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The Madness of the Opposites: Reading Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* and Saramago's *Blindness*

Author's Name : **Ammu Jeyakirthana J.**

Designation: **Assistant Professor, Dept of English**

Institution Name: **Gargi College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India**

Abstract

The following paper conflates the works of two diametrically opposed writers—Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* and Jose Saramago's *Blindness*. The story of *Atlas Shrugged* is set in early twentieth century New York and follows the lives of protagonists who go on strike, demanding a capitalist utopia of complete freedom and private ownership of industries. It is an exposition of the virtues of selfishness, laissez-faire trade and a statement against the evils of a socialist form of government. Rand's Utopia is a mythical one, resplendent with her vision of what man should be. This will be a foil to Saramago's *Blindness*, which challenges the very democratic system, which he believed, served as a platform for plutocracy and imperialism aided by a capitalistic system. The novel is in the form of an allegory about an epidemic of "white blindness" in an unnamed city set in an unspecified time. Saramago's protagonists are men and women we meet every day; not the superheroes of Rand's novels. Clearly, what Rand considered her Utopia is Saramago's Dystopia and the two writers are each other's diametrical opposites. How does a reader synthesize or find a balance between these two opposing poles?

Keywords

Rand-Saramago-Madness-Asylum-Utopia-Dystopia-Menippean Satire-Heterogeneity

"The road is cleared," said Galt. "We are going back to the world."

— *Atlas Shrugged*

"The gate is wide open, the madmen escape."

— *Blindness*

The following paper conflates the works of two diametrically opposed writers—Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* and Jose Saramago’s *Blindness*. The story of *Atlas Shrugged* is set in early twentieth century New York and follows the lives of protagonists who go on strike, demanding a capitalist utopia of complete freedom and private ownership of industries under a democratic system. It is a rather long exposition of the virtues of selfishness, laissez-faire trade and a statement against the evils of a socialist form of government. Rand’s Utopia is a mythical one, resplendent with her vision of what man should be.

This will be a foil to Saramago’s *Blindness*, which challenges the very democratic system, which he believed, served as a platform for plutocracy and imperialism aided by a capitalistic system. The novel is in the form of an allegory about an epidemic of “white blindness” in an unnamed city set in an unspecified time. Saramago’s protagonists are men and women we meet every day; not the superheroes of Rand’s novels. She believed: “If there is such a thing as an average man, who cares about him, or why should anyone care? What I am interested in is the great and the exceptional”.¹ . While some of the characters in Saramago’s novels have a name, others are referred to by certain attributes: like ‘the first blind man’, ‘the first blind man’s wife’, ‘the car thief’, ‘the girl with dark glasses’, ‘the old man with the black eye patch’, ‘the boy with the squint’ or ‘the doctor’, or ‘the doctor’s wife’ from *Blindness*. There is even ‘the dog of tears’. Of the characters in his novels, Saramago said:

I never appreciated 'positive heroes' in literature. They are almost always clichés, copies of copies, until the model is exhausted. I prefer perplexity, doubt, uncertainty, not just because it provides a more 'productive' literary raw material, but because that is the way we humans really are.²

Clearly, what Rand considered her Utopia is Saramago’s Dystopia and the two writers are each other’s diametrical opposites in almost every manner possible and makes the adopting of the dialectical approach to studying these two writers difficult to evade. This paper is part of a larger research that tries to synthesize the works of these two writers, studying one as the thesis and the other as the antithesis. How does a reader synthesize or find a balance between these two opposing poles? The synthesis will necessarily have to take place in what this paper calls the imaginarium (the mind) of the reader of the two novels that portray contrasting visions of the world.

Atlas Shrugged published in 1957 paints a capitalist’s nightmare of a dystopian America that is controlled by an authoritarian collectivist government that denies property rights, and individual freedom to the industrialists, the bankers, and inventors and the entrepreneurs and believed in the redistribution of wealth. The protagonists are Dagny Taggart, the Vice President of a transcontinental railroad system; Francisco d’ Anconia a copper baron; Hank Rearden – owner of Rearden Steel and inventor of Rearden Metal and of course John Galt , the master-mind behind the strike against the collectivist government and the philosopher-physicist who invented the static-electricity motor that could run on air. There are bankers, oil barons, musicians, artists and philosophers, and even a judge, all of whom are convinced by Galt to go on strike against this collectivist government.

They retire to a secret hideaway in the Rocky Mountains, which they come to call Galt’s Gulch. This secret valley is now a near-perfect utopic place inhabited only by the best of individuals of society—each of whom believes in the code of conduct set down by Galt: reason, purpose and self-esteem. All of them are heroes in their chosen fields and believe in what Rand called “the virtue of selfishness”. One of the characters even likens Galt’s Gulch to Atlantis, the city once inhabited by heroes.

However, this valley is only meant to be a makeshift residence for these “prime-movers” of society, until the world outside realizes that these individuals were the ones who kept society alive: that they are, in fact, the ones who constitute “the motor of the world”. The novel’s purpose is to teach society (and the governments) what would happen to a world deprived of man’s mind. Without the minds that help to run the machines and gadgets, “[T]he very machines that had made their life so safe, will now make it a continuous peril” (*Atlas*, 739).

¹ JOAR p 474

² Jose Saramago Guardian Interview

Francisco d' Anconia recounts what Galt said to him when he explained the purpose of the strike to him: that Galt “pointed to the skyscrapers of the city. He said that we had to extinguish the lights of the world, and when we would see the lights of New York go out, we would know that our job was done” (*Atlas*, 703). Dagny Taggart is on the list of people that Galt wants to join the strike and because she is the person keeping the railroad systems running, her strike would help to send the rest of the world a clear message:

“When the rails are cut, the city of New York will starve in two days...they’ll go through the whole of the agony—through the shrinking, the shortages, the hunger riots, the stampeding violence...” (*Atlas*, 739)

Dagny, however, is the last industrialist who refuses to join Galt’s strike and believes that she cannot bring herself “to abandon to destruction all the greatness of the world...I cannot believe that men can refuse to see, that they can remain blind and deaf to us forever” (*Atlas*, 740). However, she does join the strike towards the end and witnesses “the last convulsions:” the pandemonium sets in when the lights in the city of New York do finally go out, signifying that civilization has returned to primitivism. The darkness into which the cities are plunged is symbolic of the darkness of a whole race of people devoid of rationality (“light”) —which was what Galt (and Rand) were protesting against. The “basic vice and the source of all evil” of the people, as Galt proclaims in his radio address is “the act of blanking out, the willful suspension of one’s consciousness, the refusal to think...the act of unfocussing your mind and inducing an inner fog to escape the reality of judgment...”(*Atlas*, 931).

Blindness by Saramago published in 1995 presents a nameless city in a nameless country that has been hit by a mysterious plague of “white blindness”. The novel opens with a man who suddenly goes blind while waiting at a signal saying “... it’s as if I were caught in a mist or had fallen into a milky sea” (*Blindness*, 5). In a postmodern reading experience—that would justify such a blurring of boundaries—one is tempted to read this as the next narrative point of view of the same city one sees at the end of *Atlas Shrugged* (by another author). The induced “inner fog” that Galt refers to, is very similar to Saramago’s depiction of “white blindness” that soon affects everybody in the city, except for the character of ‘the doctor’s wife’. This is the “darkness” into which the city plunges, and soon pandemonium does break out in the city.

The story narrates the initial confinement of the protagonists in an asylum. The trope of the asylum in Utopian studies has helped serve the purpose of what Foucault referred to as “heterotopia” or Other Space³ that provides one with a new vantage point from which to view the world. Saramago uses this trope to portray the breakdown of different systems of organization in society—both democratic and totalitarian. This space is sharply different from Galt’s Gulch, however, since that is a utopic space, which does not, in fact, exist in reality, unlike the asylum that does—as an Other Place. (Utopia is both ‘no-place’ (*outopia*) and ‘good-place’(*eutopia*))⁴. Besides, the utopic, Atlantis-like valley that Rand represents is more of a homogenized space, unlike Saramago’s heterogeneous portrayal of (an attempt at) democratic organization alongside a dictatorial gun toting blind man, and numerous other kinds of blind inmates all squabbling and haggling over food. All of them are reduced to living in a horrifying state of filth and slime, which Saramago paints with unrestrained scatological narrative. This is a far cry from Rand’s insistence of an aesthetic portrayal of life.

Ruth Levitas, points out how since the 1970s, utopic texts have become more pluralistic, provisional and reflexive and have become “more heuristic, rather than telic”—ie, they are more speculative; rather than employing a goal oriented, systematic approach, they invite the readers to engage in dialogue with the text itself.⁵ When the asylum in Saramago’s novel burns down, because of an inmate who starts a fire, the protagonists find the gates unlocked and walk out into a world taken over by the epidemic of the white blindness. The wall dividing the asylum dissolves and the Other Space is now really the only place. The morning after the fire burns down the asylum, the doctor’s wife comes back to tell her husband (and the other ward mates who have tagged along) “...from what I heard everyone must have gone blind, In that case quipped the old man with the black eyepatch, its just as if we were still in the mental asylum...”(*Blindness*, 213).

³ Foucault, Michel. *Of Other Spaces* (1967), *Heterotopias*.

⁴ Parker, *Utopia and the organizational imagination: eutopia*, p 217

⁵ Levitas, Ruth. *For Utopia: The (limits of the) Utopian function in late capitalist society*, p 38.

Blindness itself is the other dominant (and rather common) trope Saramago employs in the novel. It is a blindness of rationality, and the picture of the society in which they live in is very similar to the one that the strikers in *Atlas Shrugged* prophesize. All of the characters including the ophthalmologist who meet the first blind man go blind soon after, and are affected by the milky white blindness - except the doctor's wife "the dog of tears" who joins the doctor's wife later and stays with her. This inexplicable white blindness soon affects other inhabitants of this unnamed city (while others outside the city remain unaffected) and is soon declared an epidemic. The city throws the first few affected individuals into quarantine in an asylum. The only structure the authorities are willing to spare to these patients.

The original Portuguese title of the novel was *Ensaio Sobre a Cegueira*: literally 'An Essay on Blindness'. *Ensaio*, however, also means test/ attempt/ practise or rehearsal. The first few pages of the novel establish that the plot is a dystopian narrative, that also blends elements of a fantastical allegorical fable, that includes a sliver of magic realism, yet, also self consciously uses the space of the novel as an experiment, to explore, demonstrate and determine the hypothetical disease of a "white blindness".

The doctor's wife, however, is another important narrative tool. She is the only one who retains her vision—in other words, her rationality—and performs the role of the one who helps her blind (irrational) companions. She is the alter ego to Rand's heroes whom she likens to the mythical Atlas who carries the world on his shoulder; the difference between them and the doctor's wife, is the sense of responsibility she feels towards her companions. Rand's rallying cry is for all the Atlases in the world to shrug—to lay down the burden of carrying more than they have to, is a call that the doctor's wife is incapable of answering.

She looked at them, (her companions) her eyes filled with tears, they were, as dependent on her as little children on their mother. If I should let them down, she thought, it did not occur to her that all around her the people were all blind yet managed to live. (*Blindness*, 213)

This genre employs an extended use of metaphor, and the protagonists function as mouthpieces to mental attitudes in society. This enables the heuristic mode of engaging with the idea of utopia in itself as mentioned above. This allows both the author and the reader greater self-reflexivity, and through the character of the doctor's wife, an almost voyeuristic view into the lives of these characters and their situations. Saramago's novel portrays his experimental attitude to the art of writing itself, and the space that it provides to the artist.

The asylum as the chosen structure and space for the "diseased individuals" in the text is a telling choice thus and immediately highlights the allegorical metaphor of the blindness as both ignorance and the mental/intellectual state of the characters. The choice of the characters themselves provides a relatively realistic cross-section of society in terms of gender, age, class and ableism, and even more importantly, a non-human being who becomes an intrinsic part of the narrative while lending a fabulist spin to the tale. They represent the elements that appear to induce fear in everyday life, due to their very difference; Jung's statement "*in lunatic asylums it is a well known fact that patients are far more dangerous when suffering from fear than when moved by rage or hatred.*"⁶ is a reminder of how the social spaces we inhabit seem to turn lunatic in how these various forms of fears induce a psychosis in the public spaces. The presence of the dog of tears however, does more than represent a mere fabulous element, but serves to expand the narrative beyond an anthropocentric representation of the social fabric. Given that this novel explores an urban setting, the presence of the dog needs to be read as an important reminder and pointer to recognize non-human presences in urban spaces as well.

The initial confinement of the protagonists in an asylum also functions as an important trope in these texts that are both utopian and dystopian-what Foucault refers to as the "heterotopia" or Other Space⁷. Specifically the heterotopia of deviance- an 'other' space where individuals who fall outside the norm are placed. The removal of the undesirable, non-normative bodies (and minds) are expected to make a utopian space possible. It is possible then to see the dystopian text in itself as a utopian experiment, a kind of a heterotopic entity that mirrors the world

⁶ Jung, Carl. *Psychology of Fear and Religion*

⁷ Foucault, Michel. *Of Other Spaces* (1967), *Heterotopias*.

we live in, being both an unreal virtual space, while also being a real object. The space of the novel then becomes both the utopian “no place” and what this paper considers dystopia- the ubiquitous ever present real. The dystopian and the utopian are thus intrinsically and dialectically enmeshed, and serve the same purpose: to imagine other spaces that can and do reflect contemporary social landscapes. It is thus also possible to consider that what one deals with is multiple subsets of utopias or utopian spaces that make up the dystopian Real.

Saramago’s *Blindness*, however, uses the asylum to portray the breakdown of different systems of organization in society—both democratic and totalitarian. The 6 protagonists are the first inmates at the asylum. All of them have gone blind (except the doctor’s wife who lies to the authorities that she is blind so she could go to the quarantine with her husband). When other 'inmates' arrive, the asylum is divided into two wings - one for those exposed to the illness and the other that's the doctor's wing inhabits for those who have already been 'infected'. Very soon this heterotopia of deviance serves as a microcosm for the actual world and highlights the breakdown of modern human existence to a fight for basic survival, a bed and food. There is a lot of emphasis on graphic scatalogical descriptions, the disintegration of sanitation where the inmates are forced to live in filth both literal and metaphorical. Clean drinking water becomes scarce and eventually non-existent and the inmates are left at the mercy of soldiers who drop off food thrice a day. Unable to see, the acquisition of food becomes an ordeal in itself and with increasing numbers, fights soon break out between different wards.

While the doctor tries to maintain a semblance of order in his ward, a new inmate arrives with a gun and proclaims he shall ration out food to other wards. The threat of a blind man with a gun reduces everyone to fear and they agree to first exchange all valuables for food, and later the women are made to prostitute themselves for the survival of the other inmates in their wards. The doctor's wife is now placed in a moral and ethical dilemma but is forced to take matters into her own hands. She is the only one who retains her vision—in other words, her rationality—and performs the role of the one who helps her blind (irrational) companions. She stabs the blind gunman with a pair of scissors. The woman who was being raped by the gun man when the doctor’s wife stabs him, later sets his ward on fire. The fire burns down the asylum and sets all the inmates “free”. A male writer, assigning this agency to a woman who was first helped by the doctor’s wife, and the act of killing the autocratic male predator, and the fire that burns the asylum is an interesting and important intervention. When the asylum walls burn down, however, the inmates find that the whole city has been affected by the epidemic of white blindness. When the doctor’s wife informs her other inmates of the blind city, the old man with the black eyepatch quips “ in that case...it's just as if we were still in the mental asylum...”(*Blindness*, 213). The “other “space, the heterotopia of deviance, in effect the dystopian space dissolves into the urban dystopia.

Galt’s strike in *Atlas Shrugged* waits for the road to clear up so that he could live out his dream of a world peopled with kindred Atlases. It appears to be a dangerous proposition and representative of the kind of attitude the capitalists and multinationals take towards those who do not share their interests. They simply pack their bags and leave, searching for better prospects and take an “objective” stance on the “the whole of the agony—the shrinking, the shortages, the hunger riots, the stampeding violence...” that they foresee. (*Atlas*, 739). The doctor’s wife however, is not the kind of character who is going to be able to emulate Dagny’s decision at the end of *Atlas Shrugged*. The differences in the attitudes that Rand and Saramago have towards the malaise of the world is inherent in the respective mediums of their art as well. The difference is that of a novelist and a Menippean satirist.

Northrope Frye’s definition distinguishing between the two best describes the difference between Rand and Saramago: “The novelist sees evil and folly as social diseases, but the Menippean satirist sees them as diseases of the intellect.”⁸ This would explain why Galt waits until the world beyond the mountains is cleansed of “the parasites”—as Rand calls them—so he could start afresh from scratch. This is the utopian dream: the longing for a clean slate, within which one could live out the fantasy of a world devoid of parasitical homogeneous rational Atlas-like men. Such a place (thankfully), could not, and does not exist in reality.

⁸Frye, Northrope. *Anatomy of Criticism* (1974), pp. 309-12.

Menippean satire on the other hand, is the genre of fantastic realism that Saramago adopts, like Swift and Wells as pointed out by Prof. Koppenfels. This genre employs an extended use of metaphor, and the protagonists function as mouthpieces to mental attitudes in society.⁹ This enables the heuristic mode of engaging with the idea of utopia in itself as mentioned above. This allows both the author and the reader greater self-reflexivity, and through the character of the doctor's wife, an almost voyeuristic view into the lives of these characters and their situations. Saramago's novel portrays his experimental attitude to the art of writing itself, and the space that it provides to the artist.

Much as one would like to create and fashion a world after one's own desires (like Rand) a responsible attitude would be the one that never forgets the heterogeneity of society—the fact that we will always have (relative) social miscreants whom we cannot simply wish out of existence. Saramago's asylum is a representation of an imperfect dystopic society as opposed to Rand's perfect utopic valley. It is not even the heterotopic "other place" but the not-so-good-place that is, in reality, present everywhere (the opposite of utopia). What is deemed the asylum and assigned to a the heterotopic, in reality is the real madness of the heterogenous existence of the dystopian world.

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⁹ Koppenfels, Werner von. 'These Irritant Bodies': Blinding and Blindness in Dystopia