

Raising Social Awareness in Saramago's Novels

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Abstract:

José Saramago's works depict an unfinished and dormant modernity and contribute to a better understanding of the contemporary world, through a local spatiality which soon becomes a social discourse. As stated by the Swedish Academy, Saramago creates "parables sustained by imagination, compassion and irony [that] continually enables us once again to apprehend an elusory reality". The universal theme of social identity does not suppress the historical reference, though it emphasizes the consequences of modernity as a decisive factor for the transformation of the global identity. The questioning of the paradigms of social evolution is associated with the absence of human justice, as well as the exploitation and domination of the modern subject through the decrease of freedom, the psychological imprisonment and ideological alienation.

Keywords: José Saramago, social identity, social awareness, Nobel Prize, modernity, literature

"talvez o romance possa restituir-nos essa vertigem suprema, o alto e extático canto de uma humanidade que ainda não foi capaz, até hoje, de conciliar-se com a sua própria face." (Saramago 1994: 212-213)

"maybe the novel can restore that ultimate vertigo, the high and mighty chant of a humanity who has not yet come to terms with its own image"

It is thought that in literature the social theme "is never merely a surface layer [...] it is the matrix within which all other terms are fleshed and shaped" (Eagleton 1988: 2) and that it is at the level of the values that literature "is seen to reinforce and illuminate purely sociological material [...] it delineates man's anxieties, hopes and aspirations, is perhaps one of the most effective sociological barometers of the human response to social forces" (Swingewood 1972: 15-17). The literary text thus emerges as social matter with the capacity to question Man and raise his awareness. José Saramago's works portray an unfinished modernity and contribute to a better understanding of the modern world, through a spatiality which is initially local but which spreads rapidly to social discourse. The literary space works as a frame promoting a dialogue that questions the psychological, physical, moral, social, political and historical reality. The universality of this theme does not annul the historical reference, though it does highlight the consequences of modernity as a decisive factor in the transformation of the global identity. The capitalist fever under the form of excess consumption, the decentralization of the basic concepts of human reference previously established by traditional order, the media's trivialization of war and death and the fragmentation of time and space, are some of the factors that have socially united the individual citizens of the so-called globalized world or that have led to an attempt at homogenization. Claudio Guillén states that it was from that "tensão entre a integridade do mundo descrito pelas ciências naturais, ou abarcado pelas tecnologias, e a pluralidade de mundos – sociais, políticos, culturais, psíquicos – onde residimos, onde de facto vivemos, que verdadeiramente conhecemos, e que são, ou desenham, o horizonte de humanistas e criadores" (2001: 404).

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(tension between the world's integrity as described by the natural sciences or embraced by technology and the multiplicity of the social, political, cultural and psychological worlds – we inhabit, we actually live in, we truly know, and which are or shape the horizon of humanists and creators.)

In Saramago, the journalistic experience combined with the humanist spirit have left unquestionable marks in his literary works and have simultaneously begun to define themselves as “nexus, temas e obsessões que viriam a ser a coluna vertebral, estruturalmente invariável, de um corpo literário em mudança” (Saramago 1982: 13-14) (nexus, themes and obsessions that would be the structurally unvarying backbone of a changing literary body). A complex combination of ideological commitment and literary activity has resulted in a literary work filled with inter-texts and knowledge resulting from oral tradition.

Saramago introduces a set of discursive constructions that question and deconstruct reality in order to question both social and individual identity. As an example, the onomastic designation used as element of identity is, on the one hand, nullified or typified for a social group or structure and, on the other hand, functioning as a symbolic representation of all those rescued from socio-historical oblivion. As he writes in *Memorial do Convento/ Baltasar and Blimunda*, “tudo quanto é nome de homem vai aqui, tudo quanto é vida também, sobretudo se atribulada, principalmente se miserável, já que não podemos falar-lhes das vidas, por tantas serem, ao menos deixemos os nomes escritos, é essa a nossa obrigação, só para isso escrevemos, torná-los imortais, pois aí ficam, se de nós dependem” (1992: 211).

(All Men's names are written here, all lives too, especially if troubled, particularly if miserable. Since we cannot speak of such lives, for they are so numerous, at least we write their names. That is our duty, we write to immortalise them. There they shall be, if they depend on us).

Saramago's most recent novels dwell with the concept of identity in a more significant manner, through a diversity of different sociological registers and a timeless compromise which places the reader in contact with *the other*. The reflection about identity matters derives from the erasure of identity categorisations, through the suppression of the basic elements to life support associated with onomastic elimination, the shaping of an abstract space and the political and economic powers' inability to communicate resulting in repressive behaviours. This thematic elasticity enables a universal reading of the subject's constraints nowadays and the use of the word “essay”³ for Saramago's novel for fitting into this social questioning. The conscious choice of this word as “auto-exercício da razão” (“self-exercise of reasoning”) enables “tornar inteligíveis as coisas através do auto-exercício das faculdades, da liberdade pessoal, e do esforço constante pelo pensar original” (Moisés 1985:188) (to make things intelligible through the self-exercise of faculties, of personal freedom, and of constant strive for original thought). This expository writing focuses on a vast range of themes based on interpretation, information and explanation with a strong persuasive component associated with the ethic and aesthetic state and aiming to reflect a philosophical and critical perspective.

The epistemological and ideological dimensions and the writing's timelessness, combined with the wish for a more aware humanity, placed Man as the theme of Saramago's narrative as he himself emphasized in the Nobel speech at the Swedish Academy on December 19, 1998: we pervert reason when we humiliate life, that human dignity is insulted every day by the powerful of our world, that the universal lie has replaced the plural truths, that man stopped respecting himself when he lost the respect due to his fellow-creatures.⁴ The appeal towards active social participation in a fight against its opposite, i.e., collective passiveness, is recurring in several of the Portuguese author's notes and in remarks that aim to raise the reader's awareness, himself a subject of a dormant modernity.

³The publication of José Saramago's novels has very amusing episodes associated to the problematics of the titles of his works. There is an incident with the Angolan government who requested hundreds of copies of *Manual de Pintura e Caligrafia / Manual of Painting and Calligraphy* (1977) as a learning book. In turn, the title *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* has different translations which, for editorial reasons in the majority of the cases, do not use the word “essay” for philosophical and academic reasons. In English the translation is *Blindness*, in French *L'aveuglement*, in Italian *Cecità*, in German *Die Stadt der Blinden*. In Saramago's work *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez* there is the same use of the word essay and the correspondent translation in English is *Seeing*, in French *La Lucidité*, in Italian *Saggio sul la Lucidità* and in German *Die Stadt der Sehenden*.

⁴ http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1998/saramago-lecture.html.

If there is no awareness revolution, if people do not shout: “Não aceito ser apenas aquilo que querem fazer de mim, ou não recusarem ser um elemento de uma massa que se move sem consciência de si própria, a Humanidade estará perdida. Não se trata de regressar ao individualismo, mas há que reencontrar o indivíduo num tempo em que se pretende que ele seja menos do que poderia ser” (GómezAguilera 2010: 155).

(I refuse to be just what they want to make of me”, or I refuse to be a piece of a mass moving unaware of itself, then Humanity is lost. We do not have to return to individualism, but we have to find the individual again as there is a wish for him to become less than what he could be).

In his poetic writing “Se não tenho outra voz” (If I have no other voice), in *Os Poemas Possíveis/ Possible Poems*, or in the wise words of universalist characters as the old man with the black blindfold in *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira/ Blindness*, appear intricate subjects with the capacity to articulate different fields of knowledge:

Não sei se haverá futuro, do que agora se trata é de saber como poderemos viver neste presente. Sem futuro, o presente não serve de nada, é como se não existisse. Pode ser que a humanidade venha a conseguir viver sem olhos, mas então deixará de ser humanidade, o resultado está à vista, qual de nós se considerará ainda tão humano como antes cria ser (Saramago 2001: 244).

(I know not of a future. What is relevant is to know how we can live in this present. Without a future, the present is pointless, it is non-existent. Maybe Humanity will manage to live without eyes, but then it will not be Humanity. The result is there to see. Which of us still sees himself as human as he so wanted to be).

These are unstable, complex times, experiencing an individual abolishment of critical awareness and the governments’ lack of responsibility for the atrocities committed against Mankind. Once again, we refer to the Nobel Prize Speech, this time related to *Levantado do Chão / Raised from the Ground*, to understand the process through which the ideological construction is formed:

Vieram depois os homens e as mulheres do Alentejo, aquela mesma irmandade de condenados da terra a que pertenceram o meu avô Jerónimo e a minha avó Josefa, camponeses rudes obrigados a alugar a força dos braços a troco de um salário e de condições de trabalho que só mereceriam o nome de infames, cobrando por menos que nada a vida a que os seres cultos e civilizados que nos prezamos de ser apreciamos chamar, segundo as ocasiões, preciosa, sagrada ou sublime. Gente popular que conheci, enganada por uma Igreja tão cúmplice como beneficiária do poder do Estado e dos terratenentes latifundistas, gente permanentemente vigiada pela polícia, gente, quantas e quantas vezes, vítima inocente das arbitrariedades de uma justiça falsa. Três gerações de uma família de camponeses, os Mau-Tempo, desde o começo do século até à Revolução de Abril de 1974 que derrubou a ditadura, passam nesse romance a que dei o título de *Levantado do Chão*, e foi com tais homens e mulheres do chão levantados, pessoas reais primeiro, figuras de ficção depois, que aprendi a ser paciente, a confiar e a entregar-me ao tempo, a esse que simultaneamente nos vai construindo e destruindo para de novo, construir e outra vez nos destruir (1999: 12).

(Then came the men and women of Alentejo, that same brotherhood of condemned people of earth to which my grandfather Jerónimo and my grandmother Josefa belonged, simple peasants obliged to hire out the strength of their arms for a salary and working conditions that deserved only to be called infamous, receiving for less than nothing a life which the educated and civilized beings we are proud to be, are pleased to call - depending on the occasion - precious, sacred or sublime. Common people I knew, deceived by a Church both accomplice and beneficiary of the power of the State and of the landowners, permanently watched by the police, people so many times innocent victims of the arbitrariness of a false justice. Three generations of a peasant family, the Mau-Tempo (Badweather), from the beginning of the century to the April Revolution of 1974 which toppled the dictatorship, pass through this novel, which I called *Risen from the Ground*, and it was with such men and women risen from the ground, real people first, figures of fiction later, that I learned how to be patient, to trust and to confide in time, that same time which simultaneously builds and destroys us in order to build and again destroy us). In *Levantado do Chão / Raised from the Ground*, the main actions focus on the day-to-day survival of individuals who fight against a system that keeps them physically and psychologically apart from the mechanisms of power, having as background context, events that mark the national and international history but have little impact on the lives of these fiction characters.

This is a narrative of inner-reflection and quest for identity, from the perspective of oppressed subjects, who tell the story, not only of isolated or politically constrained people but of mankind and the fight against living conditions marked by continued injustices.

This is a telluric novel providing a dialogue between the subjects and the history in a timeless discourse. According to Mark Sabine, *Levantado do Chão*, “asserts the contribution of historical materialism and class-based revolutionary politics to social progress” (143).

In Saramago, the art of storytelling is bounded to a discourse that acts as a full circle with the reader beginning as a fictional project and aiming to bring down some of the barriers between History and fiction. Social matters are the fundamental working material and the historical background comes secondly. This literary construction connected to a restoration of orality, corresponds in a certain way and even if through the means of the written text, to the recovery of the modern subject’s ability to exchange experiences or narratives (because of war, inflation, hunger and political constraints). In “Experience and Poverty”, Benjamin associates the art of storytelling, a practice of oral tradition, with the sharing of experiences and knowledge that has always occurred “handed down in short form to sons and grandsons, with the authority of age, in proverbs; with an often long-winded eloquence, as tales; sometimes as stories from foreign lands, at the fireside (2003:731)”⁵.

The works of the Portuguese writer function as a moral teaching or sociological code of conduct where anonymous voices leave a mark “as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter’s hand” (Benjamin 1985:87), recalling Cipriano Algor’s central character in *A Caverna/ The Cave*. These narrators, recalling Benjamin’s designation, are storytellers with the ability to depict the world from the perspective of an ethic humanism. Saramago undertakes the rewriting of the human journey of “common and ordinary” characters forgotten in the book of History and memory for being amidst hunger, misery, war and plagues. As advocated by Ana Paula Arnaut, there is great “empenhamento ideológico traduzido na adopção do ponto de vista dos mais fracos e desfavorecidos ou na incisiva denúncia e crítica de injustiças e desumanidades de índole e de jaez diversos (2008:21)” (ideological commitment expressed in the up taking of the point of view of the weaker and underprivileged or the blunt exposure and criticism of injustices and inhumanities of different nature and uses).

Saramago refers, in an interview to Carlos Reis, that time’s “arrumação caótica” (chaotic organization) justifies the historical and discursive timelessness. Time, in the novel comes forward as “tempo simultaneamente linear e labiríntico, instável, movediço, tempo com as suas leis próprias, um fluxo verbal que transporta uma duração e que uma duração por sua vez transporta, fluindo e refluindo como uma maré entre dois continentes” (Reis 1998: 135) (a simultaneously straight forward and complex, shaky and unstable time. A time with its own laws, a verbal flow carrying and being carried by a duration, flowing backwards and forwards like a tide in between two continents). Saramago’s novels become key components of a conscious and ironic visit of History and they refresh the quest for reality to raise an ideological awareness, as previously seen.

The work of the Portuguese writer presents a constant philosophical questioning of a self-reflexive nature, challenging the conceptual paradigms of modernity. In it, a self-proposed social novelist and thinker uses allegories that reclaim a human rights’ ideology. In *O essencial sobre José Saramago/ Essential thoughts about José Saramago*, Maria Alzira Seixo stresses that the author attempts the very invention of the world for “os caminhos da ficção [são] os que mais justificadamente conduzem ao encontro da verdade. [...] Saramago entende que a história do mundo é a escrita conjunta da acção e da reflexão humana (a prática e o bem saber, agindo em interdependência dialéctica)” (Seixo 1987: 42).

⁵ In this essay, Benjamin restates knowledge associated with traditional experience. The text reflects on humanity’s decadence and on historical issues connected to the Second World War post memory. These concepts have already been mentioned; although, the essay introduces the inclusion of a parable which completes this reading. At the beginning of the text, Benjamin emphasizes the importance of experience passed on to the younger ones by the communication of knowledge. The author introduces the deathbed of a father who calls his sons to reveal that underneath his vine there lies a great treasure. After digging and discovering nothing, they found the following Fall that the vine was the most abundant of the region. According to Benjamin, lack of experience occurs when cultural heritage no longer includes this tie in human relationships.

⁵In 1977, Michel Foucault published the article “La vie des hommes infâmes”, the life of infamous Men who are only named in Registration books. One of Foucault’s concerns is related to the historical anonymity of these Men, a theme also covered by José Saramago’s novels *Memorial do Convento / Baltasar and Blimunda* (a tribute to all the workers who participated in the construction of Convento de Mafra) and, particularly in, *Todos os Nomes / All the Names*.

(The paths of fiction [are] those which more justifiably lead to truth [...] Saramago believes the history of the world is the joint writing of human action and reflection (the practice and good knowledge, acting in dialectical interdependence). In this way, the ideological component comes forward as extremely relevant for the thematic construction of narratives for embracing complex issues embedded in the subjects' construction of identity on a world scale. It does not work as an illusion,

Nem superstição religiosa de indivíduos mal-orientados, mas uma forma específica de consciência social, materialmente ancorada e sustentada [...]. Sua persistência se deve ao fato de ela ser constituída objectivamente (e consequentemente reconstituída) como consciência prática inevitável das sociedades de classe, relacionada com a articulação de conjuntos de valores estratégicos rivais que tentam controlar o metabolismo social em todos os seus principais aspectos [...] as ideologias conflitantes de qualquer período histórico constituem a consciência prática necessária em termos da qual as principais classes da sociedade se inter-relacionam e até se confrontam, de modo mais, ou menos, aberto, articulando sua visão da ordem social correcta e apropriada como um todo abrangente (Mészáros 2004: 65).

(Nor as religious superstition of ill-advised individuals but a specific form of social awareness, materially anchored and supported [...]. Its tenacity is due to the fact that it is objectively built (and consequently rebuilt) as practical inevitable awareness in societies with social classes, and linked to the interaction of sets of strategic rival values that try to control the social metabolism in all its main aspects [...] the conflicting ideologies of any historical period constitute the necessary practical awareness to which the main social classes interrelate and even confront each other, in a more or less open way, articulating its view of a correct and appropriate social order as a whole).

The centralization of Man in the world and his awareness of place and history are essential to understand identity in modernity. It is through ideology that the subject reflects on his own *raison d'être* and grasps the power of work as a tool that assures and guarantees a place in society. It is from ideology as a focus of political fight that Man understands his place in the world and in history. In this way, ideology contributes to redeploying the individual in a more central and participatory position in society and to forming his own identity. According to Althusser, the latter emerges as part of a super structure connected to the reflections on the unconscious that run from Freud to Lacan. Ideology as an expression of social, political, religious, ethic and aesthetic awareness works in literature as the principle uniting and separating the discursive awareness (cf. Eagleton 1985: 19).

The multiplicity of sociological registers is triggered by the co-occurrence of a variety of voices that form a collective (anonymous) whole and gives a new dimension to the analysis of identity in modern times. We are faced with a transformation of society process where the macro aspects are being dimensioned again and are causing a change in the identity condition. In a statement about the Chiapas (State of Mexico), concerning the disturbances amongst the indigenous population and the Mexican government, Saramago states that “[c]ada mañana, cuando nos despertamos, podemos preguntarnos qué nuevo horror nos habrá deparado, no el mundo, que ése, pobre de él, es sólo víctima paciente, sino nuestros semejantes, los hombres. El hombre, mi semejante, nuestro semejante, patentó la crueldad como fórmula de uso exclusivo en el Planeta y desde la perversión de la crueldad ha organizado una filosofía, un pensamiento, una ideología, en definitiva, un sistema de dominio y de control que ha abocado al mundo a esta situación enferma en que hoy se encuentra” (1998b).

(Every morning, when we wake up, we may ask ourselves what new horror awaits us, in this world, that this poor man, is only a patient victim, if not our fellow men. Man, my fellow man, our fellow man, patented cruelty as his only way on Earth and from the perversion of cruelty he has organized a philosophy, a way of thinking, an ideology, ultimately, a system of dominance and control which has driven the world to this ill situation where we are today).

In the words of Fernando Gómez Aguilera, Saramago “ha expuesto sus análisis y juicios críticos sobre cuestiones fundamentales de nuestro tiempo: las falsas democracias, la Europa de los mercaderes, la hegemonía del capital transnacional, la sistemática vulneración de los derechos humanos, el debilitamiento de la política a favor del capital, los gobiernos vicarios del sistema financiero internacional, la corrupción generalizada de las conciencias, la trivialización de la cultura, la insularidad, la irrealidad del mundo, el fin de la intimidad, la injusta distribución de la riqueza mundial, y, en última instancia, la razón suicida que parece determinar el destino de la humanidad” (2010: 151).

(has exposed his analysis and critical judgements about fundamental issues of our times: the fake democracies, the Europe of the markets, the hegemony of transnational capital, the systematic violation of human rights, the weakening of politics in favor of capital, the governments sold to the international financial system, the

generalized corruption of consciences, the trivialization of culture, the insularity, the world's false reality, the end of intimacy, the unfair distribution of worldwide wealth, and, finally, the suicidal reason which seems to determine the fate of humanity).

The need to know the human being and his identity has taken the subject on anthropological, sociological, philosophical, physiological, political, economic and religious travels. In modern times and spaces, some of the questioning remains dormant due to a rapid erasure of social memory and to practices of ideological and financial abstraction, as previously shown. The factors that contribute to this generalized apathy lie in the way economic and political relations shape identity questions and are responsible for the establishment of a new social code of conduct. As the problematics of modernity are centered on the fragmentation of time and space, on the utopian (de)construction, on the obsolescence of the traditional structures and aesthetic and ethic models, on the exacerbation of individualism, on the revolutionary ideal, on capitalism, on the production of industrial technology and the impact of the present means of communication, the reference structures of individuals which gave the social world its stability have been fragmented and have provoked identity dispersal. Without a stable nucleus, the individual has become continuously formed and transformed from the cultural systems that surround him. In Saramago's works, it is possible to recognize the humanist theme. Additionally, they raise issues related to identity in modern times characterized by being formed from a repression of the inner self, fear and lack of safety. We are thus faced with works interacting with the modern subject, essays representing a plural entity that questions space and reflects on social identity at a time when justice, compassion and solidarity are absent.

These are sociological searches into the human condition where forgotten heroes are rescued under the form of farmers, potters or common citizens who follow a unique life journey and question the transformations of a modernity defined by economic yardsticks and by repressive and controlling States. Saramago's works warn us against the emotional constraints of subjects who wish to be homogenous within the cultural hybridization. Novels in the form of metaphors for the obfuscation of reason are the pillar where fictional discourse is revealed as a constant quest for the Self. The literary field becomes the ideal location to question issues of social identity and ideological construction. If, on one side, the creation of fictional worlds asserts cultural existence, on the other, the questioning of reality contributes to a critical debate on modern times. The texts lead us to rethink, (re)imagine, redesign aspects of identity through the visualization of cracks and voids in reality, "o que é preciso é pômo-nos nós a pensar" (Saramago 1985: 168) (we ourselves need to start thinking). The questioning of the paradigms of social evolution is associated with the absence of human justice, as well as the exploitation and domination of the modern subject through the decrease of freedom, the psychological imprisonment and ideological alienation. In societies that annihilate free ideology and distract the individual with consumerist pleasures or keep them confined to fighting for survival, identity is totally controlled by the actions of a State with absolute power, of multinational capitalist companies or by globalization itself. The texts analyzed in this article are some of the discursive tools that urge awareness raising to identity.

Algo que nos llevará en futuro a entender mejor quiénes somos, en donde estamos (no hacia dónde vamos, eso me interesa muy poco, y, además, yo sé adónde voy, adónde tengo que irme). Que haya un conocimiento que nos sea común a todos, que nos hiciera entender mejor qué es, finalmente, esto de vivir, de pensar, de crear, de imaginar, de transmitir, de hacer cosas. Qué es esto [...] tener una idea sencilla de lo que soy yo, porque me cabrea muchísimo irme de aquí sabiendo lo mismo que sabía al principio (...) Y lo peor es que no solo no sabemos nada de la vida en general, es que nos iremos de la vida sin habernos conocido unos a otros (Saramago 1998b: 144).

(Something which will give us to a better knowledge of who we are, where we are (not where we are going, I am not interested in that, and, besides, I know where I am going, where I must go). Let there be a common knowledge, that will make us better understand what it is, ultimately, to live, to think, to create, to imagine, to transmit, to do things. What is this [...] to have a true idea of who I am, because I would really like to leave here knowing what I knew at the beginning (...) And worst of all, not only know we nothing of life in general, we will depart from life knowing nothing of each other).

From a humanist perspective, in both senses, educational on one side, ethical and epistemological on the other, the depiction of identity finds in the literary field a location for questioning. The concept's volatility fosters a critical discourse of modernity. These are works that 'repair' and work as tools for awareness. Metaphorically, writing becomes the literary epiphany of social, moral, cultural and political oppression, through which the bias of historical description enables a rereading of sociological constraints.

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