

## 'THE GOD' OR 'GOD'? TRACING EXISTENTIAL NIHILISM IN THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF JOSE SARAMAGO

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### **Abstract:**

*An outright denial of God or any omniscient supernatural power is explicit in the works of the Portuguese writer Jose Saramago. But the absence of an authoritarian God does not mean that his characters are free to act upon their will. They survive under the clutches of a power that is as unalterable as destiny- a power that provides them hardly any choice. In *Blindness* and *Cain* the central characters are nihilists most often suffering from existential anxiety. Through the characters of *Cain* Saramago questions a series of punishments imparted upon the human race by the God of the Old Testament. *Blindness* in turn is an existential reflection of the state of modern human society desolated by the tyrannical presence of various institutions. The paper attempts to examine nihilism in the fictional world of Saramago.*

**Keywords:** *Punishment, justice, existentialism, God.*

The term nihilism has its roots in the Latin term 'nihil' which means nothing. This is a radical movement which has its origin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia among people who were skeptical of moral values and the purpose and meaning of life. Freidreich Nietzsche used the term to imply a rejection of traditional Western values. The term was popularized by Ivan Turgenev in his novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862). This novel depicted disillusioned characters violently resisting the prevailing social order. Following the publication of this work, nihilists asserted individual freedom and negated the tyranny of religion, state and family.

Jose Saramago, the Portuguese writer won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1998 and the Nobel committee detected an element of traditional parables in his works. An openly atheist writer, Saramago makes a deconstructive reading of the Bible in *Cain* and *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*. In these works of fiction, Christ and the God of the Old Testament turn out to be mere characters with their own virtues and vices. "When the lord, also known as God...." (*Cain* 1) begins *Cain* subverting the traditional conception of God as a singular being. God is only a name in the novel. *Cain* (2009) and *Blindness* (1995) recounts nihilist characters disillusioned by the meaninglessness of life and oppressed by the tyranny of state and religion.

*Cain* traces major punishments imparted by the God of the Old Testament. This includes Adam and Eve getting evicted from the Garden of Eden and Cain's exile from his homeland. Adam, Eve and Cain- the central characters of *Cain*- are left with little choice in their life as even the Biblical Fall and fratricide were pre-destined. The characters thus turn out to be mere tools in the hands of a tyrannical power- represented by God<sup>1</sup>- and the sole purpose of their life is to wriggle out of it. As a punishment for his fratricide Cain is doomed to be "a fugitive and a vagabond upon the earth". (*Cain* 26) Before evicting him from his homeland God puts a mark on his forehead: "That is the mark of your condemnation, added the lord". (*Cain* 26) In the course of his journey, Cain indeed gets cross-examined by strangers on account this mark. In *Blindness*, the contagious and incurable disease symbolizes the helplessness of modern man. The narrator does not reveal names of any characters. The character's vices, habits or profession are used

instead of names thereby making them representatives of a larger group of humans. In *Blindness* the titular disease turns contagious and infects almost everyone thereby leaving the world in chaos. In the novel, as blindness spreads rapidly the affected individuals are forced into an asylum thereby isolated from the rest of the world. Obviously it was beyond their choice to go blind, get isolated and live in a filthy asylum. It is not just hopelessness and purposelessness but the lack of any sensible choice that makes the asylum a cross section of the modern human society. Despite the determined efforts from the part of the doctor's wife to establish order and peace the asylum grows unhygienic and chaotic: "When it became impossible in any sense, to reach the lavatories, the blind internees began using the yard as a place to relieve themselves and clean their bowels". (*Blindness* 125-126) While in *Cain* the surveillance of God constantly makes the characters aware of their unfree state, the tyrannical presence of state machinery replaces God in *Blindness*. In *Human, All-Too-Human* Friedrich Nietzsche says that the importance of the death of God lies in freedom and the infinite number of choices that it provides: "We philosophers and 'free spirits' in fact feel at the news that the 'old God is dead' as if illuminated by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, astonishment, presentiment, expectation-at last the horizon seems to us again free". (Nietzsche 23)

In *Cain*, Saramago takes us to those sites where the most significant actions of the Old Testament unfold. Landscapes and cultures change as the story develops through the narrator's journey. But throughout the course of his journey Cain proves his wit and rationality. The first few chapters of the novel correspond to the Genesis of the Holy Bible where the God is engaged in the act of creation. Here, the author deconstructs some of the popular misconceptions and forces the readers to think logically. The Garden of Eden thus turns out to be an extremely passive place that drained life out of its inhabitants. Adam and Eve grow weary of seeing the beautiful of all sights, tasting the delicious of all fruits and smelling the sweetest of all scents. The author comically points out that in the utopia created by the God, even the carnivorous animals had to satisfy themselves with fruits. At all events the central focus of the novel is Cain, the son of those ancestors who shared the wrath of God. Saramago makes witty statements of how Garden of Eden turned out to be a place of purposelessness and boredom:

...one must not underestimate the intense boredom of all those years ... that the sole occupants of that earthly paradise must have felt like poor orphans abandoned in the forest of the universe....their conjugal routine, aggravated in their case due to inexperience proved to be as destructive as the invasion of woodworm to a roof beam. (*Cain* 3)

In both the novels an omniscient and sturdy power determines the fate of the characters. The sense of justice of this sturdy power is retributive. The central characters get punished for their actions that are marked 'forbidden'. But the characters most often welcome this punishment as a boon. In *Cain* for instance, life on earth gets a better portrayal than that at the Garden of Eden. Cain turns out to be pleased as he gets evicted from the homeland. In *Blindness* it is implied that the contagious disease infects those who are 'sinful'. Be it the man who stole the car or the girl with the dark glasses (a part time prostitute) every blind character in the novel is associated with socially unacceptable activities. A closer look into *Blindness* reveals that the author himself becomes the sole authority in the godless world that he creates. The third person narrator in *Cain* makes a clear cut distinction between virtue and vice but does not force the readers to welcome those notions. But the characters' destiny is determined in accordance with the ethics and morals of an 'authoritarian author'. This is more explicit in *Blindness* where blindness is pictured as a contagious disease that finally affects everyone. The doctor's wife is the only person who is free from this infection. She is too selfless in her services and this is perhaps the virtue that the author finds in her. But she does not care for anyone outside her group of blind inmates despite knowing the fact that she is the only one gifted with eye sight. The dog of tears starves underneath her eyes as she was unwilling to spare any food. The narrator deliberately sidesteps these facts only to foreground the so-called vices of other characters.

The narrator of *Cain* too makes a categorization of good and evil but reminds the readers that he is not prejudiced by the traditional morality. Cain's jealousy and subsequent fratricide is justified. As a victim of fate he receives the sympathy of readers. Here, God turns out to be a trivial character with a flawed sense of justice. What distinguishes him from other characters is his undisputed power to execute or impose that justice upon everyone. He thus turns out to be a royal heir for whom power is something that is granted and not bestowed by virtue of any personal qualities. Though the protagonist of the novel is Cain, the story begins with the act of creation only to expose the "grave oversight" of God in creating Adam and Eve. As Garden of Eden suffocated its inhabitants with its serenity one cannot blame Eve for trying the forbidden fruit. God bound the ancestors together in love so that Adam faced no dilemma while his partner extended the forbidden fruit. Together they shared the sin and the punishment. Adam seems to have enjoyed the daily toil and anxieties of a farmer after being evicted from the Garden of Eden. Eve too is presented in the novel as being pleased with her share of punishment that included the pangs of childbirth.

As the novel begins, the devoted farmer Cain and his shepherd brother Abel are shown to enjoy a blissful time in their homeland until God intervened. By accepting Abel's sacrifice and denying his brother's, God plants the seeds of jealousy in Cain. But God does not become the metaphor for fate even though he is aware of every evil that is about to happen whether it be Cain's growing envy or Eve's disobedience. He remains blind until the incidents lead to their so-called doom. He is shown to admire retributive justice. Here the divine logic leads Cain to crime and demands repentance. Cain was doomed to be an eternal traveler for the rest of his life. But he failed God by relishing every experience in his journey. By exposing himself to different cultures, by looking things through an objective eye and by maintaining a detachment with everyone in his path Cain gets strengthened.

In the series of incidents- particularly those involving divine punishment that Cain encounters, the narrator elucidates his moral stand. God seems to be a sectarian concerning the matter of sexuality. He cannot combat incestual relations and homosexuality. His bigotry is explicit in his vengeful anger towards Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities that he destroyed as the inhabitants engaged in homosexual relations. The incestual relationship of Lot's daughters was punished with infertility. God could tolerate Lot's decision to give away his virgin daughters to the men in Sodom when they came demanding his male guests. Thus for God heterosexuality is justifiable even if it involves physical assault and domination.

In *Cain* and *Blindness* heterosexual relations are depicted as an oft repeating action that is devoid of any fervor. Intercourse is associated with the extreme boredom of life in the Garden of Eden: "their extreme conjugal routine, aggravated, in their case due to inexperience, by the complete lack of alternate positions to adopt, proved to be as destructive as an invasion of wood worm to a roof beam." (*Cain* 3) When Cain reaches the place of Lilith she forces him into her bedroom only to make the latter feel "like a prisoner" (*Cain* 67). Sexual pleasure was only a secondary aim for Lilith. Her primary concern was to conceive as her husband was impotent. In the novel God's consent for heterosexual relations is reasoned by the fact that it can lead to procreation. The need of Lot's daughters was not different from that of Lilith. They too wanted to conceive, to produce an heir was the sole purpose of their existence. They are blameless in the eyes of the narrator as that maternal instinct was instilled upon them by God. Thus there is a pragmatic side to heterosexuality as depicted in the novel. God is a patriarchal hero. But he is also an asexual hero like Hippolytus of the Greek mythology. His fanaticism regarding the matter does not prove otherwise. Lilith is forever dissatisfied in love like some of the characters in *Blindness*. In *Blindness*, sexuality is commercialized by the girl with the dark glasses and the blind hoodlums trade it in exchange for food. Unlike *Blindness* that presents sex in all its grotesqueness the very act of sexual intercourse, despite being repetitive, is a positive relief in *Cain*.

In *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ*, Saramago reads the Bible from the perspective of Christ. In *Cain*, the author rewrites the Old Testament with certain amendments thereby changing the heroes and

the villains. It deconstructs the traditional interpretations of the Biblical incidents. 'God' is only a name- a character's specifically an antagonist's. The author refuses to amend the name as 'the God', probably because he is doubtful about his uniqueness. All that Saramago did was to incorporate logic and reason, to give voice to the otherwise sidelined characters, to justify those who were till now unjustly treated in popular beliefs and ultimately to inculcate in us the notion that every act is justifiable once we become objective viewers. Thus traditional conception of sinfulness gets questioned in his nihilistic fictional world.

### **Endnotes**

1. *The author uses the term God (instead of the God) in Cain. In this paper the term is used to denote the fictional character in Saramago's novel.*

### **Works Cited**

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2. Saramago, Jose. *Blindness*. Translated by Giovanni Pontiero, Vintage Books, 1995.
3. \_\_\_\_\_. *Cain*. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa, Vintage Books, 2009.