

Sin and the Sinners versus Virtue and the Saints: Comparisons and Contrasts on the Basis of the Select Novels of Jose Saramago

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Abstract

As a political moralist, Jose Saramago, the Portuguese novelist has his own convictions and value system. Extremely prolific and talented, he has proved himself in all areas of literature like essay, drama, short story, and novel. He was the first Portuguese novelist who bagged the Nobel Prize for literature in 1998. Saramago has a vision and philosophy. His vision and philosophy are clearly articulated through his narratives and characters. Saramago considers his philosophy as his own Gospel truth. In his novels, he tries to retain the qualities of love and compassion for humanity. In that sense, Saramago's Jesus in his *Gospel according to Jesus Christ* is a humanitarian figure and He enjoys his own human actions without the divine touch of God. Instead of resembling a loyal and very obedient son in the Canonical Gospels, Saramago's Jesus becomes an opposing and contradictory figure in his *Gospel*. Saramago's Jesus protests against God the father, a powerful hierarchy in the *Gospel*, and He wants his father to be merciful and more kind to humankind. Moreover, Saramago is trying to exhibit a humanist philosophy in his novels. For him, sin and ignorance are part and parcel of human life. Saramago's main concern is to humanize the circumstances and people. In order to represent them as more humane and caring, he portrays his characters as sinful and fallible. Sin according to Saramago is a human activity and it is sometimes a violation of the rituals and the predictions of the society. Saramago questions the inhumanity and it becomes a colonial encounter for him to create a binary between sin and virtue and between a sinner and saint.

Key Words: Inhumanity, Moral Conscience, Virtue, Radicalization, Religiosity

Sin and Virtue in Saramago's Novels

The conundrum between sin and virtue is overwhelmingly represented in the works of Jose Saramago. On the one hand, the concept of sin takes a dimension that is more sinned than sinning and on the other hand, the concept of virtue is presented as a votary of big interest groups and the institutionalized frameworks. When the killing itself is justified as a virtue to maintain the survival or continuation of an exploitative system, then the line that separates the sin from the virtue is so blurred to the core. So in this article, this dichotomy so innate within virtue and sin is explored and the U-turn that is so synonymous with them is brought into the limelight. When it comes to the novel of Jose Saramago titled *Blindness*, the sin itself is depicted as something wholly necessary. Here, the disability blindness is termed as something bad and the ordinary people do have to pay a heavy price for them getting into such a situation. The normal ways of functioning are not considered as anything of consequence rather they are termed as something that goes against certain vested interest groups, so those normal people must be dealt with to bring damnation to them to save the skins of many around. For example, when the disease called blindness descends down upon the general population, the doctor and the prostitute do face the same plight. The abusing of a prostitute is considered as a sinful thing but when an inmate of that detention center does such a thing, at first it is resisted which results in the abuser sustaining a grave injury but later on the prostitute takes pity on the abuser and tries to get out his physical injury, here sin does metamorphose into different things one after another. Likewise, the government that imprisons the people with blindness is lauded for what it does although that is not desirable and right behavior. The confinement of blind people in a detention center itself is an act of moral trepidation but after doing so, the government also denies them basic facilities, here what the government does is sinful but it is projected here as something that is absolutely necessary. Likewise, the gunning down of innocent people without any apparent reason is a sinful act but when the guards appointed to protect the people in the detention center do such a thing, it is termed as only collateral damage. The reduction of people to subhuman conditions is a sinful act, but it is characterized in the novel as something so essential. So, the very concept of sin is presented as a virtue in relation to the novel *Blindness*.

In the novels titled *Seeing* and *Blindness*, the acts such as killing, detention, discriminations, ethnic cleansing, depriving people of their livelihoods, human rights violations, denial of personal rights of the individuals, oppression of their liberties, suppression of the aspirations of the people, segregation of the people, the total disregard for human dignities and the rough handling of the ordinary people by the powerful elements of the society are considered as acts of acceptable nature solely because here confirmed sins are looked through the prism of virtues so much so that here sins are seen as virtues by the manipulated and radicalized minds. This conflict pertaining to established sins shown as virtues owing to its implementation by crooked logic is all the more discernible in the novel titled *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* wherein all the virtues associated with Jesus are put forth as having a sinful side to them and all sins do attain level acceptability. This transformative dimension of sin and virtue happening in the contrastive fashion due to the general situation prevailing in the society leaned towards the notion that goes along with the motto "Fair is foul and foul is fair". Even in the Indian context, this very situation is so applicable wherein those who tell the truths are sent to the gallows and those who resort to the acts of telling lies are glorified to the brim. So, the saints versus sinners and sin versus virtue do obtain a platform of contrasts in the novels of Jose Saramago in an obvious fashion and such contradictions are keeping with the trends and tendencies so clear-cut in our social framework today.

Saramago problematizes the diverse metaphors of sin and virtue and sinners and the saints. By and large, Saramago tries to conscientize the readers by invoking the conflict between sin and virtue. For him, human concerns like compassion, kindness, love, and fraternity are virtues. The opposites are termed and marked as sins. For him, Jesus in the *Gospel According to Jesus Christ* is a cynic and not a supernatural figure. In short, Saramago exhibited a lot of courage and confidence to question the ethical and moral standards in his novels. His fictional way of presenting moral themes goes beyond the religious themes and concepts which are loaded with dogmatic and traditional beliefs and practices.

According to Saramago, the only effective guiding force that pressurizes us to do good and avoid evil is certainly our moral conscience. This moral conscience determines our actions and even our thinking. Yet he does not reveal the origin of moral conscience and its repercussions of moral conscience. For him, moral conscience foretells sin and virtue and it is a prophetic voice. It is also significant to point out that his conception of moral conscience is deeply rooted in rationality and logical coherence and reasoning power. In *Blindness*, he

shares his mind with the readers: “The moral conscience that so many thoughtless people have offended against and many more have rejected, is something that has always existed, it was not an invention of the philosophers of the Quaternary, when the soul was little more than a muddled proposition” (17). We also read in the novel *Blindness* that there is a judicious conflict between external appearance and internal appearance. A girl with the dark glasses comments in the novel *Blindness*: “Inside us, there is something that has no name that something is what we are” (276). Even in the interviews, Saramago refused to ascertain his idea of morality and ethical standard. When he was interviewed by Anna Kloubucka, he liked to follow the thematic statements of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: “If the human being is shaped by his circumstances, then it is necessary to shape those circumstances humanely. This contains all the wisdom I needed in order to become what it seems I am considered to be, a political moralist”. Based on this statement, Saramago’s *Blindness* is a very interesting novel to pinpoint the sinful situations and the possibility to overpower the sin. The asylum itself is a sign of sin and it is later burnt down and the sinners/the blind discover them in the street. Later they find themselves in a fresh situation where we read that blindness is slowly deteriorating and descending. Here they start to seek their original homes and localities and begin to develop a feeling much closer to their earlier feelings. Here sin functions as a reminder to the inmates of an asylum where they recollect their early life and particularly their eyesight.

The role of tenderness and meekness has also played a crucial role in the novel *Blindness*. The Doctor’s Wife is an ambassador of this heart-touching tenderness and compassion to fellow beings. She manifests an additional quality to save the lives of the blind people who were trapped and blocked in the cell. She urges people to desire for freedom and survival. According to Tim parks, she develops “a growing physical tenderness toward the other members of the group, a sort of desperate respect for the human body, her own and others, which she transmits to her companions by simple acts of practical love”. Moreover, the doctor’s wife acts like a saint. The meal she circulates to the poor and the hungry fellow beings and her caring and consoling deeds serve as a saintly action and that paints her figure as a saintly and religious one. It symbolizes a religious ritual as depicted in the Bible. The action has a humanitarian and religious coloring and overtones. The Principal aspect of Jesus’ life in the novel Gospel is with Mary Magdalene, the promiscuous woman. Saramago does not associate Jesus with his father, his mother or even with his disciples but he colors His life

with a scarlet woman. The concept of sin is entirely different for him and he wants to portray Jesus as a purely human figure with all the human passions and emotions. Saramago gives gentleness to Jesus based on his sinful tendencies and articulations. Saramago wants to present Jesus as an undogmatic Christian who challenges the commands of even God the father. It is always remarkable and sensational that Saramago's fictions are subtly grounded in a recognizable reality. In his *Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, Saramago articulates Jesus' humanity and his own humanitarian concerns with the concepts of sin and virtue.

Conclusion

As a professional novelist, Saramago was a late bloomer. He became a full-time writer only in his late fifties. There is always a harsh realism and lyric fantasy in his writings. The critic Irving Howe argues that Saramago is a representative of the voice of European skepticism and he may be called the connoisseur of ironies. In *Gospel According to Jesus Christ* he depicts Jesus as a man of human will and desire and he says that even Jesus tries to apologize to mankind for God's sins. Saramago's version of sin and virtue may be scandalous and even blasphemous for the Catholic Church and the pious believers. That is why it is seen that the Portuguese government blocked the novel's entry for a European Literary prize in 1992 and as a reaction to this Saramago had chosen his life in an exile mode in the Canary Islands. Saramago always questions the power structures in society through his characters and themes. He attacks the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy and wants to establish an egalitarian structure. Saramago has the rationalization to talk about sin and virtue and that may be a distancing idea for us. He wants to introduce a new age where new imaginations and new structures dominate with the concepts of equality, fraternity, and compassion. His politics may seem odd and playful. But his radical and revolutionary thoughts may not stop. He questions guilt feeling imposed by the Christian religion upon poor human beings. For him, this dehumanization is a kind of sin and negligence from the part of Church. And it is very obvious through the meeting between Jesus and the Scribe in his *Gospel*:

Guilt is a wolf that eats its cub after having devoured its father, the wolf, of which you speak, has already devoured my father. Then, it will be soon your turn, and what about you, have you ever been devoured, not only devoured, but also spewed up. (158)

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