



Contents lists available at ASJP (Algerian Scientific Journal Platform)

Academic Review of social and human studiesjournal homepage: www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/552

The Insightful Blindness of Apocalypse in José Saramago's Blindness

بصيرة العمى لنهاية العالم في رواية العمى لجوزيه ساراماغو

Elhamel Lamdjed ^{1,*}, Mehiri Ramdane ².¹ Mohamed Khider University, Biskra, Algeria.² Mohamed Khider University, Biskra, Algeria.**Article info:****Abstract****Article history:**

Received : 20-08-2022

Accepted : 03-06-2023

Key words:

Apocalypse

Blindness

Insight

Conspiracy.

The current article tackles the apocalypse theme through José Saramago's novel, *Blindness*. It tends to investigate the tangible reasons for the swift prevalence of that pandemic through the lens of the conspiracy theory. It also delves into the ironic significance of this blindness and how it deepens people's insight to uncover the hypocrisies of the human race. The ideological conflict between the hegemonic system and the blind masses is of paramount importance to portray the different shifts from that fake utopian reality to the dystopian apocalyptic chaos which is manipulated by the tyrannical system. This ideological strife between the system and the internees is portrayed to highlight the depth of the individual's existential crisis. Therefore, the investigation is based on the approach of cultural materialism and the existential theory to dig out the conspiracy's dimensions. Eventually, the findings show that this apocalyptic blindness has dual effect. It is a part of the system's conspiring plot to subdue the masses, nevertheless; it arouses the internees' awareness to figure out this conspiracy and to deepen their insight about the human hypocrisy.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ملخص

نهاية العالم

العمى

البصيرة

المؤامرة.

تتناول المقالة الحالية موضوع نهاية العالم من خلال رواية خوسيه ساراماغو، العمى. كما إنه يميل إلى البحث في الأسباب الملموسة للانتشار السريع لهذا الوباء من خلال نظرية المؤامرة. كما أنه يتعمق في المغزى الخفي لهذا العمى وكيف أنه يعمق بصيرة الناس للكشف عن نفاق الجنس البشري. الصراع الأيديولوجي بين النظام المهيمن والجماهير العمياء له أهمية قصوى في القصة لتصوير التحولات المختلفة من تلك الحقيقة المثالية المزيفة إلى الفوضى المروعة التي يتلاعب بها النظام الاستبدادي لذلك عمدنا إلى التركيز عليه. يتم تصوير هذا الصراع الأيديولوجي بين النظام والمعتقلين لإبراز عمق الأزمة الوجودية للفرد. لذلك، فإن التحقيق يستند إلى مقارنة المادية الثقافية والنظرية الوجودية لاستكشاف أبعاد المؤامرة المحاكاة ضد الفرد. في النهاية، أظهرت النتائج أن هذا العمى المروع له تأثير مزدوج. فمن جهة أثبتنا أنه جزء من مؤامرة النظام التآمرية لإخضاع الجماهير تحت غطاء وباء العمى؛ ومن جهة أخرى تبين أنه ساهم في إثارة وعي المعتقلين لمعرفة هذه المؤامرة وتعميق رؤيتهم حول النفاق البشري.

1. Introduction

The theme of the apocalypse is an interesting scope that pertains to the human existence in a world of chaos. Therefore, José Saramago approaches this trope from a different perspective, blindness, to help us conceptualise our flaws and hypocrisy from an unprecedented angle. By adopting the blindness pandemic, Saramago aims at eliciting our insight to circumscribe the human atrocities and paradoxes in a doomed context. The novel evokes the human existential crisis under the guise of that apocalyptic dystopian blindness. This pandemic is portrayed through the ideological mould of the conspiracy theory where the that disguised strife between a hegemonic tyrannical system and the common masses takes multiple facets for the sake of imposing that system's control and domination with an iron fist.

The events unfold to reveal how this blindness has dual effect. It strengthens that system's control over the blind masses. However, it also contributes to raising the blind internees' awareness of the true essence of sight, insight and existence. The apocalyptic events interrelate the fake utopian existence before the apocalypse with the dystopian reality which characterise most scenes. Eventually, the blindness evokes people's deep insight with which they can grasp the system's conspiracy's dimensions and how they were unaware before the pandemic about the essence of the human values and tangible existence. Saramago ironically dramatises the human psyches, hypocrisy, virtues, paradoxes and complexities. He lets them float to the surface after expounding their aftermath in a crisis atmosphere.

2. Precursors of the Apocalypse

Literature of apocalypse has ever been an inspiring trope regarding the existential significance of life and death concepts. Its portrayal of the demarcations between the two notions is rooted in a complicated and blurry interrelation that renders existence a set of subsequent resurrections. Shermer notes, 'The end of the world is actually a renewal, a transition to a new beginning and a better life to come'(2011, p.31). The role of senses transcends the physical nature of this world through envisioning its true essence. Hence the

novel, *Blindness*, introduces a juxtapositional image of Mankind. It portrays the true essence of existence by contrasting sightful and blind views of a world escalating towards the apocalypse. Such contrastive image reveals the hypocritical nature of the human race which fluctuates between utopian inspirations and dystopian doomed reality.

In *Blindness*, the author interweaves three different visions of the world, the pre-apocalypse, the apocalypse, and the post-apocalypse. Each vision reflects a distinctive realm that tends to disclose the hypocrisies of the human race. José Saramago tends to visualise the three realms by means of new lens, blindness, as the usual sight sense shows inadequacy in circumscribing the truth. Instead, blindness, with its profound and sensitive insight seems to be the ideal lens for an objective re-presentation of this world's disturbances, atrocities and hypocritical paradoxes.

Interestingly, the author hints at this distinctive feature of blindness by replacing its common archetypal blackness with a mystic whiteness. Unlike blackness which hinders one's vision, whiteness endows the viewer with the ability to sense what is beyond physical conception even if it is not fully perceived. In this respect, the little woman states, "They say that blindness is black. Well I see everything white" (Saramago, 2017, p. 4). She expresses her ability to see with the white blindness in contrast to the obscure archetype of the dark blindness.

At the beginning of the novel, the pre-apocalyptic scene emphasises the importance of the sight sense through characterisation. The author sketches a set of characters who are in a way or another related to this sense. The doctor is an ophthalmologist; his clinic represents the space which gathers the other characters who have sight problems and look for a cure to better that sense. The doctor's wife is the only survivor of the illness; she devotes herself and her sight to help the blind. The girl with dark glasses who is immersed in immoral business to earn her living, and the man whose eyepatch symbolises his half blindness before the illness. The boy with squint is another aspect of social victimisation on the part of children.

The pre-apocalyptic scene of the novel is pregnant

with a fake utopia where all the characters seem to be overtly suffering from sight problems. Yet, the wound is deeper as the surrounding atmosphere is overloaded not with a physical microbe or virus but with a sweeping wave of fear. Blindness cannot be brought about only by these harmful germs, but also by that paralysing fear that is deliberately created and manipulated by a tyrannical system. The girl with dark glasses maintains, “Fear can cause blindness, said the girl with dark glasses. Never a truer word, that could not be truer, we were already blind the moment we turned blind, fear struck us blind, fear will keep us blind” (2017, p. 94).

Fear has ever been the precursor and impetuous catalyst of illnesses as it deteriorates the psychological stability of the individual and injects him with anxiety, paralysis and psychic chasm at the level of selfhood. Likewise, pandemics and epidemics result in the same sensation of unease leading to the apocalypse from an existential perspective. In this context, Simon Dein argues, “Pandemics indicate the fragility of life and the world, chaos, engender paralysing anxiety that the world is dissolving, a sense of detachment and raise significant issues of meaning resulting in existential crises. Self-isolation and quarantine create a sense of being separated from the community and world generally—a sense of anomie” (2020, p.6).

Human conflicts are also another reason for the pre-apocalyptic fear. Unlike natural disasters, these conflicts prove the hypocrisy of the human race and how it contributes to self-destruction where the individual becomes blind and devoid of merciful feelings. Such rigid and impotent state represents the very tragic apocalypse where human fellows share nothing except the deadly fear that ruins their existence. Dein contends, “Apocalyptic belief was invigorated by the World Wars, the Cold War, and the threat of nuclear annihilation. Fears pertaining to atomic destruction, lethal disease, and environmental catastrophes have become prevalent” (2020, p.9).

3. The Ideological Seeds of Blindness

One of the major seeds of this pre-apocalyptic fear is the political atmosphere which poisons the scene with its foul conspiracies to serve its ideological

agendas. The theory of conspiracy is of paramount importance to grasp the covert dimensions of any prevalent apocalyptic phenomenon. In his article, “The Apocalypse and Political Discourse in an Age of COVID”, James Crossley maintains, “Behind the presentation of the ironic distancing, fantastical language and sensationalist conspiracy theories, we should not lose sight, then, of the serious ideological issues at stake in presentations of apocalypticism” (2021, p.106). All the political incidents interact with the other social, economic and cultural factors which are oriented in favour of the hegemonic tyrannical regime.

This regime’s utmost priority is to dominate the masses and all life aspects to ensure its supremacy over the others by paving the way for human-made apocalypse besides the natural one. José devotes his pen to tackle the apocalyptic scene after realising that what is disguised behind this tragic mess is a political play. Therefore, he opts for the choice of the blindness trope as it entwines natural with man-made calamities. Thus Pagels argues, “Apocalyptic literature which includes visions, prophecies and predictions of cataclysm always carries political overtones, both revolutionary and reactionary” (2012, p.9). Hence the political conditions represent another facet of that doomed beginning which is exploited to pave the way for the other tragic human-made apocalypse. Bertens goes further by considering every literary text “a time- and place-bound verbal construction that is always in one way or another political” (2009, p.177).

The novel aims to offer a bunch of social and political critique to an apocalyptic order within a tragic context. It hints at how one should avoid his superficial blindness to uncover the threads of that conspiracy. James Berger writes, “Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic representations serve varied psychological and political purposes. Most prevalently, they put forward a total critique of any existing social order” (1999, p.7). Therefore, the blindness in the novel has been controllable at the beginning, but the authorial power which overlooks to the doctor’s pleas about the disease, in a way or another, deliberately contributes to its mushroomic prevalence.

When the doctor informs his officials about the case, they show reluctance and diminish the dilemma's perilous threat. Successively, the minor functionary on the phone answers, "You tell me you're a doctor, if you want me to believe you, then, of course, I believe you, but I have my orders, unless you tell me what you want to discuss I can take this matter no further" (Saramago, 2017, p. 24). The hospital director, in his turn, shows the same passive stance, "I can understand your state of mind but we must avoid any gloomy speculations that might turn out to be groundless, Many thanks, You'll be hearing from me soon, Goodbye" (2017, p. 26). The highest authority represented in the minister is no different; he reacts, "Good afternoon, this is the Minister speaking, on behalf of the Government I wish to thank you for your zeal, I'm certain that thanks to your prompt action we shall be able to limit and control the situation, meanwhile, would you please do us the favour of remaining indoors" (2017, p. 26).

Saramago dramatises this hypocritical authority and its order through the doctor's attitude towards these governing machines. He sheds light on that corrupt system as he describes its devilish strategies especially when the doctor mistakenly "realised that he had been wasting his time, that the only way of getting the information to the right quarters by a safe route would be to speak to the medical director of his own hospital service, doctor to doctor, without any civil servants in the middle, let him assume responsibility for making the bureaucratic system do its work" (2017, p. 25). The first initiative of that regime to dominate the blindness spread is not taken with help of medical sector of doctors and nurses, but with the brutal power of the police who are implemented to root the absolute power of fear among the blind victims. In one of the satirical scenes, Saramago narrates, "A few minutes later, the telephone rang yet again. It was the medical director, nervous, jumbling his words, I've just been told that the police have been informed of two cases of sudden blindness" (2017, p. 26).

After exceeding the number of a few patients who are affected by the white blindness, the illness takes over the whole atmosphere to act as the apocalypse in itself. This shift from the medical status to the

apocalyptic status of the pandemic proves that this transformation is designed by a super power whose interest lies in widening the scope of its authority at the expense of the individual's welfare. It is the pragmatic superiority spirit of the system which imposes its will on society according to what it considers, in terms of its hegemonic ideology, the common good. Therefore, the novel portrays characters who represent epitomes of the different social layers such as women (the doctor's wife), children (the boy with squint), young girls (the girl with dark glasses), the elderly (the man with eye-patch), and the educated class (the doctor). All these personalities are victimised by two types of apocalypse which represents two faces of the same coin, the illness and the conspiring system.

Both the psychological fears and political plot imply the dystopian nature of the novel's apocalyptic phase. The blindness intermingles a multi-faceted apocalypse with various dystopian aspects. On the one hand, it is likely to be a natural disaster which strikes mankind to penalize them for their dark animalistic instinct of injustice, greed, and tyranny among the human race itself. On the other hand, the pandemic starts with some characters, then it spreads to the rest. What worsens the situation with a dystopian flavour is another human act of injustice which takes the human life for granted by underestimating the perilous nature of that pandemic's threat. This inhumane act stands as a precursor to a dystopian existential whirlpool and can also be justified politically as Munir Ahmed Al-Aghberi explains, "The literary dystopia designates a fictional future world within which a human existence is extremely difficult due to political oppression, natural disasters, or declining human systems" (2021, p.4).

The tyrannical system contributes to entrenching the dark apocalypse through its hierarchical structure. This system represents the dark shadow which evokes the prevalence of the white blindness. Ironically, this latter is figured out in the hospital where the common garment is the white overall worn by doctors and nurses. Yet, the head of this system, the director, is also on top of the other victimised side. This dual role swinging between the guilty and the victim proves the credibility of the conspiracy theory where the head of the tyrannical

system is the same head of the victimised saviours. He combines the dark and the white blindnesses but sides with the most powerful one.

The second contributor to this apocalyptic crisis is the government which abuses its power. Instead of treating the first befallen persons with blindness, it imposes on them an inhumane besiege within isolated reservations of miserable conditions. These dystopian conditions represent the climax of the apocalypse. The highest authority in this system, the government, helps diffuse the illness to become a wide apocalyptic pandemic. It distinguishes between no body and cares for none except its own interest at the expense of the masses. Instead of saving lives, it endeavours to persecute them in a dystopian confinement asylums. The contagion prevails later to infect all masses. Actually, the system acts as the mastermind of that conspiracy which immerses all the people in the hell of that apocalypse by oppressing the first contaminated victims, who represent the different social layers, instead of curing them. By the deliberate overlooking of the blindness's contagious nature, it benefits from its spread by widening the scope of its dystopian reservations. This led to a destructive anarchy, chaos and torn psyches in favour of this system's dominance.

Another vital part of this tyrannical system's conspiracy is the soldiers. They are the executors of the mastermind's orders. The author depicts them as merciless inhuman monsters who listen to nothing except to their animalistic instinct of greed, lust and the system's aggressive orders. Their strict commitment to these fierce orders render them murderers, rappers and thieves. The system's instructions shift the soldiers' mission from protecting people's lives to sacrificing them. Thus the quest for existence turns into a struggle for being, a strife of life and death. The intermediary role of these soldiers lies in imposing the hegemonic system's strict orders on the blind masses in a way that portrays them as a herd of cattle. They are captured, gathered, carried, and imprisoned forcibly in governmental buildings which stand as torture reservations. The soldiers transmute the verbal form of the system's authoritative discourse into oppressive dystopian practices that aggravates the apocalyptic scene in the novel. Foucault notes,

"In every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised, and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures"(as Cited in Said, 1983, p.47). He adds, "Discourse is the power to be seized" (1981, p.53).

The fourteen rules imposed by the government foreground the foundation of the apocalypse as they revolve around the existential bond between life and death. They function as provocative measures to pave the way for the blind's doom, imminent death. The second instruction, for instance, is the prominent evidence that the masses' existence is permitted only if the hegemonic system allows it with the rules it sets; "second, leaving the building without authorisation will mean instant death"(Saramago, 2017, p.143). Similarly, the tenth instruction overlooks the internees' life by undertaking no responsibility for their death; "Tenth, in the event of a fire getting out of control, whether accidentally or on purpose, the firemen will not intervene"(2017, p.143). The discrepancy between the system's life and the masses' is emphasised through these unjust instructions as the twelfth ensures that "in the case of death, whatever the cause, the internees will bury the corpse in the yard without any formalities" (2017, p.144).

3. The Hegemonic Axes of the System

Notably, these inhuman instructions focus on three axes that propel the characters' existence to project death. These are food, order and blind obedience. This existential equation binds the utopian markers of life with the same dystopian aspects of death leading to a chaotic manifestation of the apocalypse. The three elements are utilised by the system to manipulate the masses lives and to manage their steady transformation from utopia to dystopia. Firstly, the food, which represents the source of life, is totally controlled as a weapon against the blind internees. After being promised that they will be provided with all their basic needs to guarantee them a decent life, the guarding soldiers who act as executors of the system's orders keep oppressing and blackmailing the blind prisoners by that very symbol of life, food.

Instead of providing regular amounts of food that ensure a decent human dignity, the soldiers continue

reducing the food provisions regularly till they become so scarce. The soldiers' role changes from protectors of the masses to persecuting wardens who seize every opportunity to degrade, persecute and dehumanise the internees. They set borders between the two worlds; these borders represent the dividing line between life and death by shooting every internee who dare cross them. Saramago narrates, "The blind man who had lost his way did not dare to move from where he was. In a state of anguish, he let out a loud cry, Please, help me, unaware that the soldiers had their rifles trained on him as they waited for him to tread on that invisible line dividing life from death" (2017, p.75). They also force male internees to deliver the blind women in return of food. They rape them collectively and cruelly causing the terrible death of one of the victims. Paradoxically, the series of wardens' exploitation, rape and murder does not stop until the doctor's wife ends it with another act of avenging murder against one of the soldiers. This implies that sacrifices are necessary for preserving a dignified life.

On the one hand, food represents the common bond between all the internees who attempt to organise themselves and share their food equally. During those miserable conditions, they establish a new social system which allows them to survive the minimum life conditions and to cope with the new dystopian circumstances. This new system also comes as a reaction to the hypocritical governmental system which meant to exterminate them instead of curing their blindness. So this pandemic is in favour of their collective insight when they become aware of the conspiracy woven against them thanks to this pandemic.

On the other hand, the scarcity of food propels the blind masses to scatter and fight one another for survival. It deteriorates their social system rendering them blind primitive savages who believe and live according to the barbarian motto, survival for the strongest. The doctor's wife admits this terrible fact when depicting their miserable situation, "We went down all the steps of indignity, all of them, until we reached total degradation, the same might happen here albeit in a different way, there we still had the

excuse that the degradation belonged to someone else" (2017, p.198). After the total dystopian collapse of both their society and system, they start breaking into houses, shops, supermarkets in a fierce competition to sacrifice everything and everyone for one's life.

Secondly, after the blindness spread, it has become obvious that the system does not consider all people equal. It sets among its priorities the protection of the hegemonic authoritative interests at the expense of the common social class, represented in the doctor and his fellows. This proves how hypocritical and fragile the order was before the pandemic, but people were truly blind and unaware to see this fact. Afterwards, as soon as some members of this common social class are infected by the illness, they discover the disguised nature of that tyrannical system which pretends to take into its consideration the welfare of all, but in reality, it discriminates between them unfairly. Thus the preapocalyptic order seems to be superficially sound, but it is deeply prone to collapse.

After the spread of the illness, the chasm in that hypocritical order grows to become more apparent. However, it is now distinguishing in its treatment between the oppressed and the oppressor. The new order is imposed by the hegemonic system that does not consult the common class epitomes about how their life should be. Under the pretext of preventive protection for the others, the system starts forcing the blind infected to experience a painful and harsh lifestyle that marks the onset of the dystopian apocalypse. As a matter of fact, it is not the blindness which acts as a turning point from common life to dystopia; it is the system's new order of confinement which represents the beginning of the apocalyptic nightmare. This shift is metaphorised through the first blind man who thought that "he had passed from one blindness to another, that having lived in the blindness of light, he would now pass into a blindness of darkness, the fear made him tremble" (2017, p.232).

Instead of resorting to the medical staff of doctors and nurses, the new order implements the army soldiers, to control the victims's lives and oppress their freedom. On the contrary, the doctor who symbolises the medical front which is supposed to act as saviours receive the same cruel treatment

within the same dystopian conditions. The new order transposes roles between the saviour who became oppressor (soldiers) or oppressed (doctor). This shift in roles results in purposeful anarchy controlled by the hegemonic system to transfix its authority through this messy order. The masses become unable to organise themselves or erupt any rebellious revolution to restore their fair position. The anarchy involves them in a non-stop conflict to undermine their power, silence their voice, and bury their awareness.

This systematic anarchy seems very ideological as it is planned by the regime to make the people's transfer from ordinary free life to apocalyptic controllable one very natural and fluid. There must be a mechanism by which the masses are subtly fooled and driven either by persuasion or oppression to adopt the new scapegoat role in that new hegemonic order. The doctor's wife refers to this planned anarchy,

The worst thing is that we are not organised, there should be an organisation in each building, in each street, in each district, A government, said the wife, An organisation, the human body is also an organised system, it lives as long as it keeps organised, and death is only the effect of a disorganisation, And how can a society of blind people organise itself in order to survive, By organising itself, to organise oneself is, in a way, to begin to have eyes (2017, p.212).

The system's ultimate goal is to take advantage of that dystopian speedy fluctuations so as to manipulate the masses and determine new existential functions for them as sacrifice objects rather than human subjects.

One of the interesting plots in this system's conspiring order is the soldiers' creation of another suborder with its own hegemonic strategies. While the system's order is based on confining the blind mob in closed buildings to isolate them and block their efficient social roles, the soldiers' suborder is more cruel, more tyrannical and more dystopian. It relies on power abuse to darken the masses' lives by immersing them in miserable conditions which make them wish the ultimate apocalypse, the end of their lives.

The suborder is also meant to ruin the internee's existential awareness by rendering it darker. Limiting their space aims at limiting their freedom to become

manipulative puppets under control. The subsequent torture practised upon them hypnotises their sense of being in order to incarnate a dystopian gloomy image of their world where they become hopeless, psychologically damaged and unconsciously controllable. In fact, the new suborder creates an apocalyptic world based on disorder to reflect the human injustices lying in the deep darkness of our souls. Yet, they could not realise this laden evil when they are sightful. It is the blindness insight which discloses and illuminates this painful truth about the human nature.

During the harsh conditions of confinement, the soldiers issue more persecuting rules to humiliate and disdain the internees. They want to deprive them of their humanity by killing any human sensation which may let them distinguish between what is good and what is evil. The doctor's wife preaches,

Now we are all equal regarding good and evil, please, don't ask me what good and what evil are, we knew what it was each time we had to act when blindness was an exception, what is right and what is wrong are simply different ways of understanding our relationships with the others, not that which we have with ourselves, one should not trust the latter (2017, p. 198).

Blinking the masses' senses is another target of that oppressive suborder and its terrific instructions. For aggravating the dystopian scene of the apocalypse, violence is immersed as a dialogising medium between the internees and the system's soldiers. Murder, harsh treatment, rape, striking are all facets of communication adopted by the system to root its order.

All these aspects of violence are implemented by the system to justify its power abuse within that anarchic atmosphere where it is impossible to distinguish between the warden and the victim. As the blind constitute a threat to the rest of society, it is of extreme priority to take any measures, even if aggressive, to exterminate the plague's evil regardless of the means. That is to say, some sacrifices are necessary to safeguard the interest of the majority. Yet, with the increase of blind internees, the foul conspiracy is uncovered as the pandemic's shadow hovers all over the country. The tyrannical system's order fails to stop

the illness; therefore, it resorts to distance and isolate the common infected masses far away as a pretext for the common good. Thus if someone threatens life, the other has the right to decide his death. According to the system's philosophy of existence, exposing the blind masses to dystopian turbulence is a necessary evil to prevent the pandemic's spread to the unaffected. However, the tangible goal is to protect only those in power.

Thirdly, another apocalyptic aspect which ruins the internees' lives is the blind obedience to the system's orders. This blind obedience mimics the blindness pandemic as it renders the individual conducted forcibly to someone else's orders. Besides harnessing the masses due to the pandemic, the system devises a strict set of regulations to guarantee the internees' blind obedience and turn them into manufactured individuals who are devoid of will. Ideologically speaking, the apocalypse in itself "is a planned mechanism specifically designed to instill, promise, and possibly even create an undeniable form of order in the universe"(David, 2014, p.7). By forcing them to obey orders blindly, the masses are involved in a second level of blindness which darkens their lives and dyes it with a tasteless dystopian flavour. A flavour of agony, repression, oppression, melancholy that haunts their psyches and destroys their sense of existential being.

The forcible blind obedience is also employed by the dominant system to objectify the blind individuals and put them under total domination. Hans Bertens clarifies how power discourses serve this discreet objective, "Power works through discourses and, like ideology, gives the subject the impression that to comply with its dictates is the natural thing to do and thus a free, autonomous decision. It does not need to appear repressive because it effectively turns the subject into its own watchdog"(Saramago, 2017, p.179). It tends to erase their identities and cancel their social roles since all the internees are subject to the same instructions and conditions.

These instructions do not consider the individuals' differences; by contrast, the educated (the doctor), the children (the boy), women (the girl with dark glasses)

and all the other social strata are put in the same tunnel as blind slaves. The conspiracy dimensions seem to exceed the level of confining the individual and suffocating his freedom; it strives to deny his free selfhood and distinct existence to construct a model of cloned objects whose sole ambition is just to stay alive even as an exploited objectified slave. The first blind man expresses the same pessimistic view, "Anyone who is going to die is already dead and does not know it, That we're going to die is something we know from the moment we are born, That's why, in some ways, it's as if we were born dead"(2017, p.145).

The peak of the apocalypse occurs when the internees led a revolution against the soldiers. The soldiers, in their turn, lose control of everything and fail to maintain power after being blind themselves. These incidents represent the precursors of the hegemonic system's disintegration where the executive authority becomes unable to protect itself, let alone the rest of the population. The internees seize this precious opportunity to conduct a revolution and escape the walls of those oppressive reservations. Yet, after a while, they realise that their escape is no more than a transfer from one small jail to a bigger one. It seems that the aftermath of that unjust order is shifted to the internees who form wandering groups outside and deteriorate everything in search of food. As the blindness is still widespread, the dystopian apocalyptic scenes keep darkening the image of the human existence in the novel with its shadowy inhuman conditions in the streets, buildings, supermarkets and everywhere.

The postapocalyptic scene witnesses the collapse of that tyrannical system that could not protect itself from blindness. Yet, the aftermath of this disaster cannot omit the traces of dystopian atmosphere on the individuals who, in spite of their suffering, go through a stage of maturity they undertake by force when they are subjected to the different types of oppression and pressure. After the rape incidents, the doctor's wife declares, "We are no longer the same women as when we left here"(2017, p.132). Consequently, they gain newer identities, stronger psyches, as well as a resistant spirit against the surrounding hard conditions.

Furthermore, the end of the blindness is immediately followed by a collapse of that authoritative system which is infected by the same pandemic. All the internees fled outside forming human herds roaming here and there seeking food. Another struggle erupts among the internees' herds to maintain their existence. This can be read as another facet of the system's conspiracy which planned for shifting the struggle from its vertical dimension (authority versus masses) to a horizontal one (masses versus masses) to keep manipulating the social front and subdue its freedom even outside the walls of their custody. The new plot focuses on transmitting the same fears, tragedies and agonies outside to be practised by one group of escapers upon the other.

4. The Blindness's Insight

The blindness radiation surpasses its dark prototype. José implements a white version of this pandemic which swept the whole country as a threat to human existence. Interestingly, this pandemic has dual effect on the people. On the one hand, it contributes to digging out the animalistic and instinctive nature of humans who start fighting to death for food to maintain their existence. Moreover, it uncovers the system's hypocritical nature which gives up its responsibility of protecting civil and peaceful people; instead, it takes advantage of this illness in order to serve its interests, consolidate its hegemonic power and control the social front by entrenching that crack between the blind masses and those in authority. The doctor's wife contends: "Don't think that blindness has made us better people, It hasn't made us any worse, We're on our way though, just look at what happens when it's time to share out the food" (2017, p. 96).

The blindness turns their utopian world into a dystopian nightmare. In such ordeals, people are expected to be more thoughtful and concerned. They are supposed to consolidate one another with every aspect of solidarity. Yet, what happens is the tangible essence of blindness which darkens humans with selfishness, greed and fight in search of an animalistic version of existence. The doctor's wife maintains, "You have no idea what it is like to watch two blind people fighting, Fighting has always been, more or

less, a form of blindness, This is different, Do what you think best, but don't forget what we are here, blind, simply blind, blind people with no fine speeches or commiserations" (2017, p. 96).

Exceptionally, the doctor's wife is the only eye-witness who does not lose her sight. She is portrayed as the voice of insight and wisdom that contrasts the two versions of the world before and after the pandemic. She stands for the voice of wisdom which laments the loss of utopian humanity as she states: "The charitable, picturesque world of the little blind orphans is finished, we are now in the harsh, cruel, implacable kingdom of the blind, If only you could see what I am obliged to see, you would want to be blind, I believe you, but there's no need, because I'm already blind" (2017, pp. 96 -97) The secret behind her deep insight is the meditation on people's eyes where the essence of soul and existence lies. She explains: "I've spent my life looking into people's eyes, it is the only part of the body where a soul might still exist and if those eyes are lost, Tomorrow I'm going to tell them I can see" (2017, p.97).

Paradoxically, over time, the internees start meditating on the different hardships they went through to figure out that thanks to this blindness, their insightful senses have become sharper. Also, their sense of human sympathy grows and matures to compensate for the misery they suffer from by the system's oppression. Therefore, the blindness is not characterised by darkness; on the contrary, it is dyed with whiteness hinting that it opens a new insightful vision never experienced even with the ordinary sight. This white blindness lets the internees transcend the physical dimension to explore unique inner sensations. Consequently, the doctor's wife "serenely wished that she, too, could turn blind, penetrate the visible skin of things and pass to their inner side, to their dazzling and irremediable blindness" (2017, p.43).

In the same context, the blind internees deny the association of this blindness with darkness. Conversely, they believe that "blindness did not mean being plunged into banal darkness, but living inside a luminous halo" (2017, p.66). This luminous halo connotes the light of sight and wisdom that is missing

in many sound people. The fact that someone has a sound sight in no way means that he can see. That is, some blind can see better than sightful people or as the man with a black eyepatch puts it, “Do you want me to tell you what I think, ‘Yes, do’, I don’t think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see” (2017, p.235). The main reason for this negative blindness is the selfish lust for existence which invigorates the slogan, survival for the strongest. It has become a matter of life or death between the tyrannical system and the masses. However, this led to absencing the principle of coexistence between these two conflicting powers.

On the other hand, for some characters, feelings and emotions are also influenced by blindness but differently. They no longer convey the same sensations the individual used to experience before his sight loss. It seems that blindness defamiliarises the individual’s emotional faculty as it no longer generates the same feelings like before. In the peak of the dystopian turbulence, the old woman expresses her sympathy towards the girl with dark glasses as the meeting with her parents after her blindness will not be like when she had sound eyesight. She comments: “Poor woman, Your poor parents, poor you, when you meet up, blind in eyes and blind in feelings, because the feelings with which we have lived and which allowed us to live as we were, depended on our having the eyes we were born with, without eyes feelings become something different, we do not know how, we do not know what” (2017, p.181).

The dystopian apocalypse triggers that existential strife rendering people unable to come up with a common solution to this abrupt dilemma. So they resort to exterminate one another instead of unifying their vision for a better refuge for both sides. In this whirlpool, they have become really blind not in the sense that no one can see the other, but in the sense that every one refuses to see the other. The man with the eyepatch states, “I think we are blind, blind but seeing, blind people who can see, but do not see” (2017, p.235). One of the system’s instilled strategies to justify its deeds is propagating and marketing the oriented fear which propagates the ideology of

one’s existence requires the other’s nothingness. This existential equation represents the crux of the dystopian apocalypse which results in the tangible blindness with its dark and dehumanising miasma.

Thus what is portrayed by Saramago is not the eyes’ blindness; it is the heart’s shadowy evil which haunts every one. Greed, anger, fear, hatred and chaos are all aspects of this spaceless apocalyptic spirit with which human beings turn their utopian peace into dystopian darkness. Eventually, all this experience develops a sense of responsibility and insight which demonstrates that people were truly blind before the pandemic not after it. On behalf of one of his characters, Saramago alludes to this symbolic juxtaposition, “It is the light which does not allow them to see” (2017, p.197).

4. Conclusion

The novel, *Blindness*, by José Saramago portrays the apocalypse from different perspectives. Thus this article discussed the two facets of the apocalyptic blindness, as a natural as well as man-made calamity. It also highlighted how blindness is implemented by the hegemonic system to manipulate the blind mob. In return, the blind internees went through a dystopian experience which helped them mature and evoke their awareness to uncover the system’s ideological plot. Consequently, thanks to this dystopian ordeal, the individual’s insight became deeper as the apocalypse propels the internees to pass through that existential crisis dramatically.

Hence we adopted the existential theory to shed light how the blind internees’ sense of selfhood grew to let the individuals realise that their tangible sight lies in the insight faculty rather than their mere eyes. The disguised struggle for dominance between the different social and political powers has also been scrutinised critically from a cultural materialist perspective. All in all, the blindness disturbs the whole social and political structures revealing that the fake preapocalyptic stability was no more than a fake utopian reality triggered by the system’s ideology of propagated fear.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that he has no conflict of interest.

- References

- Al-Aghberi, M. A. (2021). "Pandemic apocalypse in between dystopias: Observations from Post-apocalyptic Novels". *Angles*, (12). <https://doi.org/10.4000/angles.4595>.
- Berger, J. (1999). *After the end: Representations of post-apocalypse*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Bertens, H. (2009). *Literary theory: The basics*. Taylor & Francis.
- Crossley, J. (2021). "The apocalypse and political discourse in an age of Covid". *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 44(1), 93–111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064x211025464>
- Dein, S. (2020). "Covid-19 and the apocalypse: Religious and secular perspectives". *Journal of Religion and Health*, 60(1), 5–15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01100-w>
- Foucault, Michel (1981) 'The Order of Discourse', in Robert Young (ed.) *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. Routledge.
- Jackson, A. D. (2014). *A world-maker's will: The post-apocalypse and human power in Cormac McCarthy's the road* (dissertation). Lakehead University, KnowledgeCommons.
- Pagels, E. (2012). *Revelations: Visions, prophecy and politics in the book of revelation*. London: Penguin Books.
- Said, E. W. (1983). *The world, the text, and the critic*. Harvard University Press.
- Saramago, J., & Pontiero, G. (2017). *Blindness*. Vintage.
- Shermer, M. (n.d.). (2011). The end is always nigh. *New Scientist*, 210(2815), 30–31. [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0262-4079\(11\)61309-2](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0262-4079(11)61309-2).

How to cite this article according to the APA method

Elhamel Lamdjed, Mehiri Ramdane (2024), The Insightful Blindness of Apocalypse in José Saramago's *Blindness*, academic review of social and human studies, vol 16, number 01, Hassiba Ben Bouali University of Chlef, Algeria, pp: 183-193.