

Unsettling Epiphanies: Rereading José Saramago's *Blindness* in the time of Covid-19

Jaidaa Hamada*

As the entire world finds itself in the grip of Covid-19, a global pandemic that is shaking even the most advanced of countries to their foundations, and leaving behind long-term sequelae in all domains, interest in reading and rereading novels about pestilences, diseases and crises has become a shared endeavour. In many instances, it has even become a coping mechanism with a world that seems to be irredeemably disintegrating. A case in point is the Portuguese Nobel Laureate José Saramago's dystopian novel *Blindness* (1995).¹ Of all the pandemic-related novels one has read,² *Blindness* is particularly chosen for the way it offers an epiphanic insight into humanity, unsettling as it is, in times of adversity, through the paradoxical implications of a blindness epidemic that illuminates more than it obscures. What is ultimately revealed is a new perception of reality; an uncovering of what is so often overlooked, shunned or taken for granted. If there is anything humans need now, it is definitely this experience of illumination in a world whose ramifications have proven to be beyond humanity's ken. As such, the concept of literary epiphany will be of central importance to rereading *Blindness* while one is dealing first-hand with Covid-19.

This paper thus seeks to present a space for self-reflection on how personal experiences with calamitous situations can alter one's outlook on oneself and the ambient world, and can enhance one's identification with fictional works. To achieve this end, it will endeavour to show that the historical meandering of infectious diseases one has read about in fiction is no longer in the realm of the distant and the impersonal. It is now transmuted to the realm of the present and the personal, making literary works about pandemics/epidemics more relatable, and making dystopian fiction not only a theoretical framework for this paper, but also a most apt background against which one can reread *Blindness* in the time of Covid-19. A brief explication of the concept of literary epiphany, and an

* Associate Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Alexandria University.

Cairo Studies in English – 2021(2): 101-123. <https://cse.journals.ekb.eg/>
DOI: 10.21608/cse.2022.46070.1068

ensuing overview of dystopian fiction thus become imperative before one can reflect on the connections between the text and one's experience with Covid-19.

To begin with, derived from the Greek word *epiphaneia*, epiphany means "appearance," "showing forth," or "manifestation" ("Literary" 2013). In literary terms, it refers to that decisive moment when a character reaches a realization or an awareness, after which events are seen through the prism of this new light. The term epiphany was introduced into literary criticism by James Joyce,³ who used it "to describe the insight or revelation gained when one suddenly understands the essence of a (generally commonplace) object, gesture, statement, situation, moment, or mentality – that is, when one 'sees' that commonplace for what it is really beneath the surface" (Murfin and Ray 1997, 109). Put differently, epiphany is "a special kind of transformational catalyst" (Yacek and Gary 2020), offering new insights into what has been taken for granted or treated with levity. Along the lines of these definitions, and as will be explained throughout this paper, Saramago's dismal portrayal of humanity in *Blindness* and one's experience with Covid-19, may be deservedly described as epiphanic experiences that render dystopian fiction a lived reality.

Since dystopia⁴ is generally defined as "a portrait of some place understood to be worse than the one we inhabit" (Wegner 2014, 455), this paper will endeavour to show how Saramago's bleak depiction of the human condition, as well as today's world since Covid-19 has become rampant, are aptly dystopian in their essence. By implication, Saramago's text may be said to rightfully fall under the umbrella of dystopian literature/fiction, which, in turn, is broadly defined as "imaginative literature that constructs flawed fictional societies, the shortcomings of which satirize ideal utopian societies, or specific real-world societies, or both" (Booker 2005, 32). This literary model became an established genre in the twentieth century, particularly after the Second World War, begetting "a distinctive aesthetics of disaster" (Ameel 2016, 796).⁵ In an era of massive world wars, nuclear threats, capitalist and technological domination, starvation, genocide, pandemics/epidemics, environmental disasters among many other horrors, it was only natural for "[l]iterary utopias [to] run out of steam" (797), giving way to dystopian and apocalyptic narratives. At the heart of these cataclysmic writings is the theme of disaster: "The primary focus of dystopia is disaster, nightmare made real – whether in the form of natural catastrophes, totalitarian political regimes or war" (Tearle 2016, 112).

To a great extent, living through the throes of Covid-19 has served to exacerbate the harrowing dimension of the catastrophes one has read about in dystopian literature. As far as *Blindness* is concerned, the very same theme of disaster runs rife from beginning to end. This can even be evinced at the onset

of the epidemic when one of the characters affirms: “it’s a disaster, yes a disaster” (Saramago 2004, 5). Additionally, the way Saramago maps out his dystopia portends the possibility of more devastating potentialities for already extant calamities. It is worth mentioning in this context that the outbreak of a disease is a particular case of a disaster: “It is distinct from earthquakes, bushfire, or floods, due to some key characteristics: [it] has a wave pattern behaviour and might re-infect the same-affected area/population; disease outbreak can cross geographic boundaries to be a global phenomenon” (Ammirat, Linzalone, and Felicetti 2020).

Opting for blindness as his dystopian disaster, Saramago depicts a sordid picture of degeneration, violence and savagery. Throughout the narrative, blindness transcends being a visual impairment/disease to become a ravaging epidemic that indiscriminately afflicts the inhabitants of the city chosen by Saramago as the setting of his novel. It is a “white sickness”, on account of which the afflicted behold nothing but “a milky sea” (2004, 6). Symbolically, blindness in the text can be understood as an allegory for the loss of social and political order. The paradoxical meaning of it can also be evinced in the concluding lines of the novel: “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” (Saramago 2004, 309). Sweeping through the city, the blindness epidemic brings about destruction, chaos, moral depravity, and sadism. Against such a dystopian backdrop, not for once does Saramago’s insight into human nature falter. He unflinchingly describes the epidemic’s potential to bring out both the best and worst of people. Accordingly, one cannot but make connections between Saramago’s world and today’s pandemic.

Generally speaking, pandemics are large-scale epidemics afflicting people across the world. They are caused by organisms, bacteria or viruses, for which most people do not have preexisting immunity, and which can transmit easily between individuals (Vos 2021). The wholesale repercussions of a pandemic are even evoked in the origin of the word. Derived from the Greek word “*panemos*”, it literally translates to “common to all people” (Ammirat, Linzalone, and Felicetti 2020). What makes a pandemic even more menacing than any other natural disaster is the fact that it “is not a single, discrete, and time-bounded event. It is instead a continuous process, that operates over a time horizon which lasts until there is extinction of the pathogen or introduction of a vaccine” (Ammirat, Linzalone, and Felicetti 2020). In today’s world, the SARS-CoV2 virus, with its diminutive size of 0.00012 millimeters, has brought about massive destruction (Vos 2021, 2).⁶ Equally destructive to its direct somatic effects are its psychological repercussions and what it has unleashed about

humanity's potential to degenerate into a dystopian existence; hence the connection between Saramago's *Blindness* and the current human experience with Covid-19.

The connection between both will be discussed in terms of a series of unsettling epiphanies; disturbing ones that attest to the frailty of the human condition. Chief among the ideas that will be addressed are: apocalyptic life; the universality of the characters; the intriguing nature of both Saramago's epidemic and Covid-19; fear as a universal feeling that underlies dystopian worlds; humanity's battle against social collapse in the time of crises, and its degeneration into savagery in the absence of laws; the grave consequences that result from indifference to imminent disasters; man's potential for violence and brutality; undermining man's putative mastery over the world; quarantine in both the novel and as a lived experience; collective feelings of malaise in the aftermath of disasters; social stigmatization; manifestations of valiance and heroism in dystopian worlds; and the overwhelming feelings of exile and forlornness that typify times of adversity. The significance of the novel's stylistic features will also be discussed.

Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, reading Saramago's novel amounted to an apocalyptic portrayal of an *unnamed* city in an *unnamed* country that inexplicably gets ravaged by an *unnamed* blindness epidemic, afflicting almost all its *unnamed* characters, or more accurately victims, some of whom are referred to using physical attributes such as the "doctor's wife", "the girl with the dark glasses," "the old man with the dark eye patch," "the dog of tears," "the boy with the squint", "the car thief," among many others. Nonetheless, having lived through the throes of Covid-19, the universality of the characters is heightened to disturbing measures. It all starts when a man driving his car and waiting for the traffic lights turns blind and sees everything white. "I am blind. I am blind" (Saramago 2004, 4), he cries out loud, thus signaling the onset of the infectious blindness that overtakes the city. "I see everything white," he explains to an ophthalmologist (14), who is ironically the next victim. Soon afterwards several of the ophthalmologist's patients get afflicted, until the disease spreads to almost the entire population. A quarantine is set up in an attempt to curtail it, and the first infected are isolated in a mental asylum. The doctor's wife is the only inmate who retains her sight, but she does not announce this to be able to accompany her husband. At this stage, the victims are hopeful and have faith in the better judgment of the authorities. A new social structure, paralleling the society at large and under the control of the government, is consequently founded within the walls of the asylum. As more infected people arrive, a hierarchy of power develops, but matters soon get out of hands and all measures to contain

the disease go awry, with all institutions collapsing one after the other and the inmates becoming panic-stricken. Apprehensions about the food supplies are heightened as the ideals of a civilized society fall apart and the government adopts inept and highly coercive measures. The mounting anger exhibited by some indignant internees foreshadows the degeneration of the state of affairs inside the ward: “We’re locked up here, We’re all going to die in here, This isn’t right, Where are the doctors we were promised, this was something new, the authorities had promised doctors, medical assistance, perhaps even a complete cure” (65).

Very much like the sudden appearance and disappearance of the blindness epidemic in the novel, scientists and experts are still intrigued by Covid-19 and do not have a clear understanding of the virus’ behavior and mutations: “COVID-19 does not have a clear roadmap like previous pandemics, but, instead, this pandemic seems to lead us to unexpected intersections and side-tracks without knowing where we are” (Vos 2021, 2). Shaking the medical establishment to its foundations, we are still “unsure about the long-term symptoms, the best treatment options, the most effective precautions to minimise viral transmission, and the feasibility of developing a vaccination that will halt the pandemic” (2). The way the ophthalmologist is perplexed as he ponders the nature of the blindness contagion is very much today’s dilemma:

I cannot think of any solution [...] I shall look up some books, take another look at the bibliography, perhaps I will find some clue [...] it could be psychic blindness, but then it would be the first case with these characteristics [...] it also occurred to me that this might be a case of amaurosis, but [...] this blindness is white, precisely the opposite of amaurosis which is total darkness unless there exists some form of white amaurosis, a white darkness [...] something unheard of. (Saramago 2004, 20-21)

Wracking his brain, he distraughtly concludes that “it might be a variant of psychic blindness or amaurosis, but there appears to be no evidence of any such symptoms ever having been established” (21).

In their asylum, the inmates ponder possible reasons for their sudden loss of sight. While one of them postulates that it can be attributed to fear, another suggests that they have been symbolically blinded even before the actual epidemic breaks out. Commenting on the deeper implications of blindness in the novel, Krista Brune postulates:

At first, the novel describes this blindness as a medical epidemic that could be contained through quarantine and other precautions. Comments about the blindness soon become less grounded in medical terminology and more connected to philosophical musings, social observations, and political commentary. Individuals recently rendered blind ponder the relationship between fear and blindness. (2010, 94)

As one is experiencing Covid-19, the relationship between fear and the outbreak of a pandemic becomes the hallmark of today's world. It is not only fear about the perdition of humanity, but equally unnerving is the fear about the crumbling of the ideals of civilization in the absence of strict surveillance and laws like what happens in Saramago's dystopian world. If "[t]he sudden onset of blindness reminds readers that able-bodiedness is a temporary condition at best" (94), Covid-19 has not only served the same purpose, but has even brought about many alarming epiphanies about the precarious stature of man in the universe. Moreover, adversarial times show that humans are not as rational, level-headed and altruistic as one often assumes.

Since time immemorial, laws have been passed to curb evil deeds and to pay tribute to the ideals of civilization. However, in the absence of laws, as the novel reveals, humans revert to bestiality and barbarism, and consequently collective violence ensues. In their struggle for sustenance, they become totally oblivious to any manifestation of civilized behaviour, "but who cares about the regulations", Saramago states (2004, 81). Paralleling the increase in the number of contaminated internees, "[r]obberies, bullies, lies and cruelties rule and oppress this space with greater force. After a while, no one watches over or cares for the camp anymore, because everyone in the city has gone blind. Knowing that no one is watching, almost everyone loses discipline; robberies, bullies, lies and cruelties intolerable to the eye before now rule the hearts" (Lau 2006).

As the number of contaminated victims witness an exponential upsurge, the asylum, or this "inhumane quarantine" as described by Saramago (2004, 154), becomes a hotbed of collective violence, murder, rape, and fighting over the basic necessities of life — food, medicine and clean water, thereby mirroring the state of affairs in the society outside. Anarchy, chaos and corruption reign supreme and all endeavours to impart order are doomed to failure. A quintessential dystopian image resonates in the following description:

Now, with all the beds occupied, all two hundred and forty, not counting the blind inmates who have to sleep on the floor, no

imagination, however fertile and creative in making comparisons, images and metaphors, could aptly describe the filth here. It is not just the state to which the lavatories were soon reduced, fetid caverns such as the gutters in hell full of condemned souls must be, but also the lack of respect shown by some of the inmates or the sudden urgency of others that turned the corridors and other passageways into latrines. (Saramago 2004, 125)

The atavistic state to which the inmates regress is one of the many unsettling epiphanies that punctuate Saramago's narrative, and by implication, underlie one's apprehensions about Covid-19.

The soldiers who are entrusted with the task of guarding the asylum exacerbate the chaotic situation through their repressive attitude towards the infected which go as far as shooting down some of them in a battle for food, until they themselves become afflicted with blindness. An armed group seizes power and starts to subjugate the other inmates, wreaking more havoc and degeneration. A gang of hoodlums is formed. They resort to force and start subjugating the women to have sex with them in exchange for medicine and food. The repugnant aura that shrouds the asylum is worth quoting in this context: "The contaminated internees [...] saw the bodies lying in a heap, the blood wending its way sinuously on to the tiled floor where it slowly spread, as if it were a living thing, and then the containers with food. Hunger drove them on, there stood that much desired sustenance" (Saramago 2004, 81). The rampant squalor, the brutal conflict over food, and the escalating callousness of the afflicted people underscore the dystopian nature of the novel.

With the impending threat of starvation looming over the asylum, the belligerent inmates burn it down and flee to the world outside. Much to their dismay, the city is devastated, the government has collapsed, all manifestations of a civilized life have become extinct, and their life becomes a struggle for survival against disease, violence, starvation and mass death. Roaming about the "demented labyrinth of the city" (206), they come across a church where holy statues have their eyes covered with pieces of white cloth. Likewise, the paintings have their eyes obscured by blotches of white paint. In a world that has been irredeemably changed, the doctor and his wife try to forge familial ties among the survivors and they take them to their still-existing house until the blindness epidemic starts to inexplicably disappear and all the survivors regain their sight.⁷

The portrait of the human condition depicted by Saramago seems to be at bay until a lived experience renders it a gruesome reality. Reading *Blindness* before

the outbreak of Covid-19, one was taken aback by the harrowing experience Saramago chronicles. Nonetheless, rereading the novel during one's first-hand experience with a pandemic, one realizes how the current situation is as devastating as the fictional transcription. Since the outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, the entire world has drastically changed. Sooner than expected, the epidemic's appalling reality has proliferated everywhere. By March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a pandemic. "Hundreds of thousands have died, millions have been ill and billions of people and businesses have felt the impacts of COVID-19 even if it's just simply working from home or having to wear a mask while shopping" (Miller 2020). More thoroughgoing changes can be discerned in the way "the world has witnessed an explosion of effects like lockdown of cities, travel bans, states of emergencies, sealed international borders, deserted airports, train stations, tourist attractions, stadiums and theme parks, postponed big international sporting events, shutdown of schools and closed places of worship never before seen in this century" (Salcedo 2020). Attesting to the malevolence of Covid-19 is the way it is

endangering the health not just of one city but of the whole world, entrenching and deepening xenophobia, creating new forms of cruel economic motives, imperialism, capitalism, racial-based violence, and man-planned pauperization of the world are just some of its most conspicuous facets. Indeed, people around the world have become increasingly closed off from one another as sweeping travel bans accelerated, walling regions apart as a viral pandemic unfolds. (Salcedo 2020)

Just like in Saramago's quarantine, there will always be those who will exploit and subjugate the vulnerable and the dispossessed.

The epiphanic dimension of the pandemic is palpable in the way it has repudiated man's alleged mastery over the universe. Typical of apocalyptic experiences, Covid-19 has allowed one a scope for self-reflection. This can be understood along the lines of the consensus that

[p]eril is the mirror we hold up to ourselves. It forces us to ask what it means to be human. It focuses our attention on the shortness and uncertainty of our lives. We imagine the worst—death, the death of our children, the destruction of our way of life. Would we be able to withstand the suffering? Would our

cherished institutions fail? Would chaos erupt? (Wuthnow 2010, 2)

If one has mulled over these existential questions while reading *Blindness*, now, against the backdrop of Covid-19, they recur with an overwhelming urgency.

Stylistically, Saramago's doing away with quotation marks, paragraphs indentation and most punctuation marks except full stops and commas, aligns the novel more with reality than with a fictionalized rendering of it since these formal features are akin to written texts. So by removing them, one feels immersed in this dystopian existence. Similarly, "[d]ialogue is simply absorbed into the narrative discourse rather than being set off from it" (Thomas 2012, 25), as if one is already engaged in a conversation with the characters. This proximity to Saramago's world makes one all the more apprehensive about the repercussions of today's pandemic lest the situation degenerates on the same epic scale. To the very same effect is Saramago's use of the stream-of-consciousness technique by means of which his characters transcend textual boundaries, yielding a most disturbing familiarity to one's own thoughts and apprehensions. In so sketching his dystopian world, Saramago achieves a most apt marriage of form and content:

The novel is very dense and complex not only as to the topic but also as to the arrangement of the text. Throughout the novel, there are no quotation marks, subtitles, chapters or paragraphs. Moreover, the cast of characters does not have any names [...]. However these characteristics were not implemented by chance [...] a reader will become particularly absorbed in the text, even to the point of having the impression of becoming an additional character in the novel and experiencing the story's blindness in a similar way that the protagonist does. (Dachs 2012, 44)

Since "[t]he subgenre of dystopia [...] portrays communities ruled by a less perfect principle than the author's own society, intended to warn readers against dangerous trends in contemporary society" (Dietz 1990, 116), rereading *Blindness* thus serves as a warning sign against the hazards of treating Covid-19 in a facetious manner. In *Blindness*, the initial cases are off-handedly looked at and are even dismissed as unworthy of serious attention. "I am certain that thanks to your prompt action we shall be able to limit and control the situation", the Minister says assuredly in a phone call to the doctor (Saramago 2004, 34). Sooner than expected, however, the epidemic gains momentum, wreaking havoc

everywhere. One cannot but recall the very same nonchalant attitude embraced by some individuals and governments when Covid-19 first made its advent. Even as it peaked, they persisted in downplaying its extent, and even went as far as protesting for lifting the lockdown and the ensuing quarantine. It is only when matters go out of hands that humans' self-complacency, in both the novel and real life, is nudged, and it is only when one bears witness to a real pandemic that one can grasp the frailty of man's taken-for-granted superiority in the face of deterministic perils. In both the novel and today's world, an ever-growing sense of malaise and helplessness become omnipresent.

Since human behaviour is a key factor in gauging the parameters of any crisis, Saramago's somber world may be said to propagate the archetypal dystopian image of man as "as a fallen creature driven by hubris (excessive pride) to transgress what its authors regard as the proper limits of man's interference with nature" (Dietz 1990, 116). In describing an act of theft that takes place at the outset of the narrative, resulting in the blindness of the thief, Saramago ironically posits that "generosity [...] and altruism [...] are the two best traits of human nature" (2004, 17). It is not long before his irony gives way to a stark image of degeneration and brutality as he portrays the internees losing their humanity and becoming irredeemably callous: "Bearing in my mind that the dead belonged to the one as much as the other, the occupants of the first and second wards gathered together in order to decide whether they should eat first and then bury the corpses, or the other way round. No one seemed interested in knowing who had died" (83). Saramago's promulgation of an image of civilization in shambles leaves one with uncertainty about a virulent resurgence of the Covid-19 crisis on a more devastating scale. As Salcedo suggests, "[p]eople's lives are disrupted and altered not just directly by the virus itself but even more so, indirectly, by the unpredictable ways in which the different segments of society are responding to the threat and risk that the disease poses" (2020).

To the disruption of one's self-composure, fear of the pandemic itself becomes conjoined with the lingering fear of the ensuing assault on the ideals of civilisation like what happens in Saramago's world since manifestations of social chaos are already under way but still on a small scale. For example, the rampant panic ensuing with Covid-19 has bred antagonistic feelings that escalate to "blame games and pointing fingers between nations and numerous racist and xenophobic attacks against Asians but even on anyone who coughs or sneezes. World news coverage attests that the attacks range from physical to verbal to financial" (Salcedo 2020). Along the same lines, a mounting sense of antagonism is bred between those who are wary of the pandemic and take all precautionary measures in an attempt to stave it off, and those who dismiss it as

a game of politics, and accordingly blame the media for hyping the virus via its sensationalist language. The distraught and panic-stricken, on their part, sometimes resort to stockpiling hoards of canned food, bottled water and many other basic amenities in their battle against an impending doom, and accordingly heighten the ambient crisis. We have seen some even go as far as fighting over toilet paper, face masks and hand-sanitisers. Worst of all, either out of fear of being shunned, or out of utter selfishness, some patients afflicted with Covid-19 at an initial stage, or when it is not very severe, move around unconcernedly, perpetuating the spreading of the virus. In short, anticipating humans' reactions in the face of the present calamitous situation is as unforeseeable as the pandemic itself. This lends credence to the consensus that "peril is terrifying and causes us to react with our emotions. Also, we respond less effectively than we might because it is difficult to assess risks" (Wuthnow 2010, 2).

Although the pandemic is relatively ebbing in some places, "[n]ow, we are experiencing COVID-19 fatigue, trying to emerge from its dense fog that pervaded every facet of our lives. We are fully cognizant that there will not be a return to the previous 'normal.' The pernicious virus had a transformative effect that did not spare any component of our society. Full recovery will not be easy" (Nasrallah 2020). With Saramago's dystopia in mind, grappling with the aftermath of Covid-19, or what Henry Nasrallah refers to as "Covid-19 fatigue", is adulterated with morbid apprehensions about ensuing waves of the virus, alongside more prospective fissures in the economic, medical, political and social institutions. If this means anything, it attests to the tenuous tie that anchors humans to the world they have long taken for granted; a morbid epiphany that Covid-19 has unearthed.

Before one's experience with a global pandemic, though the sense of vulnerability that engulfs Saramago's world yields a disquieting impact, it is, at the end of the day, transient; that is to say, it does not perpetually permeate one's consciousness. Nonetheless, being contemporaneous with Covid-19 has bred nightmarish repercussions that have become inextricably bound up with every aspect of one's existence. Even everyday conversation has become permeated with a Covid-19 repertoire. For example, "our language has expanded with the lexicon of pandemic terminology" (Nasrallah 2020). Familiar words acquire a new unsettling dimension and a more tangible existence in the context of today's pandemic. Paradoxically, the term 'positive' is now fraught with nightmarish connotations as if one's fate is sealed with it. The phrase 'the new normal' is widely used to denote the changes human behaviour has undergone in attempt to come to terms with life during, and in the aftermath of, Covid-19. 'Quarantine' is another obvious example that is worth elaborating on.

Figuring predominantly in *Blindness*, quarantine denotes the isolation of the characters during the outbreak of the epidemic. Prior to the Covid-19 experience, ‘quarantine’ denotes merely spatial isolation, described in the novel as follows:

According to the ancient practice, inherited from the time of cholera and yellow fever when ships that were contaminated or suspected of carrying infection had to remain out at sea for forty days, and in words within the grasp of the general public, it was a matter of putting all these people into quarantine, until further notice [...] this could as easily mean forty days as forty weeks, or forty months, or forty years, the important thing is that they should stay in quarantine. (Saramago 2004, 36)

Nonetheless, one’s real experience with a global pandemic has rendered quarantine more of a psychological state. Once Covid-19 has tightened its grip on the world, strict quarantines have been implemented globally, truncating most of real-life human interactions, and begetting the related term ‘social distancing’. In *Blindness*, the way the sequestered inmates of the quarantine behave exacerbates the dystopian image propagated by Saramago, where “[t]he victims, who suddenly lose their eyesight, are quarantined inside an abandoned mental institution, where all semblance of civility quickly evaporates” (Oppenheimer 2008). No longer is it empathy that one exhibits towards those victims; it is rather a heightened sense of identification with their frailty and at the same time fear of one’s liability to be divested of the same “semblance of civility” (Oppenheimer 2008). Although in the time of today’s quarantine “video services, such as Skype, Zoom, and Google Meet have become the primary way for communication with people outside of our households - family members, friends, teachers, students, business partners, co-workers, and clients (Pejić-Bach 2020), and although technology has served to mitigate the sense of isolation imposed by the lockdown, it is still no easy endeavour to look at the brighter side of things as the world feels menaced by forthcoming waves of the pandemic, against a chaotic backdrop like the one described by Saramago as follows:

It would not be right to imagine that these blind people, in such great numbers, proceed like lambs to the slaughter, bleating as is their wont, somewhat crowded [...] cheek by jowl, mingling breaths and smells [...]. A number of the new arrivals had already entered the hallway, but two hundred persons cannot be expected to sort

themselves out that easily, moreover blind and without a guide, this painful situation being made even worse by the fact that we are in an old building and badly designed at that. (2004, 105)

It is only by experiencing quarantine first-hand that one can sense the appalling sequestration of Saramago's characters that is rendered all the more stultifying through his somber description of it as having "doorways so narrow that they look more like bottle-necks, corridors as crazy as the other inmates of the asylum, opening for no clear reason and finishing up who knows where" (105). The debilitating repercussions of quarantine can also be evinced in the following description: "Say to a blind man you're free, open the door that was separating him from the world, Go, you are free, we tell him once more, and he does not go, he has remained motionless there in the middle of the road, he and the others, they are terrified, they do not know where to go" (206).

Even after the curfew and lockdown have been lifted, and even if the ferocity of the pandemic is alleviated in some places, the experience of the quarantine remains a nightmarish one, likely to maim one's psyche for life. It thus becomes an epiphanic experience that makes one realise how far humans are no longer in control of their lives, and how they have been taking their supremacy for granted. The absurdity of existence becomes an irrefutable reality. In Hill's viewpoint, at the heart of *Blindness* is Saramago's question: "what would remain if everything that makes us human were removed" (1998). To endeavour to fathom an explanation for the absurdity of the universe is by definition a Camusian undertaking that renders one all the more bewildered. The way Camus's *The Plague* (1947) looms over the novel from beginning to end is quite conspicuous. By implication, it becomes very much an underlying basis for the present day experience with Covid-19. Worth quoting is the following extract from *The Plague*: "Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise" (1947, 18). If Camus' novel reverberates in Saramago's world, it is not only because they both chart the escalation of an omnipresent infectious disease that descends upon a city and predates on its inmates; but also because both novelists are primarily portraying nothing less than the human condition which turns out to be gruesome in many ways. When brought to bear upon today's world, no particular solution is posited; rather one is left to ponder the precarious condition of human existence.

In a similar vein, one is overtaken by a growing sense of vulnerability and uncertainty, particularly because of the way the virus chooses its victims

indiscriminately, precluding the possibility of the young and stout being impervious to it. The way the infectious blindness spreads like wildfire in the novel, with no foreseeable cure, exacerbates one's already burgeoning fear lest Covid-19 persists to be a ravaging pathogen with no conceivable vaccine. Rereading Saramago's description of the proliferation of blindness, one can readily feel overrun by its disastrous dimension: "Blindness was spreading, not like a sudden tide flooding everything and carrying all before it, but like an insidious infiltration of a thousand and one turbulent rivulets which, having slowly drenched the earth, suddenly submerge it completely" (2004, 116).

As one witnesses the positive cases of Covid-19 and the ensuing death toll, one cannot but be apprehensive about how "[t]he world's vulnerable populations could face long-term clinical sequelae that might later develop" (Eddy, Schuster, and Sase 2020), wreaking more havoc, emotional devastation and far-reaching socioeconomic losses. Prior to Covid-19, and as one was reading *Blindness*, one's conception of what an incurably infectious disease was like was primarily pivoted on imagination and information culled from one's reading about it, be it fictionalized or from scientific books. In other words, one experienced it "as absent", without "inspect[ing] the picture-like mental image" (Caracciolo 2013, 89). Real-life experience with Covid-19, however, becomes an epiphanic means of realisation. One's understanding of the harrowing details related to the experience of battling a contagion that one has formerly read about metamorphoses into becoming part of one's psychological make-up. Unfortunately, more detrimental than the clinical sequelae are the psychological ones. In short, one is no longer an outsider to Saramago's dystopian world, but an inextricable part of it. Accordingly, the harrowing details with which the novel abounds are rendered all the more appalling. A case in point is the following description: "the blind inmates running all over the place like madmen, a repetition of what happened in the mental asylum when the fire broke out, they would roll down the stairs, trampled and crushed by those coming behind, who would also stumble and fall" (Saramago 2004, 220).

If humans, amongst whom oneself is no exception, have been listlessly basking in the illusion that they can master the universe with their knowledge and technological breakthroughs, the Covid-19 crisis has acted as an epiphanic harbinger for more far-reaching realisations. Blinded by self-conceit and pride, humans have been totally oblivious to the impending disaster, and some have even gone as far as dismissing it as a storm in a teacup. Lau's postulation is worth quoting in this context: "'Profound' experiences that evoke in us shock, fear, anxiety and trepidation are more and more founded on our ignorance about the evils shaping our lives. Our ignorance, however, is proportionate to the

‘knowing’ constructed by the information era. The more we come to ‘know,’ the more impoverished our experience is” (2006). In other words, those ‘profound’ experiences are the epiphanies humans need to realize how misguided they are in gauging their capabilities. A morbid epiphanic realization is that as scientific and medical breakthroughs are catapulted to their pinnacle, man’s vulnerability rises apace. As depicted in the novel, man is so vulnerable that even an exchange of a glance suffices to transmit a deadly virus. Although the world has experienced major crises in the past, “our time is unique in combining high levels of technical expertise with a continuing sense of extreme vulnerability. The more we learn about our world, the more we realise that our existence is precarious” (Wuthnow 2010, 3). Against this tumultuous background, fear, that escalates to panic, is perpetuated everywhere. Press releases, WHO alerts, and round-the-clock news coverage reinforce the calamity the world is currently facing and that the prospects of staving it off are quite slim.

To one’s utter desolation, “as successive layers of civilization are peeled from the stricken inhabitants -- Saramago's story grows darker” (Driscoll 1998), and so does today’s world as it plummets deeper into the throes of this accursed pandemic. Pitted against the sudden outbreak of Covid-19, rereading Saramago’s novel makes one identify with the initial state of panic that overtakes the characters as they try to fathom the nature of this pathogen. The ensuing dispiritedness with which the characters become fraught, referred to in the novel as “the progressive deterioration of morale” (Saramago 2004, 117), is very much today’s salient dreariness. At the nadir of the crisis, measures for mitigation and containment go awry in both the novel and our present day world. Now one can fully grasp how a personal illness can become a global crisis that takes its toll on all aspects of life like what happens in the novel. As Marion Pinsdorf posits, at the heart of Saramago’s novel are the questions: “How do people alter judgments when their environment becomes life-threatening? Or shun social relationships when ‘the other’ becomes an infectious threat?” (Pinsdorf 2005, 29). As one ponders these questions, it becomes all too obvious that experiencing a pandemic first-hand reshapes one’s relationship with oneself, with others and with the surrounding world. It is not only one’s environment that becomes “life-threatening” but rather the entire world as Covid-19 leaves no place free of its ripples.

One also realises how people can be stigmatised by their affliction with an infectious disease. In the novel, those afflicted with blindness are ghettoised in the mental asylum as if they were demonized souls posing a menace to the stability of their community. Even those outside the asylum are abandoned in fear of the ravaging contagion: “The worst thing is that whole families [...]

rapidly became families of blind people, leaving no one who could guide and look after them, nor protect sighted neighbours from them” (Saramago 2004, 117). A dichotomy sighted/blind is thus established, thereby exacerbating the stigmatisation of the latter. Now that one has lived through Covid-19, it becomes appallingly alarming to realise how selfish humans could be towards their fellow humans. Driven by highly egoistic yet realistic intentions, and in one’s attempt to salvage one’s health, one has a proclivity to think only about himself/herself. A highly unsettling epiphany is that in those times of adversity one is not exempt from prioritising his/her well-being: “More insidiously, dormant and longstanding prejudices are activated as nations and various publics scan the horizon for races and cultures to blame for this modern pestilence” (Salcedo 2020).

In this context, one is awed by the valiant attitude of front-line medical care heroes on whom the death toll was and still is the greatest. Pitted against the omnipotence of the virus, they are relentlessly exhibiting altruistic acts. Words cannot do justice to their sacrificial stance in their lopsided battle against the virulent pandemic. As the virus peaked, all around the world hospitals were transformed to emergency services to attend to patients with Covid-19 infection, and quarantine centers were made available at once. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, hospital and intensive-care units have become arenas where medical doctors and nurses have proven their dedication and valiance, and have accordingly counterbalanced the overarching sense of disillusionment that has become a hallmark of this era. Their individual interests have been sublimated to a common cause. A dim ray of benevolence can also be evinced in some gestures of kindness and charity exhibited by people from different walks of life to help out those who are vehemently bearing the brunt of the pandemic. A recourse to Camus is a valid undertaking in this context. According to Salcedo “[t]hese 'heroes' fit into his idea of Absurdism, as in the face of a harsh, uncaring universe, one must struggle to help others [...] even if defeat is inevitable. This kind of struggle in the face of certain death is a possible definition of heroism, however, so Camus is proposing a kind of heroism in everyday life - to embrace the Absurd, but at the same time to struggle hopelessly against it” (Salcedo 2020, n. pag.).

In Blindness, Saramago attempts to take the edge off the morbid world he depicts through the heroism of the doctor’s wife. According to Stone,

Another way of sneaking heroes into political literature is to establish a world in which heroism is impossible, as in Jose Saramago’s *Blindness*. Here, among all the (literally as well as

metaphorically) blind, just one woman can see, and she uses her vision to make life a little more bearable for those around her. She's not unrealistically sweet, though: Saramago creates narrative tension by having her keep her vision secret, help her own spouse just more than the others, and let her compassion and protective role lead her into violence. (2009, 62)

The realism of the doctor's wife, not being too 'unrealistically sweet,' becomes all the more important as she is the one calls attention to the fact that painful recollections indelibly scar one's memories. This is the costly price she has to pay as she is the one who witnesses first-hand the harrowing details others cannot see. In her case, "she sees how the violence of blind obsessions breeds more blind obsessions and violence, accumulating into a torrent flushing all sentiments of kindness, forgiveness and generosity down the drain" (Lau 2006). Therefore, Covid-19 is bringing out the best and worst about humanity just as the blindness epidemic has done. Now that one has had an unprecedented experience with a pandemic, one can better understand the role of the doctor's wife as a chronicler to the horrors that were wreaked behind the asylum walls. Being contemporaneous with a pandemic on such an epic scale opens one's eyes to the absurdity of life one has been reading about in books. Emphasizing her role, Brune states how "[b]y maintaining her sight during the blindness epidemic, the doctor's wife occupies a minority position, which allows her to reconsider the dichotomies of sighted and blind to become more attuned to the implicit and metaphorical meanings of vision within society" (n.d., 96). In the context of today's world battle against Covid-19, "the implicit and metaphorical meanings of vision within society" become an unsettling epiphany, underscoring the precariousness of human existence.

The characters' feelings of exile and frailty as the disease progresses are very much the morbid day-to-day realities that Covid-19 has unleashed: "There are some here who cannot stop crying, others who are cursing, someone uttered a terrible futile threat" (Saramago 2004, 105). Salcedo's words are worth quoting in this context: "We are now all exiles and prisoners but rather than just keeping ourselves from being infected, we need to recognize that our health and fates are inextricably linked to our fellow human beings and so working together as a community of nations in the face of a common challenge is key" (n.d.). If potential annihilation is a common threat, humans should, by now, be enlightened to where they stand in the universe: not at the center to reign supreme, but rather as part of a larger organic continuum that operates according to a set of rules over which they have no control. Hardly a year passes without a

calamity shaking the world to its foundations. As a result, the contemporary world lives in perpetual anxiety, never ascertaining what is at stake next. If Saramago zeroes in on the reactions of humans when all of a sudden everything they have taken for granted goes awry, the lived experience renders Saramago's world all the more abysmal. Crushed by the disastrous Covid-19, man's alleged supremacy is ousted in a most alarming manner; hence an epiphany that reminds humans to be less covetous and self-conceited, and more grateful and down to earth.

In conclusion, resorting to dystopian literature as a niche for revisiting Saramago's *Blindness*, one cannot overlook the glaring parallels between the afflicted world Saramago evokes and our present-day world since Covid-19 has set in. As a specimen of dystopian fiction, *Blindness* has unremittingly conjured up an appalling image of humanity's regression into savagery in the absence of strict moral codes. With very few exceptions, the blind characters in Saramago's novel lose not only their sight, but also their humanity, rationality, their ability to tend to their most basic bodily needs, and their sense of morality. In a similar vein, the current experience with Covid-19 has served to bring to our everyday life the dismal themes with which dystopian fiction is fraught. Through a plethora of unsettling epiphanies, one's convictions about oneself and one's society are put to the test, if not undermined. No longer is one's experience with a dystopia a readable narrative; it is now a reality that looks one in the face and makes one run the whole gamut of perturbing human emotions. As this study has endeavoured to prove, reading/rereading *Blindness* in those tumultuous times, one cannot but feel a sense of identification and proximity. Fictional boundaries are transgressed, and a collective state of panic becomes the common denominator for the present-day experience with Covid-19.

Akin to what happens in the novel, it takes a devastating pandemic to shed a blinding light on some many taken-for-granted assumptions and to accordingly unleash many unsettling epiphanies. As Covid-19 has established itself as a paradigm-shift that will leave an indelible mark on the history of mankind, hard now it is for one to imagine a world impervious to the eruption of similar if not more devastating crises. Other crises will erupt with the same appalling preposterousness. The contemporary perils that threaten humanity with perdition will persist to be unsettling epiphanies that open one's eyes to the tenuous tie that binds humans to the universe.

Until the pandemic diminishes into oblivion, to keep on living in a world fraught with forebodings is conducive to depression among many other psychological ailments. What one can do is to try, hard as it is, to adapt to the

“new normal” while strictly attending to all precautionary measures. To some extent, being cautious invests one with a sense of consolation that one is doing everything possible within one’s control. Nobody is impervious to the virus or any other peril – this is what Covid-19 has consolidated, among so many unsettling realizations about humans. Nonetheless, if one tries to search for a glimpse of light amid an overwhelming dystopian existence, an awareness of fragility maybe viewed as a potent motive for reconsidering one’s view of oneself and the ambient world on a more realistic and accordingly less disappointing note. Fear, anxiety, and panic are inevitable responses in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, but against all odds, one must seek solace in the belief that such a crisis, sooner or later, will run its course. As more unsettling epiphanies unfold, one is reminded that literature will always provide a mental respite even if it is thematically dystopian, for we will always be reminded that we are not the only ones who are dealing with a worldwide devastation wrought by a pandemic or any other calamity. Why a particular crisis has occurred will probably remain an existential question, leaving one with no definite answer, but impelling one to look deeply within oneself to rediscover so many unearthed realities about oneself and one’s relationship with the surrounding world.

Endnotes

¹ José Saramago (1922-2010) the Portuguese novelist was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1998. In many of his works, he explored Portugal’s troubled political identity. Although he took up literature relatively late in life, he wrote extensively, and his works have been translated into many languages and published throughout the world.

² Literary works have always offered insights into the predicament of humans in times of pestilences among so many other crises. A rich array of works is readily available. In addition to *Blindness*, among the most memorable for me are Daniel Defoe’s, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722); Albert Camus’ *The Plague* (1947); Gabriel García Márquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), and Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842).

³ James Joyce first used the term epiphany in his posthumously-published *Stephen Hero* (1944), which turned out to be an early version of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).

⁴ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest recorded use of the term dystopia – a modern Latin term derived from the Greek roots, *δυσ*, or ‘bad,’

and τόπος, ‘place’ – appears in an 1868 speech by John Stuart Mill (Wegner 2014, 455).

⁵ Among the most famous examples of dystopian fiction are: Evgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Alan Moore’s and David Lloyd’s *V for Vendetta* (1982), and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985).

⁶ The disastrous effects of the virus can be discerned in a wide array of symptoms, mostly:

This virus can lead to respiratory illness with symptoms such as fever, coughing, sore throat, shortness of breath and sometimes a lack of taste and smell, and cardiovascular symptoms. Eighty per cent of all patients experience mild symptoms, whereas 13% experience severe symptoms and 6% suffer from critical conditions such as severe pneumonia and respiratory or multiple organ failure. Whereas most patients experience these symptoms only for a brief period, almost one in five report remaining symptoms in the long term. Individuals most at risk of developing severe COVID-19 are elderly individuals and those with underlying medical conditions. [...] COVID-19 is the third large coronavirus outbreak in less than 20 years, after the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2002–3 and the Middle East Acute Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2012. Other recent pandemics include the Zika virus in 2015, the H1N1 swine flu in 2009, the H5N1 bird flu in 2008, and the Ebola virus in 2004. (Vos 2021, 5)

⁷ *Seeing*, published in Portuguese in 2004 and then in English in 2006, is the sequel Saramago wrote to *Blindness*. The novel is set in the same unnamed country and begins with a parliamentary election, in which the majority of the people cast blank ballots. Some of the characters from *Blindness* appear in the second half of the novel.

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