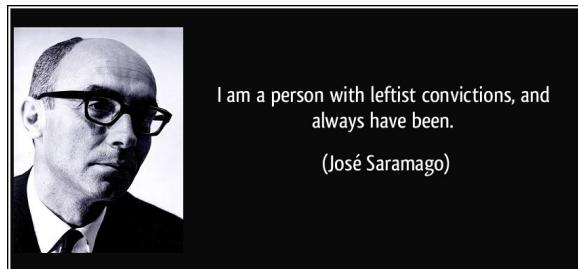


A Review of the Novels of Jose Saramago: Portuguese Socialist Novelist (1922-2010)

Salena Williams



Jose Saramago (1922-2010)

Saramago is arguably the greatest socialist novelist of the 20th and early 21st century. Especially from the 1980s to 2010 he wrote an astonishing proliferation of allegorical and fantastical tales critical of capitalism and the way our lives are structured, and human resilience in the face of capitalism. If you enjoy a great story and haven't read Saramago I would highly recommend him. Saramago has a purposeful unique writing style irreverent of classical literature and reminiscent of the American beat writers. He rarely uses full stops, commas or capital letters thereby giving a breathless rhythmic flow of continuous conversational style. Saramago used this style to deliberately enhance the equality of all people and things he wrote about. Individuals, gods and places in the novels do not have capital letters, a reflection of Saramago's view of how life should be, everyone and everything as equal.

Saramago was born in 1922 to a very poor peasant family in rural Portugal under the dictatorial political regime. He moved to Lisbon with his parents when 7 years old. The family could not afford grammar school education so Saramago went to technical school and trained and worked as a mechanic. He also worked as

a civil servant. In the 1950s he was sacked for political activity and began writing extremely prolifically. Some of his stories were directly critical of the Salazar regime. In 1969 he joined the Portuguese Communist Party; he wrote for and helped edit the Communist Party paper during the revolution in 1974. As well as standing in the local elections for the Communist Party in 1989, Saramago continued writing novels after the revolution. However, he became increasingly pessimistic about the course of politics and the emergent new state of Portugal after the revolution. His novels became increasingly critical of the newly formed democratic regime, which had been set up with the aid and financial assistance of both the British Labour Party and the German Social Democratic Party. A lifetime atheist and supporter of the Palestinian struggle, two of his novels were specifically anti religious, leading to the new social democratic party under Anibal Silva refusing to endorse his book *the Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991) for the European Prize for Literature, stating it was too anti-religion to be supported by Portugal. Because of this shunning of his work he left Portugal and continued living and writing on the island of Lanzarote until his death. After leaving Portugal Saramago remained politically active and spoke at two World Social Forums. He was consistent in his criticism of the hypocrisy of capitalism, stating at one meeting: 'it is more important (for this society) to reach the planet Mars than prevent 13 million Africans from dying of hunger', and at another 'Marx was never as right as now' (2008). Along with Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, Saramago formed

the European Writers Parliament - an organisation committed to free speech for authors. He was blogging criticisms of those such as the Pope and Tony Blair until he died in 2010.

His books are very much a reflection of his life and political beliefs especially *Raised from the Ground* (1980) - an almost autobiographical novel about peasants and workers living under a dictatorial regime then taking over and occupying land: a novel with a brutal and indifferent ending. Although many of his novels are allegorical it is obvious he hated the Portuguese dictatorship but was pessimistic about the social democracy that followed.

Many of the novels are allegorical, and concentrate on the political systems he lived under. *Blindness* (1995) is a stunning depiction of an entire population that all become blind. The novel looks in detail about the impact of this bizarre occurrence and how people survive in the Big Brother totalitarian style world. The novel examines the oppression of the regime, and the psychology within that, how people individually respond to and attempt to survive under changed circumstance. The regime descends to absolute savagery by the proponents of oppression. Shocking and appalling events are inverted to normalcy and bureaucratised, discussed and audited by the government. However there are examples of dissidents and personal bravery. *Seeing* (2004) is in some ways a sequel. The story is of a post blindness election where all the population is free and able to vote. The people all use their democratic rights and post their ballot papers but everyone returns them blank, using abstention as a political decision. Uniquely within the novel Saramago refers back to his previous novel *Blindness*, the government discussing the previous regime. Although a gripping tale *Seeing* could be seen as an intensively psychological ex-

posé of a Gramscian passive and grudging acceptance of democracy under capitalism. The intense excitement Saramago expressed following the 1974 revolution that toppled Salazar 'death of the dictator is a new life of freedom.. never again will men be treated as things' quickly led to disillusionment of social democracy in Europe. Similarly, *Death with Interruptions* (2008) recounts a society where no-one is able to die with bizarre personal and political results. The farce of democracy when the real power lies in multinational companies and international financial bodies is exposed in stories describing life in a world of outrageous parodies.

Many of his novels concentrate on the psychological effect of living under capitalism. A recurring theme is ordinary people struggling to live in an absurd world - and failing. Saramago gives some spectacular vignettes of the descent into madness due to the stress of everyday life. For example *The Double* (2002) a story about a teacher who sees his doppelganger in a video is a captivating description of the impact of alienation within the individual, a sense of being outsiders in their own lives. The hero is eventually forced to live the life of someone who he is not.

There are also vivid and Kafka-like descriptions of the madness of the bureaucracy of the system. It is easy to see the references to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, the ideas of 'you must be mad to be normal' and madness creating its own logic. *All the Names* (1997) is an incredible and highly readable tale about a civil servant (Jose) working in the Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages. With remarkable insight Saramago describes the hero's decent into mental illness; his anxiety and personal distress, alienation, hierarchy in the workplace and the stifling claustrophobia of life in a world where individuals are subsumed in a society where violence is covered up

by ‘civilised society’, where the real self is hidden by the self presented to others, and the only authority is meted out by nameless figures. The story recounts the life of Jose, a lowly civil servant. During the day Jose works under a clearly defined order and hierarchy. There are strictly defined rules and expectations, and this is mirrored by the way the registry is maintained - by a strict coding system which becomes more and more difficult to manage as more people die. The way in which the names are filed means that as more people die the registry has to extend further and further outwards. Although he suffers vertigo, Jose is forced to climb great heights to collect and deposit certificates. During his time off, as a hobby Jose collects information about the lives of celebrities. By an accident of events he begins to gather information about someone ordinary, with bizarre and dramatic consequences, including a death. The novel concludes with the life of the gravedigger, who further perverts the course of identity by randomly swapping grave markers. The themes in *All the Names*: life, death, identity and meaning, the real person and the person alienated from themselves are themes that are repeated in other novels. The identity theme is strangely related to Saramago and echo a personal link to a bizarre turn of events in Saramago’s own life: Saramago’s name on his birth certificate was wrongly written and the recording of his date of birth was delayed for two days for his parents to avoid paying a tax on his birth.

In 2012 a collection of Saramago’s earlier short stories were translated into English. This collection - *the Lives of Things* is outstanding. Saramago starts the book with a quote from Marx and Engels: ‘If man is shaped by his environment, his environment must be made human’. The story from the novels title *Things* describes an ordinary man living an ordinary life in

an apartment block when normal society begins to disintegrate around him. Stairs in his flat start to disappear, a jug disappears from his kitchen cupboard. The watch stops telling the time but still ticks. Post boxes in the street go missing. A woman suggests to him they should lodge a formal complaint or protest about the missing post box. The government dictates that all disappearances have to be reported and a specific office needs to be informed when things malfunction. The man tries to abide by the rules but when a door goes missing and he cuts his hand he is viewed by suspicion and shunned and outcasted by others. The entire apartment block goes missing leaving the occupants naked until they are rescued by revolutionary forces. The real and confused personal responses to repression, brutality and loss of control are tangible. In *Embargo* a man is driving in his car when he realises that he is unable to control the car or stop driving. He is forced to travel incessantly. At first he tries to enjoy the experience, visiting place he has not seen previously. However the situation becomes increasingly desperate. He is forced to urinate as he sits in the driving seat. He tries to call to his partner in the apartment block but she cannot pull him out. The story has no real end, leaving the options open of starvation or running out of fuel. The allegorical significance is fascinating. ‘Centaur’ is a magical mythological gallop through the centuries. The centaur is hunted by the rest of the population for being a mythical half man half beast, and has to sleep by day and travel by night. He meets other historical misfits, such as Cervantes’ Don Quixote. There is a short passage encapsulating the logistical difficulties of sleeping whilst being half a man and half a horse. In order to sleep naturally including turning over in sleep, the man has to turn the whole body of the horse. The whole collection of short stories

are striking in their story telling and their significance.

Saramago is a remarkable writer with a world view consistent with other socialist and authors critical of capitalism, depicting a world political view through the lives of individuals. Critics have likened Saramago to Kafka in the way in which fantastical events are allied to the normalcy of life. I would argue Saramago has the imagination of Kafka, but encapsulates the stifling, stultifying entrapment of Austen, the repetitive logic defying method of work under capitalism depicted by Magnus Mills,

the rich dramatic allegorical descriptions of Rushdie and the whole world human descriptive vision of Zola. Instead of stories depicting the dynamism or the normalcy of capitalist society, Saramago writes of the claustrophobic and nonsensical world it creates. It is mad to be normal in a capitalist world where we have children starving alongside butter mountains and wine lakes. It should be easy to provide food clothing and shelter to every human being on this planet. Saramago gives us magical and comical stories which question why we live in a world that cannot do this.