

The Language of José Saramago

Dr. G. Manivannan and Prof. S. Maran

M. R. Govt. Arts College, Mannargudi, Tiruvarur Dt. (Tamil Nadu) India

Abstract

José Saramago's novels are unique. They are unique in themes, style, description and characterization. With reference to his novel *Blindness*, the theme is unique. An unnamed city is infected with white amaurosis. Many people are infected but not the doctor's wife. There are names for the characters. Characters are called by the descriptions or by their professions like the doctor, the doctor's wife, the girl with dark glasses, etc. as is vogue in well-known places. Saramago's description is extraordinary. He uses long winding sentences. He is very different as is E.E. Cummings. One sentence of Saramago runs for a page. Paragraphs are big, one paragraph for one page. There are no frequent periods. Sentences are written together by the use of commas. There are no quotation marks. As a clue, only the speaker's first letter is capitalized.

Key Words: Subversion, white amaurosis, epidemic, narratology, centre, the other, Marxism, deconstruction, postmodernism

There are so many languages as there are so many races. There are many styles of handling the same language, particularly the language styles and varieties of English. In poetry spelling, syntax and even grammar are changed and everybody accepts. But the poetry of E.E. Cummings is very different. He has written one letter as one sentence, one letter as one stanza, one single sentence as one complete poem, capitalization in the middle and a very different punctuation. Though there adverse criticism on Cummings, he has succeeded as a great poet.

The language of José Saramago is different. Saramago has not used the same writing technique in his earlier short stories. It is possible for us only to study the translations

of his novels into English and study the English translations as his technique and he himself says he has used the same technique in Portuguese also.

In his novels Saramago has used long winding sentences. Sometimes a sentence goes on for one page and sometimes even beyond. For example,

When the voice fell silent, the doctor, on his own, because he was getting to know every nook and cranny in the place, went to the door of the other ward to inform the inmates, We have buried our dead, Well, if you've buried some, you can bury the rest, replied a man's voice for within, The agreement was that each ward would bury its own dead, we counted four

and buried them, That's fine, tomorrow we'll deal with those from here, said another masculine voice, . . . (Blindness 87)

This sentence from the novel, *Blindness* is not over yet. It has seventy eight words. The end is marked by a period. The sentence is connected by twenty eight commas. Within this sentence, there are twenty four grammatically correct clauses, one comma is used for a phrase, two commas are used to express 'well', and 'no', and one comma is used to give and explanation. Normally other writers could have used thirteen sentences. In all his novels, Saramago has used only such constructions. This writing is very different from that of the other writers. Not only his ideas are subversive but his writing technique is also subversive.

This is very tough for any lay reader. But once a reader gets the grasp of his story, the characters and the description, the reader cannot place the novel anywhere else but to finish. It is possible for Saramago because his sentences are scenes. Any reader can visualize the scenes Saramago described. Ernest Hemingway has such description. But Saramago has presented extraordinary scenes. Our eyes do not stop watching beautiful scenes. When a writer uses small, small sentences, the reader takes a breath, looks aside and then read. But when a reader reads a long sentence, he cannot take his eyes away as he cannot when he watches a beautiful scene. And one more thing, if his eyes go astray he loses the coherence and continuity of the scene. The long sentences of Saramago is compelling any reader to

read continuously. Otherwise the beauty of the scenes he is describing cannot be felt.

Sure his style is very different. To write long sentences full stops should be avoided. So, Saramago has used full stops rarely. When full stops are avoided, then the sentence becomes long. When the sentence becomes long, the scenes are larger and more beautiful. In his novels Saramago has not used quotation marks to mark direct speeches. His explanation is that when we speak we do not use quotation marks. So there is no necessity of using quotation marks in a novel to mark direct speeches. Initially it is not possible for a reader to understand who speaks now and who speaks then. Instead he has used clauses. The clauses are joined by commas and thereby he has used a lot of commas instead of periods. When someone speaks, the first letter is capitalized and when the other person speaks the first letter of his clause is capitalized. There are no other clues for the reader. Even if there are more than two speakers, Saramago has not given any more clues or any other punctuation marks. It is for the reader to read and understand. Normally, what Saramago does is this: he lays a very good foundation for the reader to grasp the story and the prominent characters. When Saramago goes on with more characters, the reader has no difficulty as she/he has a good understanding of the novel.

As already discussed the sentences of Saramago are very long, sometimes more than a page. Likewise his paragraphs go on for pages. In the novels of Saramago, the reader can see words, words and words.

There are not many paragraph breaks and gaps but only words. So, he has no necessity to stop for a conversation. As he does not use periods, he has the liberty to write longer sentences and longer paragraphs.

In the novel *Blindness* an entire city is infected with psychic blindness. To begin with, the city has no name. Suddenly the white amaurosis infects people one by one. We have heard of many epidemics like plague and other diseases. This epidemic is sudden blindness, a white blindness. Normally a blind man may 'see' things black. When we close our eyes everything becomes black and we assume it must be black for the blind but in *Blindness* it is white blindness and highly contagious. So far no evidence of such symptoms has ever been established.

Certainly this white amaurosis or white blindness is different and unheard of ever before and it is highly contagious. Saramago has not given any name to any of his characters. The readers' job of reading, understanding and appreciating is made tough. For the better understanding of the reader, Saramago does not bring in too many characters at the beginning. He brings the readers slowly into the groove and then introduces all other characters.

In this novel there are characters like the doctor. If there is any other doctor, this doctor is defined in a different way. In addition to the doctor, there is the doctor's wife, the car thief, the girl with dark glasses, the policeman, the man driving the car, the boy with the squint, the taxi driver, the pharmacist's assistant, the hotel maid, the

employee from the surgery, the telephonist, the minister, the medical director, the old man with the black eye patch, the fellow with the gun, the first blind man, the blind(normal blind) clerk, the blind lovers, wife of the first blind man, the chambermaid, the insomniac woman and the woman no one knows.

Saramago's subversive tactics are brilliant. In this novel *Blindness*, there are no characters with any names. He has gone away from the established norms of giving names to characters. In villages, it was a custom to call people by their description. Saramago gives a twist by making one character with eyesight. He keeps the doctor's wife safe from the infection. She is fine throughout the novel. She helps her husband, helps the sick and helps other people. She is the eye of the novel. With her eyes we understand the story and plight of the people in the novel. She is ready to suffer the fate of her husband being his wife in the real sense. She acts as though she were blind. She is the symbol of hope, light and path. There is desperation in the novel. People suffer for no fault of their but there is hope in the form of the doctor's wife.

Conclusion

Saramago has subverted the real blindness. He has not given names to characters. He has not used normal writing pattern. As Derrida pointed out, Saramago has made the other the centre. He is a Communist and Marxism prevails throughout his arguments. As the Postmodernists believe there is no order in *Blindness*. Thus Saramago creates a style in description and in characterization.

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