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Collective memory, nature, and cultural collapse in an Essay on *Blindness*

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SUMMARY

This article analyzes José Saramago's novel *Blindness* from the perspective of collective memory, drawing on the theory of Maurice Halbwachs and expanding the debate with contributions from Pierre Nora and Paul Ricoeur. Using the metaphor of blindness, the narrative dramatizes the collapse of social bonds and culture, emphasizing the importance of memory as a foundation for collective identity and civilization. The discussion highlights how the loss of social frameworks of memory leads to dehumanization, while simultaneously emphasizing the possibility of cultural reconstruction through narrative and solidarity. The article contributes to understanding collective memory as a dynamic process, indispensable for the maintenance of culture and the human condition.

Keywords: collective memory; José Saramago; *Blindness*; culture.

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes José Saramago's *Blindness* from the perspective of collective memory, based on Maurice Halbwachs's theory and expanded through the contributions of Pierre Nora and Paul Ricoeur. Using the metaphor of blindness, the narrative dramatizes the collapse of social bonds and culture, highlighting the importance of memory as the foundation of collective identity and civilization. The discussion reveals how the loss of social frameworks for memory leads to dehumanization, while also highlighting the possibility of cultural reconstruction through narrative and solidarity. The article contributes to understanding collective memory as a dynamic process essential to maintaining culture and human condition.

Keywords: collective memory; José Saramago; Blindness; culture.

If our impression can be supported not only by our own memory, but also by that of others, our confidence in the accuracy of our recollection will be greater, as if the same experience were begun not only by the same person, but by several.
(Halbwachs, *Collective Memory*)

1 INTRODUCTION

The novel *Blindness*, by José Saramago (1995), presents a narrative A dystopian story in which a sudden epidemic of white blindness strikes an unnamed city. causing the collapse of institutions and social coexistence. Blindness, in this context, goes beyond... The physiological field is configured as a metaphor for the failure of rationality and social structure. revealing a critique of the human condition in extreme situations. One of the central aspects of the work is... The breakdown of the characters' identity and social references, which highlights the disintegration of collective memory.

From the theoretical perspective of Maurice Halbwachs (1990), it is understood that memory The individual is intrinsically linked to the social frameworks that sustain them. When these frameworks... They fragment, as happens with characters deprived of sight, space, and community ties, Memory becomes disorganized, compromising identity and social bonds. Thus, the work of Saramago can be analyzed as an allegory for the loss of collective memory, understood as the link



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that connects individuals to the group and to history.

This article aims to analyze the construction and deconstruction of collective memory in the work. *Essay on Blindness*, in light of the theory developed by Halbwachs, in addition to proposing a discussion of how vision loss is associated with the disruption of memory and collective identity, and how the figure of The doctor's wife symbolizes resistance and the preservation of social memory. Spaces like the The asylum and the city will contribute to confirming the construction or erasure of memory.

2. Blindness as a Rupture of Memory

The theory of collective memory, proposed by Maurice Halbwachs, is based on the principle that... Individual memory does not exist in isolation, always being shaped by the social groups to which one belongs. the subject belongs. In his work *Collective Memory* (1990), Halbwachs argues that every act of Remembering is conditioned by social structures such as family, religion, social class, or institutions. which offer the individual the "social frameworks of memory". Thus, memory is, essentially, A collective and relational construction. As he states in his work:

Our memories remain collective and are recalled to us by others, even if they are events in which only we were involved and objects that only we saw. This happens because we are never alone. It is not necessary for others to be present, materially distinct from us, because we always carry with us a certain number of people who are not confused (Halbwachs, 1990, p. 30).

Therefore, for Halbwachs, remembering is a collective process, even when it seems to be. personal. This idea breaks with the notion that memory is a purely psychological phenomenon or individual. Instead, it shows that society is present in our memories, shaping- as constantly.

For the author, memory is not a fixed repository of recollections, but a process of... Continuous reconstruction, mediated by shared experiences and the social context. He states that "it is in society that man acquires memory" (Halbwachs, 1990, p. 48), which means that individual memories only make sense when referenced to a social group that It provides meaning and forms of recognition. Personal identity, in this sense, is only consolidated... with regard to collectively sustained memories.

When social structures are disrupted, whether by wars, disasters, exile, or, in the case of... In Saramago's work, an epidemic, a kind of symbolic erasure of memory occurs. This This implies not only the loss of references to the past, but also the impossibility of projecting the future. future. The absence of a group capable of validating and sharing memories leads to the fragmentation of identity and the psychological and social vulnerability of the individual.

Collective memory also manifests itself in physical and symbolic spaces, such as places of



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worship, monuments, cities, rituals and narratives. Pierre Nora (1993), in developing the concept of *places of memory* reinforce the idea that spaces play a crucial role in anchoring the collective memories. When such spaces are destroyed or disfigured, there is an emptying of The symbolic function of memory.

In the literary field, the representation of collective memory allows us to analyze how the bonds Social structures are established or broken in fiction, reflecting cultural, political, and historical tensions. According to Ricoeur (2007), narrated memory is also a form of identity: telling the story of A group or collective trauma is a way of making sense of lived experience. In this sense, *Blindness* can be read as a narrative of rupture and, at the same time, of possibility. reconstruction of social memory.

Based on these assumptions, it becomes possible to observe how Saramago's work stages, through the metaphor of blindness, the breakdown of memory and identity mechanisms, offering a critique of the fragilities of modern society in the face of collective collapse.

In José Saramago's novel, the sudden epidemic of white blindness is not merely depicted... not as the loss of a physical sense, but as a metaphor for the disarticulation of social bonds and of the dissolution of collective memory. According to Halbwachs (1990), individual memory is deeply conditioned by belonging to groups that share values, symbols and Common references. With blindness, the characters lose not only the ability to see, but also the landmarks that connect them to the community.

From the beginning of the narrative, the rupture is perceptible with the compulsory institutionalization of the blind. in an old asylum, creating an artificial and chaotic social group, in which the landmarks are erased. of identity, social role, and morality. The space of confinement functions as a non-place of Memory: without familiar objects, without names, without visible hierarchies, the characters become Anonymous. Identity is not lost, but it is reduced to functional roles, such as "the doctor" or "the "old man with the black blindfold," which compromises social memory:

Throughout the Essay, we can observe the absence of the characters' names and, consequently, the lack of identity references. They are classified only by the social roles and functions they perform before losing their sight. This approach adopted by the narrator denotes the systemic violence practiced by the State, which, in a non-solidary system, objectifies the characters and devalues the subjects, comparing them to commodities (Ossaka, 2022).

This approach reveals a type of symbolic and systemic violence practiced by the State. especially in authoritarian and exclusionary contexts. In this type of non-solidary, impersonal system and exclusionary, individuals cease to be seen as subjects with history, memory, and dignity. being treated as objects or commodities, whose only relevance lies in the role they play.

In this scenario, violence and the survival instinct replace ethical and social codes.



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previously shared. According to HALBWACHS (1990, p. 31), without a group that acts as

Memory support: the individual is unable to recognize themselves or others. Degradation

The relationships within the asylum, marked by episodes of rape, domination, and indifference, symbolize the

The breakdown of social bonds sustained by collective memory:

In the middle of the atrium, surrounding the food boxes, a circle of blind men armed with sticks and bed irons, pointed forward like bayonets or spears, confronted the desperation of the blind men surrounding them who, in clumsy attempts, struggled to penetrate the defensive line. Some, hoping to find an opening, a small gate left carelessly closed, parried blows with their raised arms; others crawled on all fours until they bumped into the legs of their adversaries, who greeted them with stabs to the back and kicks (Saramago, 1995, pp. 138-139).

The passage from the novel engages with the initial quotation, especially with regard to degradation of social ties and loss of collective memory as a support for identity and... ethical coexistence.

In the described passage, the organization of armed groups that violently defend access The reliance on food reveals a complete collapse of social and moral norms. Savagery replaces... Solidarity, and the instinct for survival, prevails over any trace of civility. This confirms As Halbwachs (1990) points out: without a structured group that functions as a support for memory. In a collective setting, individuals lose the ability to recognize themselves as part of a community.

Thus, the scene of the armed blind men in a circle reinforces the argument both visually and symbolically. Theoretically: when collective memory breaks down, individual identity and human bonds also break down. They disintegrate, giving way to barbarism.

The space of the asylum, isolated from society and immersed in blindness (metaphor for alienation (dehumanization) symbolizes this collapse: violence such as beatings and rapes. mentioned in the analysis, indifference becomes the norm, as there is no longer a collective memory that uphold shared values. Blind people no longer see themselves as social subjects, but as enemies, which highlights a failure of empathy and social cohesion, replaced by the logic of brute force:

Dawn was breaking when the wicked blind men let the women go. The blind woman suffering from insomnia had to be carried away in the arms of her companions, who could barely drag themselves along. For hours they had passed from man to man, from humiliation to humiliation, from offense to offense, everything that can be done to a woman while still leaving her alive. "You know, the payment is in kind, tell the little men there to come and get the soup," the blind man with the pistol had sneered as he left (Saramago, 1995, p. 178).

Women are subjected to systematic sexual violence as a bargaining chip for food, and this reveals the apex of this degradation. The practices of domination, rape, and mockery.

They establish a regime of exception that refers to what Giorgio Agamben (2002) conceptualizes in *Homo*



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Priest: sovereign power and bare life as "bare life" (*vita nuda*), a state of existence in which

The human being is reduced to its biological dimension, devoid of dignity, rights, or protection.

symbolic.

At that precise moment, the blind woman suffering from insomnia literally collapsed, as if her legs had been severed with a single blow; her heart also collapsed, before the systole that had begun had even finished. Finally, we understood why this blind woman couldn't sleep; now she will sleep, let's not wake her. "She's dead," said the doctor's wife, and her voice was expressionless, if it was possible for such a voice, as dead as the word she had uttered, to have come from a living mouth (Saramago, 1995, p. 178).

The character, identified as "the blind woman with insomnia," dies abruptly, as if

She may have been physically assaulted, but we know her death was the result of exhaustion.

Extreme emotional, psychological, and symbolic trauma. She couldn't sleep because the horror was unbearable. When

He dies, finally "sleeps," but this rest only comes with the end of life. There is an idea here.

of existential exhaustion.

Halbwachs (1990), in his theory of collective memory, argues that individual memory is always anchored in social frameworks: "It is in society that man acquires memory. It is

"It is also in the society that preserves it and where it is remembered." Remembering is a social act: we can only do so in the social context.

Remembering within symbolic and collective structures that give meaning to our experiences.

However, in the context of a state of emergency and extreme violence, a rupture occurs.

In these frames of reference. This becomes evident in this part of the novel. The systematic violence

It destroys the symbolic bonds that sustain collective memory. Rape, fear, degradation.

Physical and symbolic violence not only causes individual trauma, but also disrupts the group's capacity.

to remember and transmit meanings.

The death of the blind woman, coldly recounted by the doctor's wife, expresses this collapse: the loss.

The inability to symbolize suffering. Language fails, the voice no longer has expression.

Memory is therefore also affected, as there is no longer a possible social framework to cope with the pain.

Silence takes the place of speech. Violence radicalizes forgetting, it establishes oblivion.

forced, which is also a form of domination.

In this environment of deprivation, the asylum represents not only a physical space, but a

symbolic space of rupture with collective memory, as proposed by HALBWACHS (1990). Without

the presence of a structured group that keeps ethical and cultural references alive, the

Individuals cease to recognize others as similar beings. This lack of recognition implies

an identity crisis, in which the characters not only lose their sight, but also lose their...

The capacity for empathy is a fundamental condition for social cohesion.



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2.1 Space, silence and the erasure of memory

Physical space plays a fundamental role in Halbwachs' narrative and theory.

The disfigured, abandoned city, covered in debris and dirt, becomes a symbol of the collapse of... social organization and the emptying of "places of memory" (Nora, 1993). The streets, before Recognizable places are now inhospitable labyrinths; houses, once spaces of safety and identity, are Invaded, looted, and forgotten. There is no longer a symbolic geography that allows for reconstruction. of shared memories.

This erasure of public space is accompanied by an erasure of language.

Silence becomes recurrent, and communication between the characters takes place through grunts, pleas, or... aggression. By losing articulate language, individuals also lose the ability to share. memories, which contributes to the collapse of collective memory.

As Ricoeur (2007, p. 86) observes, memory depends on narration, and where there is no narration...

In narrative, memory disintegrates. In *Blindness*, the absence of reliable narrators...

Within the fiction, this is compensated for by the omniscient narrator, who ironically comments on and comments on the events, functioning... as an attempt to preserve the memory of the unfolding tragedy:

The girl with the dark glasses was also taken to her parents' house by a policeman, but the spicy circumstances in which the blindness, in her case, had manifested itself—a naked woman screaming in a hotel, disturbing the guests, while the man who was with her tried to escape by clumsily pulling on his trousers—moderated, in a way, the obvious drama of the situation. The blind woman ran in shame, a feeling entirely compatible, however much the prudent hypocrites and the false virtuosos might grumble, with the mercenary lovers to whom she dedicated herself, after the piercing screams she began to utter upon realizing that the loss of sight was not a new and unforeseen consequence of pleasure (Saramago, 1995, pp. 35-36).

The passage about the girl with the dark glasses exemplifies this precisely. The narrator

He describes the scene of his blindness with a tone that mixes starkness, irony, and social criticism. He exposes the scandalous circumstances of the situation: a naked woman in a hotel room, with a man trying to dress her.

He speaks hastily, but instead of simply narrating the facts, he also offers a critical reflection on the...

Moral judgments imposed by society. The narrator denounces the social hypocrisy that surrounds...

Sexual work and humanizes the character in the face of tragedy.

Reflecting on the link between memory and identity, Ricoeur argues: "it is through narrative

that we configure the time of the action and construct the identity of the subject" (Ricoeur, 2007, p. 141).

Thus, in the absence of social frameworks and places of memory, as Saramago shows us, what remains is...

There is also the possibility of reconstruction through narrative, a role that the doctor's wife assumes.

by following and witnessing the events that take place:



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[...] we are so far removed from the world that it won't be long before we begin to not know who we are, nor have we even remembered to tell ourselves our names, and what purpose, what use would names serve us, no dog recognizes another dog, or makes itself known, by the names given to it, it is by smell that it identifies and makes itself known, we here are another breed of dogs, we know each other by barking, by talking, the rest, the features, the color of the eyes, the skin, the hair, doesn't count, it's as if it didn't exist [...] (Saramago, 1995, p. 64).

In the quoted passage from the work, "we are so far from the world that it won't be long before we begin to not knowing who we are, nor did we even remember to tell ourselves what our name is" (Saramago, (p. 64), there is a clear demonstration of this process of identity disintegration. The characters They cease to recognize themselves as individuals: they lose their names, their physical features become... irrelevant. This symbolizes the collapse of the *social frameworks of memory*, a concept by Halbwachs that It points out that identity is shaped through collective references such as language, rituals, and... spaces and interpersonal relationships.

However, as Ricoeur himself observes, even in the absence of these social frameworks and In places of memory, narrative still remains as a possibility for reconstructing identity. *In the essay on blindness*, this role is primarily played by the doctor's wife. She is the... The only one that retains sight, but also the only one that preserves the ability to remember, report, and... Above all, to bear witness. Her role goes beyond caring for others: she observes, mentally records, She feels guilt and compassion; that is, she internally narrates the events, and in doing so, preserves the The thread of memory and identity. As Ricoeur proposes, narrative identity is not constructed solely It's not about what one sees or experiences, but about what one tells, remembers, and transmits.

2.2 The doctor's wife: guardian of sight and memory

The only character who doesn't lose her sight throughout the narrative is the doctor's wife. Her Her status as an "eyewitness" to the barbarity confers upon her a unique role: she not only sees, but It also recalls. Its vision represents the continuity of the social frameworks of memory, since it is capable of observing, understanding, protecting and, above all, narrating.

By helping blind people to organize themselves, divide tasks, find food, and take care of themselves. from one another, she acts as a mediator between the disorder and the attempt to rearticulate the bonds. lost social skills. It can be said that she embodies the function described by HALBWACHS (1990): that of a People who anchor their individual memories in shared experiences. At the end of the narrative, when The characters return to their homes, and it is through the vision and memory of the doctor's wife that... The possible reconstruction of the community begins.

Its role as guardian of memory is not only to remember what happened, but also to... To preserve the humanity of those who have lost the ability to see and recognize themselves. Thus, their Remaining as a psychic is not a physical privilege, but an ethical and social responsibility.



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The streets are deserted, either because it is still early, or because of the rain, which is falling harder and harder. There is trash everywhere, some shops have their doors open, but most of them are closed; it doesn't seem like there are people inside, nor any lights. (Saramago, 1995, p. 214).

Nevertheless, the narrative suggests a possibility of cultural reconstruction. The woman of The doctor, who has preserved his sight throughout history, represents the living memory of humanity. Their ability to narrate, care, and remember becomes an instrument of resistance against barbarity. In the midst of it, Saramago points to the importance of memory as a way of reinstating culture and to rehumanize individuals after collapse. Thus, the work demonstrates that, even in extreme contexts, it is through collective memory that culture can be restored and the human condition reaffirmed.

Culture, understood as the set of values, knowledge, institutions, and symbolic practices that organize social life, quickly crumbles in the novel. With the spread of blindness, institutions such as the government, medicine, the military, and the media become powerless. The scientific rationality that once underpinned confidence in human progress is revealing itself to be unable to contain the regression to barbarism. As the narrator says, "Inside us there is something that cannot be contained. It has a name, this thing is what we are." This statement suggests that, stripped of the layers of civilization, people reveal the essence of their human condition, sometimes cruel, sometimes resilient.

The return to nature is not in a romantic or idealized sense, but as a regression forced by primitive survival instincts. Without social rules, the blind confined in quarantine establishes a regime of force, in which the strongest subjugates the weakest. Language, ethics, and memory, constitutive elements of culture, are put to the test. The scarcity of food, the dirt and neglect cause the characters to revert to an almost animalistic state. The scene in which one of the blind men declares: "I think we are not blind, I think we are blind people who see," "Blind people who, seeing, do not see," summarizes Saramago's critique: real blindness only reveals the blindness of moral and social norms already ingrained in contemporary culture.

Memory, as a fundamental component of human identity, is also under strain. In the novel, the loss of sight becomes a metaphor for the loss of history and meaning. Upon losing their sight, they... As a visual reference point for the world, the characters also lose their sense of continuity and belonging. However, it is precisely through memory and language that some attempt to resist the chaos. The doctor's wife, the only one who retains her sight, becomes the guardian of hope and memory, a role... which indicates the importance of witnessing and empathy in the possible reconstruction of culture.

Ultimately, the collapse depicted by Saramago is not merely social, but profoundly... existential. He denounces the fragility of a civilization that believes in rationality as a shield against the abyss. The return to nature, in this sense, reveals the ambiguity of the human condition: capable of both destroying and rebuilding. In the end, when the blind begin to recover their... With a vision, the hope of rehabilitation emerges. But the warning remains. SARAMAGO (1995,



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(p.310) "If you can look, see. If you can see, notice."

This process of degradation finds parallels with other dimensions analyzed in the work. In the chapter dealing with ethics and solidarity, for example, it is possible to see that, even amidst amidst the chaos, there are glimpses of humanity. The doctor's wife, who is not afflicted by blindness, it represents awakened consciousness; it sees not only with the eyes, but with responsibility. The moral compass of those who take on the suffering of others. She feeds the hungry, cleans the sick, buries the dead. dead. His attitude contrasts with the bestiality that takes hold in the asylum, showing that culture It may crumble, but ethics, even reduced to a few gestures, still endure.

The issue of language is also directly linked to cultural collapse. In an environment Where things are not seen, words take on a different weight: they become tangible, urgent, sometimes useless. The narrator, in Saramago's characteristic style, uses long sentences, minimal punctuation, and dialogue. without clear marking, which symbolizes confusion and a break in meaning. However, it is through the language, albeit fragmented, that the characters try to organize themselves with, console themselves with, and name the Pain. Ultimately, it is through language that collective memory is preserved, and it is through memory... that culture can be rebuilt.

For Maurice Halbwachs, memory is always collective, even when it manifests itself... individually. Remembrance is only possible within a social context that provides the landmarks of recognition. The author states that "it is in society that man acquires memory, remembers, "recognizes and locates its memories" (Halbwachs, 1990, p. 48). This means that memory Individual memory depends on so-called "social frameworks of memory," such as family and religious groups. or social class. When these paintings are destroyed, as happens in Saramago's work, the Memory collapses, and individuals lose the ability to situate themselves in time and space.

The work, therefore, engages with the present in a powerful way. White blindness can be... read as a metaphor for contemporary blindness in the face of injustice, inequality, and trivialization. of suffering. Saramago's critique is political and existential: we live in a society that sees, but He doesn't see; he knows, but doesn't act. The return to nature, in this case, is also the unmasking. from the false idea of progress, revealing how fragile we are without the symbolic bonds that sustain us. our condition as humans.

As the doctor's wife says in one of the most striking passages of the book, we are not blind. We are blind, blind without eyes, blind who, seeing, do not see. (Saramago, 1995, p. 130). The phrase This concludes the novel's main critique: the true blindness is that of conscience, of empathy, and of... memory. As long as that persists, the collapse of culture is not a dystopian fiction, it is a reality. always a possibility lurking.



CONCLUSION

An analysis of *Blindness*, from the perspective of collective memory according to Maurice Halbwachs, and complemented by the reflections of Pierre Nora and Paul Ricoeur, shows how José Saramago addresses the fragility of social bonds and the importance of memory for social constitution of human culture and identity. Blindness, a metaphor for the loss of physical and symbolic vision, This represents the dismantling of the social frameworks that underpin collective memory, launching the individuals in a condition analogous to the Hobbesian state of nature, marked by the absence of rules and violence.

The breakdown of the social supports of memory, such as family, institutions, and symbolic spaces, It leads to the emptying of meaning and a regression to an existence based on instinct and... immediate survival. This analysis engages with Pierre Nora's critique of the crisis of places of Memory in modernity and with the hermeneutical approach of Paul Ricoeur, for whom memory It is necessarily narrative, a process of reconstruction and reinterpretation.

Saramago, therefore, not only exposes the dangers of social and collective forgetting, but also... It also indicates the possibility of resistance and reconstruction of memory through solidarity, narrative and empathy, represented in the figure of the doctor's wife, guardian of vision and of humanity. In this way, the novel functions as an ethical and political warning about the importance to preserve collective memory for the maintenance of culture and civilization.

In short, the dialogue between literature and social theory reveals that collective memory is a a fundamental element for social cohesion and for the formation of individual identity. as historical beings. Saramago's work, in dramatizing the loss and possible restoration of this memory contributes to understanding memory not only as a static past, but as a living and dynamic process, indispensable for the reconstruction of a shared future.

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