

# Panopticism in José Saramago's *Blindness*

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**Abstract**—José Saramago, the Portuguese writer, expresses in the novel *Blindness* (1995) the fear of dehumanization in the contemporary globalized world. This unfavorable homogenization is represented in *Blindness* through a white blindness that obliterates the individuals' physical interaction with the world. The contagion, in fact, is related to the individuals' dependence upon the social constraints and working of power. It is evident in the nature of the relationships between the characters and the authorities and also in the interaction of the citizens with each other. Thus, *Blindness* can be read as a text demonstrating how subjection of the modern man to the power relations can bring about a real panoptical society. This feature makes the text suitable to be read in terms of Foucault's views on power relations and in particular, panopticism. As a result, this study attempts to investigate how *Blindness* society is in nature a Panopticon in which power relations are present in the context of all relationships.

**Index Terms**—*Blindness*, disciplinary power, globalization, José Saramago, Michel Foucault, Panopticon

## I. INTRODUCTION

Bertolt Brecht claims in his work, *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, that there is no true distinction between political and apolitical art. He insists that “all art is political and the question is simply whether art attacks existing structures of power or refuses such attacks and thereby contributes to the continuation of those structures” (Booker, 1994, p. 175). In fact, the issues of power structures and power relations have always constituted a major part in the works of philosophers, thinkers and literary theorists. Michel Foucault is widely acknowledged as being one of the most influential thinkers of power relations and surveillance as social facts. Foucault's theories addressed the power relationships and how they function within social context. According to him, power operates within the relationships between people in which one would affect another's action. It is different from force or violence which only affects the person physically; rather it is a strategy that makes a free subject does something through restricting or altering his will. He has called this kind of power disciplinary power. Disciplinary power is a type of power that is based on a permanent system of surveillance which eventually results in individuals' self-regulation of their behavior (Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 2003, p. 36).

For Foucault, disciplinary power is in the best way exemplified by Jeremy Bentham's panopticism. Panopticon is “an architectural structure that will permit a supervisor to see all without being seen by anyone under surveillance” (Schrift, 2013, p. 146). The “unequal gaze” caused “the internalization of the supervisor” (ibid: p. 146). This means one is less likely to break rules if he believes he is being watched, even if he is not.

The Portuguese novelist, José Saramago, is well-known for controversial novels in which his sharp criticism of any form of imposing power is transparent. His noble prize awarded novel, *Blindness* (1995) – original title: *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* –, expresses Saramago's fear of dehumanization in a globalized world where any contemporary society may lead to Panopticon through the obligation to follow what power structures define and establish.

This study sets out to investigate the novel *Blindness* in terms of working of the power relations and their consequences on the life of human beings. *Blindness* conveys Saramago's fear of concealed threat that modern society might encounter: collective blindness when society itself becomes blind because all the society is the Panopticon. There is a distinct globalization perspective in this novel; all habitants of the world get blind. Indeed, the plague reveals the power relations underlying modern civilization and the panopticism that is present everywhere, not only in the relationship between the authority and the people, but also in the relationship among the populace who has blindly submitted to it.

## II. DISCUSSION

“Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain ... individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (Foucault, 1980, p. 98). This statement reveals how Foucault's view about power differs from the traditional view on this issue. Foucault regards the power problem within the relations between society, individuals, groups and institutions. He defines a micro-physics of power which is constituted by a power that is strategic and tactical rather than acquired, preserved or possessed. This type of power is not restricted to the relation between the oppressors and the oppressed, but it is present in any type of

relationship between the members of the society. For this reason, in *Critical theory/intellectual theory* (1988) Foucault says:

“I am not referring to Power with a capital P, dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of the social body. In fact, there are power relations. They are multiple; they have different forms, they can be in play in family relations, or within an institution, or an administration” (qtd. 2010, p. 58).

Foucault believes that power can be productive, because it influences individuals' consideration of their own thoughts and behavior and leads to individual's self-discipline. In this way, it causes new behaviors to appear as norms. He chronicles the appearance of this kind of disciplinary power in his highly acclaimed book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975).

In this book, Foucault traces the emergence of the disciplinary power back to the massive changes that occurred in Western penal systems during the modern age. The appearance of new means of punishment, imprisonment instead of execution, heralded a technology of power that acts through the soul to subject and train the body. This technique of power is discipline.

To put simply, discipline for Foucault is a set of strategies, procedures and behaviors that pervades the individual's general thinking and behaviour. This purpose achieves through four ways: the first is “the art of distributions: it operates through certain *spatial* disposition of individuals, which is usually attained through imprisonment” (Bällan, 2010, p. 59). The prisoner is confined in an isolated room; so that he is separated from other prisoners (the patients of psychiatric clinics are disposed in the same way). The second way is “the control of activity” (Schrift, 2013, p. 144): discipline controls strictly the activity of the body according to a strict daily schedule. The next way is “the organization of geneses” (Schrift, 2013, p. 144): It introduces “exercises to maximize individual efficiency” (Schrift, 2013, p. 144). Here, duration is divided into certain segments with certain analytical plans. At the end of each temporal segment, an examination is done to decide if a subject has reached the required level or not. Reaching the required level is possible through the exercise of certain tasks. The last way is “the composition of forces: discipline is the coordinator force of “all the parts of a system” (Bällan, 2010, p. 60). This coordination is done through discipline's use of “what Foucault calls “tactics” (ibid: p. 60), through which “the product of the various forces is increased by their calculated combination” (ibid: p. 60).

From what was discussed, Foucault concludes that the success of disciplinary power depends on three elements: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination. In hierarchical observation, the obedience of what discipline imposes is assured by means of observation. The ruling group observes if the individuals behave in accordance with the objectives of the system of power or not. If an individual behaves in a different way from what the system wants, he will be regarded as an abnormal. Thus, slight departure from correct behavior will be punished. The third instrument of discipline, examination, combines the hierarchal observation and normalizing judgment. It examines, judges, selects, or excludes according to the conformity of the individuals to the norm. “That is to say, the modern individual is what he or she is by virtue of comparison with, conformity to, and differentiation from the norm, and it is this individual's individuality itself that is produced through the disciplinary power that examines and judges it” (Schrift, 2013, p. 145). In this way, the exercise of disciplinary power leads to what Foucault calls panopticism.

Foucault relates panopticism to the early modern society's measures for controlling contagious diseases. The infected ones were excluded from the society in order to reduce the risk of infection. The confinement of the diseased ones entailed a system of constant surveillance in which the dominant group controlled the people. This imprisonment of individuals represents for Foucault the model according to which the modern world controls the human beings. In this surveillance system,

... the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the center and periphery in which ... each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and dead – all this constitutes a compact model of disciplinary mechanism. (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 1979 p. 197)

In the nineteenth century, the same system of constant surveillance was applied for identifying and controlling the abnormal individuals like “beggars, vagabonds, madmen, and the disorderly” (Bertens, 1995, p. 150). Foucault's metaphor for this type of order in the society is Panopticon, an architectural structure which Jeremy Bentham designed in the late eighteenth century. This kind of prison is made of one central tower around which the cells are built. The inside of all the cells are visible for the guardian in the central tower, while the internees cannot see the supervisor. They can never be certain whether they are being watched or not. This spatial technique exposes the individuals to the permanent visibility. So the person is forced to behave in a way as if one observer is always watching and monitoring him. This situation will result in internalization of certain behavioral code as norms.

According to Foucault, the Panopticon was destined to spread throughout the whole society, so that the modern men always bear this imprisonment in their mind. Therefore, power causes the human beings become responsible for and “complicit in their own confinement” (ibid: p. 151). As Schrift states:

The Panopticon thus leads to panopticism, and the disciplinary machine leads to the disciplinary society and the production of the modern individual who, by internalizing the supervisory gaze of the other, takes all the disciplinary tasks of society upon itself and forces itself to conform to social norms without any external authority imposing those norms. (p. 146)

Foucault claims Panopticon has finally spread throughout the modern society in the form of schools, barracks, factories and so on, wherein the individuals exercise to behave according to certain standards, under constant surveillance and examination, up to the point that those standards or norms are internalized within them. What results is a society of judges in which everyone will judge him and others according to the norms and subject to them his body, movements, gestures, behavior and thinking.

The normalization which Foucault attributes to panopticism is similar to the global homogenization. In social and cultural field, the homogenizing pressure of globalization has penetrated into all aspects of human life, from less important issues like the individual's appearance to more important ones such as the way he behaves and thinks and what the truth means for him. Globalization takes away the differences in the name of the constitution of an ideal globalized society. José Saramago, as an outstanding literary and public figure, declares its opposition to globalization as a hidden form of totalitarianism. Statements like "globalization will eat up the poor mouse of human rights, globalization manufactures exclusion, or totalitarianism's faces are many and globalisation is one of them" (qtd. in Rollason, 2004, p. 2), represent his denunciation of the standardizing and homogenizing impact of global mass culture.

*Blindness* is a great epitome of Panopticon. Saramago's strange blindness wipes out suddenly the physical interaction of the blinds with the world of colors, things and beings. This feature can be read as a hint of contemporary homogenization. The names, colors, identities, thoughts, or all the singularities as a whole, have disappeared alike what happens in a homogenized globalized world wherein the assimilation of the individuals with various personal, regional, cultural and political origins occurs. In Saramago's own words: "we know each other's bark or speech, as for the rest, features, colour of eyes or hair, they are of no importance, it is as if they did not exist" (*Blindness*, 1997, p. 23).

*Blindness* tells the story of a city in which all people get struck by white blindness. No one has a name, only roles – a doctor, a prostitute with dark glasses, a child, a man with an eye patch, a dog of tears, a woman who never gets blind and so on. Blindness has eliminated all names, jobs (among the blinds, there are police men who would be killed by the soldiers and an ophthalmologist who himself is blind and his professional skills would be of no use to the others), and thoughts. They never speak about their past and future does not have any meaning for them.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault claims that the plague acted as an image against which the mechanisms of discipline were defined. It was because when plague strikes, the boundaries of normal and abnormal are blurred. Anyone can become sick, and therefore abnormal; and what is abnormal is particularly dangerous.

In *Blindness*, the blinds are abnormal and therefore dangerous for the society. So, the government quarantines them in a sanatorium. The government's domination over the life and death of its subjects is disguised as its duty to protect the public from an evil plague. The authorities decide what is correct and the people must obey. The sanatorium, functioning as a prison, is the first Panopticon of the novel. Its entrance is permanently lit and guarded by soldiers and anyone trying to escape will be shot on sight: "Behind the gate there was a light which outlined the black silhouette of a soldier ... he would only shoot if she, having descended the stairs, were to get nearer, after being warned, from that other invisible line which represented for him the frontier of his safety" (Saramago, 1997, p. 58).

The detainees can never count on any help from their guardians, even when a dictatorial regime is formed inside the prison. Like Foucault's Panopticon, the blind internees internalize the permanent presence of the guards at the gate of the sanatorium. The outstanding manifestation of this internalization is the moment that the fire is destroying the sanatorium, but the poisoners do not dare to leave their prison: "Then someone shouted, What are we doing here, why don't we get out, the reply, coming from amidst this sea of heads, needed only four words, The soldiers are there" (ibid: p. 80). The observing gaze of the authority and the rules it has legislated have been internalized within the being of the internees in such a way that oblige the prisoners to remain in their assigned space. They do not dare to break the defined rules. Only after the doctor's wife ventures to go out to ask for help, they realize that the soldiers are no longer there and they leave the place.

The sanatorium is the embodiment of the whole society. In fact, the whole country or the whole world, for Saramago's setting can be everywhere in the contemporary world, is Panopticon. The sanatorium only projects more straightforwardly the power relations which were already functioning in the social body. Saramago exposes it in the words of the doctor's wife: "There's no difference between inside and outside, between here and there" (ibid: p. 90).

The point that is worth mentioning is that, in *Blindness*, panopticism is not restricted to the places. In the text, panopticism may be also traced to the essence of the way the individuals consider themselves or behave towards others. From the first pages of the text, the power relations governing the relationships among the individuals are obvious. A good example is the way the patients are treated by the doctor in his office. The receptionist guides the first man who gets blind to the doctor's room, stating merely: "Doctor's orders, this man is an urgent case" (ibid: p. 7). Only the mother of a cross-eyed boy states some words of protest: "her right was her right, and that she was first and had been waiting for more than an hour" (ibid: p. 7). Other patients murmur few words supporting her; however, even that woman does not follow her complaining, because they know it would be entirely useless. The narrator explains that in the previous similar situations, the patients' complaint has not brought into any result but being made to wait longer. Here, the doctor, as the one having power at his disposal, controls his patients' will. The patients have already internalized within themselves that they are not allowed to object. Hence, it is better to be quiet than being punished. It accords with Foucault's view about the omnipresence of power relations within all kinds of relationships in the society, and that in these relations, everyone has its hierarchy.

The girl with dark glasses is another example of the influences of power working. She is a prostitute getting blind while she is with a man in a hotel. The police man taking her to her parents' house,

wanted to know, after asking her where she lived, if she had the money for the taxi, in these cases, the State doesn't pay, he warned her, a procedure which, let us note in passing, is not without a certain logic, insofar as these women belong to that considerable number who pay no taxes on their immoral earnings (ibid: p. 12).

Like most commercial transactions, prostitution is based on the sale of a commodity, sex. Under capitalism, sexual service is highly regulated and has an economic dimension. The government does not prevent the prostitution; it is an important industry whose profit the government does not like to lose. The policeman's words imply this fact. However, the working of power is not restricted to this point. Foucault especially argues that psychoanalysis of sexuality considers certain sexual practices as normal and other behaviors that do not agree with them as the abnormal and deviant. Accordingly, the individual sexual behavior, in modern society, is judged and manipulated according to these norms. In Foucault's view, "society does not seek to eliminate even 'deviant' or marginal sexual behaviors" (Booker, 1994, p. 13); but rather society needs such behaviors as negative models against which it can define proper conduct.

As a prostitute, the girl with dark glasses has a job and is a contributor of one commercial transaction in the context of capitalism. But she is simultaneously caught in the complicated web that the discourses on sex have created. In the sanatorium, she does not want others to know about her past, because she worries about others' judgment:

I'd also like to know what happened to that girl, What girl, asked the pharmacist's assistant, That girl from the hotel, what a shock she gave me, there in the middle of the room, as naked as the day she was born, wearing nothing but a pair of dark glasses, and screaming that she was blind, she's probably the one who infected me. The doctor's wife looked, saw the girl slowly remove her dark glasses, hiding her movements, then put them under her pillow, . . . With a shaky hand, the girl applied a few eye-drops. This would always allow her to say that these were not tears running from her eyes. (Saramago, 1997, p. 26)

The norms resulting of the discourses on sexuality allows the hotel maid to judge the girl frankly and makes that girl wish to be concealed from other's eyes. Moreover, she herself feels guilty about her profession. It is evident from her response to the policeman: "Yes, I have the money, and then under her breath, added, If only I didn't" (ibid: p. 12). The observing gaze internalized within her blames her for making money through a profession that is considered immoral by the society, as if blindness is its penalty. Thus, the girl is simultaneously oppressed by her own and the other's panopticism.

The doctor's wife is the only human who gets never blind. She witnesses the fast decay of human beings and the inevitable collapse of social order. The doctor's wife, from the outset, is the excluded in the panopticon society of *Blindness*. From her first confrontation with the plague, her husband's infection with the unknown virus, she displays a different reaction. She is supportive and does not care about her own infection:

He pushed his wife away almost violently, he himself drew back, Keep away, don't come near me, I might infect you, ... Leave me, leave me, No, I won't leave you, shouted his wife, what do you want, to go stumbling around bumping into the furniture, searching for the telephone without eyes to find the numbers you need in the telephone directory, while I calmly observe this spectacle, stuck inside a bell-jar to avoid contamination. She took him firmly by the arm and said, Come along, love. (ibid: p. 14)

As it was pointed out, panopticism controls the individuals both physically and psychologically. In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the main character, Winston Smith, adjusts his movements as if someone is always watching him. He is careful not to have a wrong posture even when his back is toward the telescreen. This feature is shown in *Blindness* repeatedly in the internees' following of the rope that shows them the right path to the supply of food or the occasions when they do not dare to approach the supply in fear of being shot if they go the wrong direction:

Attention, attention, the internees may come and collect their food, ... One of them declared, I'm not budging from here what they want to do is to catch us outside and then kill us all I'm not moving either, said another, Nor me, chipped in a third (ibid: p. 39).

The doctor's wife operates in contrast to this feature. When she goes to fetch the spade to bury the corpse, she does not even pretend to be blind despite being watched by the astonished eyes of the soldiers: "she thought, from here I'll make straight for the door, after all, what does it matter, even if you were to suspect that I'm not blind, what do I care" (ibid: p. 32).

Moreover, through this character the author expresses his sharp criticism of the media society and its outcome of voyeurism. The doctor's wife suffers from her state of being the observer who can see others while they are not aware that they are being watched. She considers it unethical. Her rejection of intrusion into the private moments of the blinds' lives is a clear rejection of the unlimited surveillance of Panopticon observer. Being the only and the last human able of seeing, she has the capability to "survey and profoundly understand the frailties and shortcomings of the human nature" (Simut, 2012, p. 116). However, for the doctor's wife, watching without being watched is mere obscenity:

The doctor's wife looked, saw the girl slowly remove her dark glasses, hiding her movements, then put them under her pillow, while asking the boy with the squint, Would you like another biscuit, For the first time since she had arrived there, the doctor's wife felt as if she were behind a microscope and observing the behaviour of a number of human beings who did not even suspect her presence, and this suddenly struck her as being contemptible and obscene. I have no right to look if the others cannot see me, she thought to herself. (Saramago, 1997, p. 26)

The doctor's wife recognizes that "her vision puts her in a position of authority" (Vieira, 2009, p. 15). However, she refuses this position of power and acts right on the contrary to Panopticon. She does not use her eyesight for controlling others, as it is expected in panopticism; rather she uses it as a means to help the blinds. Although she never loses her vision, she voluntarily enters a collective to which she does not belong. In the sanatorium and later in the city, though suffering from keeping her vision in a totally blind world: "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, you can feel it, I both feel and see it" (Saramago, 1997, p. 102), she does not hesitate to help. She is present everywhere, ready to help the injured, organize the food distribution, help to bury the corpses, negotiate with the soldiers and console the upset blinds.

She attempts to embrace the ones who need her help. Her words after seeing the blindfolded statues in the church: "I thought that in order to have got to where we are someone else must have been blind" (ibid: p. 117), expresses Saramago's blunt criticism of the religion as "a central tool of the forces of repression" (Booker, 1994, p. 11). The church like other structures of power in the society necessitates the conformity of the individuals, here based on religious belief. However, the doctor's wife accepts the singularities of the individuals and avoids judgment and its consequent outcome of controlling. Her own judgment is never an obstacle to her free assistance to the detainees, whether that person is the thief of one blind man's car, or a prostitute with whom her husband had sex:

The girl with dark glasses began to weep, What an unhappy lot we are, she murmured, and then, I wanted it too, I wanted it too, you are not to blame, Be quiet the doctor's wife said gently, let's all keep quiet (Saramago, 1997, p. 65).

A real exception in this panoptic society, she is not blindly subject to everything the power relations have dictated. So, it is not surprising that she never loses her vision.

### III. CONCLUSION

According to Foucault, in the modern society, panopticism has been inserted into all relationships. Indeed, the gaze is not something that is merely directed at the individuals; but socialization and its necessities have made the individuals subject to their own gaze in a way that they control their bodies, thoughts, actions and feelings.

The Portuguese author and Nobel Prize winner, José Saramago, in *Blindness* introduces the open-ended allegory of white blindness that affects the whole society except for one woman. Rather than viewing this condition as a physical impairment, this blindness could be read metaphorically as a comment on the situation of the humans in a world wherein the power relations govern. As Harold Bloom notes, "the open nature of the allegory in *Blindness* allows the reader to wonder if this is not another parable of the perpetual possibility of the return of Fascism, or of its first advent" (2005, p. 17, 18).

Saramago's *Blindness* is the embodiment of Foucauldian panopticism. The sanatorium is guarded by the soldiers who are put in the entrance by the army. They control the internees' movements. The slightest violation of the rules will be responded by shooting the one who has broken the certain rules. On the other hand, the blinds never see their jailers, but they behave as if the soldiers are present all the times. The great manifestation of the blinds internalization of the constant presence of the controlling observer is when the asylum is burning in the fire, but no one has the courage to leave the place.

However, the panopticism in *Blindness* is not restricted to the asylum or the country as a whole. Rather, it can be traced to the relationship between the individuals too. The blinds do not become blind, but rather they were already blind. Before the outbreak of blindness, the people interact within their relationships according to working of power, but they were not aware of it. One instance of this issue is the ophthalmologist behavior towards his patients. In his office, he has the upper place in the power hierarchy, thus, he is the one who controls his patients' will. Another example is the girl with dark glasses. She has a job but her deed does not follow the accepted norms on sexuality. While she is satisfied with her job and its income, she is ashamed of it. It is because of the girl self-internalization of the normal sexual behavior. Considering these norms, she thinks of herself as deviant and guilty.

But Saramago depicts one figure who does not suffer from blindness, the doctor's wife. The author uses this character as a symbolic figure through which the readers experience the horrors of a completely blind world. She suffers from isolation because she is a nonconformist in a homogenized blind world. In fact, her isolation originates less from her eyes which still see than from her action that is in opposition to the power relations. Maintaining one's eyesight provides a state of power for everybody within a community of blinds, but the doctor's wife does not look at her state in this way. Her behavior is in direct contrast with the Panopticon of her society. At some parts of the novel, where she observes the intimate moments of the people's lives, though involuntarily, she deeply suffers. She cannot be satisfied with the role of the Panopticon observer and rejects it. She uses her capacity for helping others and reducing their affliction. Her assistance embraces all humanity regardless of the judgments of the observing gaze of discourse, prejudice or the working of power as a whole.

In sum, Saramago's novel represents how power relations govern in the society covertly and overtly, though their operation may be hidden behinds claims such as norms, humans' well-being and so on. But they are only the euphemism of Foucauldian panopticism. In fact, at the center of all of these movements are there power relations functioning to fulfill certain objectives. In this world, the humans have been transformed to the individual subjects dependent upon what the power structures have defined. In *Blindness*, the individuals do not go blind, they were already

blind. Although they were not able to see their subjection to social constraints and power structures, but in practice they behave, think, and live according to what they have internalized as the norms. They are both oppressed and oppressor, oppressed under control of the authorities and oppressor when they are in the state of the authority within a relationship. Even when the person is the oppressor, he acts again under pressure of the norms that power structures have established and have been fixed within the person's mind. In Saramago's text, this blindly submission to power relations is embodied in the physical blindness of the characters. Saramago's protagonist is an excluded because she is the only person who does not follow blindly what power relations imposes. So, it is believable that she never loses her eyesight.

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