

## Teaching Disability as a Pure Metaphor

Dr. G. Manivannan &

Prof. S. Maran

Associate Prof. & Head, M. R. Govt. Arts College, Mannargudi, Tiruvarur Dt., (Tamil Nadu) India

### Abstract

People with good physique do not like people with disabilities. Disability, often, has negative connotations when used metaphorically, while the lived experience of disability can be quite different. Some pedagogical aspects of teaching the novel, *Blindness* by José Saramago, are discussed here. First possible interpretations of the parable that are useful for teaching are exhibited. Then, the ways blindness is constructed are demonstrated. Finally, several strategies are offered by which *Blindness*, and other literary portrayals, can be used in the classroom in a critical manner, one that values human variation and diversity.

**Key Words:** Disability studies, Literature, Pedagogy, Blindness

This article is an attempt to grapple with integrating a disability related text in the general curriculum. For this purpose, the novel *Blindness* by José Saramago is discussed. The novel *Blindness* was written in 1995, was a best seller throughout Europe and was translated from Portuguese into numerous languages. *Blindness*, like many other novels, uses disability to construct a story about human ideals, tragedy and triumph. It is not a story about people who are blind, but an ableist metaphor that appropriated blindness as its signifier.

### **Possible interpretations of the parable, blindness, from a social science perspective**

Discussing the novel with students can be useful in interrogating profound questions about the nature of social arrangements and human behavior. Schor (1999) claims that blindness is a privileged metaphor, the trope of all tropes. Indeed, Saramago uses

blindness to create an allegory about the breakdown of humanity and morality in modern societies. He suggests that as a society, we cannot deal with our postmodern state of affairs with its rampant violence, oppression, and lack of empathy.

One can also take this parable to distinctly sociological concepts. Throughout the novel, readers see what happens when social norms conflate and lose their meaning. The novel can also be interpreted and taught from a philosophical and existential standpoint. *Blindness* is an allegory about the human condition. In the absence of social or cultural norms, we understand more clearly the core of humanity. Saramago's harsh depiction of violence, rape, and loss of dignity reinforce pessimistic accounts about the cruelty of humankind.

The novel also alludes to Darwinist notions of the survival of the fittest. In this instance,

one could compare *Blindness* to *Lord of the Flies* (1954) to discuss the implications of such an evolutionary vision of society. In the novel, when all are blinded, power is exerted by means of force. Men with weapons rape women. Stronger men control the food supply. Yet, others with scarce resources share them with others. Thus, the novel can be construed as a reactionary moral tale of good and evil, but also the humanity and kindness people can embody.

Another possible reading could employ a gender-based lens. In fact, the only identity constructs that seem meaningful and known to the reader are gender, age and ability to see. The novel is ripe for feminist analysis in general and the centrality of the doctor's wife strengthens these interpretations. On a symbolic and corporeal level, she is the only character who has not lost her sight, or her vision. In feminist thought, vision represents knowledge. Saramago reverses the typical role of the woman and turns her into the only possible knower. Unlike most literary accounts, the woman is not the object of the gaze, but instead does the only one possess the ability to gaze. However, this ability still does not seem to give her an advantage as she is again objectified, raped and mistreated. She cannot reveal her only strength, her ability to see, for fear of being exploited or punished. So, although her situation is advantageous, it is only relatively so.

One might even say that her vision becomes a burden as the traditional gender roles are never reversed. She remains the "doctor's wife", whose role as nurturer intensifies tenfold. The blind band uses her as a

compass and, throughout the novel, she remains the ideal of normality. The band then becomes increasingly dependent and helpless, while the doctor's wife feels a greater and greater sense of responsibility. For example in the conversation the doctor's wife has with the girl with the dark glasses, she says:

Today is today, tomorrow will bring what tomorrow brings, and today is my responsibility, not tomorrow if I should turn blind. What do you mean by responsibility? The responsibility of having my eyesight when others have lost theirs. You cannot hope to guide or provide food for all the blind people in the world. I ought to.  
(p.225)

The doctor's wife's ability to see seems to haunt her. She does not perceive sight as a source of power, but rather the contrary. She remarks, "You do not know, you cannot know, what it means to have eyes in a world in which everyone else is blind. I am not a queen, no, I am simply the one who was born to see this horror" (p.247).

### **Blindness as a metaphor in the classroom**

Saramago's use of the narrative prosthesis is interesting because midway through the story blindness becomes the norm. All the characters(except the doctor's wife) gradually go blind and have to navigate in a world made for the sighted. The situation could have led to a realization that the boundaries of normality are permeable and arbitrary, it does not even lead to a reversal in power relations in which the world is perceived through the perspective of those

who do not see. The urge to cure is too tempting, and the novel is resolved by having the blind magically regain their eyesight. Although this is a departure from stereotypical portrayals of cure (since medical interventions were not the cause of this perceived miracle), it is a pure rhetorical device reinforcing a binary of dis/ability in which sight/ability is superior. Any political criticism regarding the need to accommodate different ways of sensing the world is never expressed in this moralist tale. As one of the characters remarks, "Perhaps humanity will manage to live without eyes, but then it will cease to be humanity" (P.229).

### **Ways to utilize metaphoric novels to discuss disability critically**

Using blindness as metaphor in novels reinforces a precarious duality: 1) the perception that blindness is symbolic of something (not simply a different form of sensing); and 2) reification of what blindness is supposed to represent, to stand for. Saramago's use of blindness burdens it with negativity on the one hand (social catastrophe and personal tragedy), and a quality that brings up the "real human spirit" within people (be it good or evil) on the other. Using blindness as a metaphor is problematic because it has a real referent, people with visual impairments. The following suggestions are meant to start the much needed discussion.

#### **1. Teaching critical thinking, understanding it as a metaphor**

Allegories provide fruitful ground for interpretation and education. As teachers,

we can manipulate the parable and extract multiple meanings to convey a variety of concepts as well as moral lessons. However, it is important to be clear with students that this is what we are doing. Allegories always stand for something else: they are not substitutes for realistic accounts. One might discuss what an allegory is and the rules of the genre, compare this novel with other allegorical tales and discuss the significance of metaphors and allegories in everyday life. Teachers must also talk about the need to be critical and think about the signifier itself and why it was chosen. Using metaphors is not wrong in and of itself, but one must be wary of any use that masks the oppressive nature of the discourse that produces them. For instance, ableist language (e.g. standing tall, seeing is believing) takes for granted that these activities are dominant and preferred. Disabling language (e.g. blind to the fact, lame idea) constructs disability as bad, as a lack. Instead of exerting power, we can teach how power is created in ableist language and imagery.

#### **2. Contrast with first person narratives**

Novels give us a particular image of reality, one which can be construed as "real" if the author is successful. It is important to engage students with images of disability and simultaneously analyze them as such. If students do not have first-hand knowledge about blindness and other disabilities, their perception is shaped by axioms produced by mass media and literary imagery. The imagery of blind people as tragic and lacking is a prevalent one in literature and film.

### 3. Discussing the social construction of sight and its significance

One of the strongest rhetorical devices used in the novel is that it shifts the centre, and makes seeing a peripheral phenomenon. Through this imaginary act, we can crystallize ideas about the social construction of disability. We can go where Saramago dared not talk not only about the construction of blindness, but also about the construction of sight. When using blindness as a metaphor, the power relations between seeing and not seeing are obscured. Seeing is viewed as the hegemonic mode of experiencing the world, and indeed the only way to experience it. Other forms of experience are devalued and seen as unnatural. The equation of all things meaningful with sight, in turn, equates lack with blindness. One can start deconstructing such dichotomies by paying attention to the way they are constructed in the first place.

### 4. How can we construct a world accessible for all?

Saramago constructs a world in which people who are blind become the majority. This reversal can be used to discuss the possibilities of such a world. In the novel, tactile gaze, as opposed to visuality, leads to

outer chaos and confusion of boundaries, but other “visions” are possible. Such conjecturing is not an easy task and it requires a leap of imagination, not just for the sighted among us. We can ask our students to create their own version of a world in which the dominant way of experiencing the world is not through vision. Discussing with students other ways of sensing the world and creating a vision of such a world does not have to involve a simulation activity. We may pose the following questions to students: 1. what would we need to change to make such a world more accessible? 2. How can we change our environment to make it more accessible? These are valuable questions that could be answered by taking the novel a step further than the allegorical realm.

### Conclusion: Disability as metaphor in the classroom

The use of disability as a metaphor or a literary device cannot be condemned altogether. This is to show how to seize the moment of disability’s appearance in the general curriculum as a teachable moment. As teachers, instructors and disability scholars, we should use disability to normalize themselves.

### References:

1. Baynton, D. (2011). Disability and the justification of inequality in American History. In Longmore P. and Umansky L. (Eds.), *The New Disability History*, New York: New York University Press
2. Camus, A. (1991). *The Plague*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert. NY: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1947)
3. Golding, W. (1954). *Lord of the Flies*. Salisbury: Faber and Faber.
4. Saramago, J. (1997). *Blindness*. (Pontiero, G., Trans.). Orlando: Harcourt books.
5. Wells, H.G. (1904). *The Planet of the Blind*. Strand Magazine. London.