by demonstrating that authority depends on the harnessed will and strength of an acquiescent or coerced populace. Saramago reworks the grotesque imagery of Swift and other seventeenth and eighteenth-century satirists to serve his own radically different ideology. Besides building the Mafra monastery, this novel is the story of the construction of a wondrous flying machine, the *Passarola*, powered by the levitating energy of captured human wills, found within the body as dense cloud. The *Passarola* project, executed to the design of the priest Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço de Gusmão and by his friends, the one-handed ex-soldier Baltasar Sete-Sóis and the

clairvoyant Blimunda Sete-Luas, is conceptualist allegory demonstrating that popular will and physical endeavour, not divine might, are the motors of history. It suggests the progress of morality and technology that follow the deregulation and integration into the civic and economic spheres of life of the human energy which is suppressed, commandeered and perverted by self-aggrandising tyrants.

Conclusion: The novel's narrative binds the contrasting stories of engineering projects through the agency of a group of protagonists including fictionalised historical figures—the King and his consort, and Bartolomeu de Gusmão—and fictional characters such as Baltasar and Blimunda. Saramago's fictional accretions to historical fact fill in gaps in the record. He reinserts the agency and experience of the oppressed and marginalized social constituencies. He opposed the established view of the monastery's construction as a vision of the heroism of the downtrodden labourers. Meanwhile, Saramago also introduces an element of fantasy that, together with the narrative voice's frequent self-interruptions, advertises the gap between this new historical account and a complete and objective truth. The *Passarola* is built through loving collaboration and for the betterment of the human condition. By commandeering human wills, and defying the injunctions against 'heretical' scientific experimentation of the Portuguese Church and its Inquisition, the builders of the *Passarola* achieve a short-lived, but symbolically powerful, riposte to the reactionary hegemony of God and King. In a metafiction, Saramago fictionalizes history and historicizes fiction and thereby makes it a historiographic metafiction.

References

Pontiero, Giovanni, trans. *Baltasar and Blimunda*. By José Saramago. London : The Harvill Press,

1988. Print.

Vieira, Cristina da Costa. *Narratological Processes*. Lisbon : Colibri, 2008. Print.za