


Environmental crisis in José Saramago's fiction

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Abstract

José Saramago, the Portuguese writer winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1998, was one of the fiercest critics of our time of the European economic, political, social and environmental crisis. The latter in particular, as well as its implications and consequences, was subjected to an attentive, detained and in-depth critical scrutiny in Saramago's literary and non-literary fictions, such as *Os Cadernos de Lanzarote* (1994) and *A Caverna* (2000 - English translation in 2002 - *The Cave*). In this article, I analyze Saramago's multifaceted perspective on the environmental crisis in his work *A Caverna*. Firstly, I will show how a central place of the novel, the ironically called "Green Belt", is in fact a dirty and monotonous area, and *eo ipso* an oxymoronic expression. Then, I will briefly comment on the denatured configurations of the Housing Centre surrounded by the Green Belt, a space where natural phenomena and processes, such as rain and snow, are only artificially replicated. Next, I examine the significant impact of climate change on the lives of the characters in the novel. Finally, I consider the possibility that the author's opinions about the climate crisis may extend to others of his fictional and non-fictional works.

Keywords

Ecocriticism; Saramago (José); Contemporary Portuguese Literature

Resumo

José Saramago, vencedor do Prémio Nobel da Literatura em 1998, foi um dos mais acutilantes críticos da atualidade europeia nos domínios de crises económicas, políticas, sociais e ambientais. A última, a crise ambiental e as suas implicações e consequências, foi submetida a um atento e profundo escrutínio em narrativas ficcionais e não ficcionais de Saramago, tais como *Os Cadernos de Lanzarote* (1994) e *A Caverna* (2000). Neste ensaio, analiso a perspetiva multifacetada de Saramago sobre a crise ambiental em *A Caverna*. Em primeiro lugar, mostrarei que um espaço crucial do romance, a ironicamente chamada "Cintura Verde", é na realidade um lugar sujo e monótono, tornando a expressão oximórica. De seguida, comentarei brevemente as configurações deturpadas do Centro circundado pela Cintura Verde enquanto lugar onde fenómenos e processos naturais, tais como a chuva e a neve, são apenas artificialmente construídos. Examinado depois o impacto significativo da mudança climática nas vidas das personagens do romance. Por fim, considero a possibilidade de que os pontos de vista do autor sobre a crise climática se expandam a outras obras ficcionais e não ficcionais.

Palavras-chave

Ecocrítica; Saramago (José); Literatura Portuguesa Contemporânea

1. The environmental crisis is not yet a central theme in Portuguese literature. In the 19th century, some romantic writers reflected on industrial and technological development and recognized its negative effects on the landscape and the

human life. During the past century, the environmental crisis was used by neo-realist authors to produce criticisms of the dictatorial political regime, an adroit strategy of civic intervention that lasted until the dawn of the April 1974 revolution. Moreover, since that moment, Portuguese writers have been mainly concerned with several other themes: the historical relationship of the Portuguese nation with its colonial imperial past, the dialogue and intersection of Literature with other arts, namely painting, the satire of canonical authors, etc. On the other hand, historical novels in contemporary fiction, intertextuality and the revisionism of classical myths in poetry, realistic concerns with everyday life have been preponderant interests in Portuguese contemporary literature. However, the same has not happened with regard to the climatic, environmental and ecological crises or, in broader terms, in relation to Ecocriticism and its denunciation of increasing disharmony in the interaction of man with Nature.

José Saramago's fictional and non-fictional works are an exception to this apparent lack of general interest in contemporary Portuguese literature for Ecocriticism. Such works cover a wide variety of themes, including those related to the eco-climatic-environmental crisis. It seems unequivocal that the fiction of the Portuguese Nobel Prize for Literature is woven to a large extent by central existential issues relating to the human condition. It is not surprising, therefore, that ecological, climatic and environmental topics, which receive great attention in other literature (Spanish, French, English or Latin American) are addressed in them, alongside, of course, other topics.

We can affirm, more incisively, that the current state of our planet, evolving in a trajectory of climate instability and increasingly worrying environmental disturbances, deserved particular attention from Saramago. A clear example of this were the attentive and penetrating criticisms that the author dedicated to the topic in his *Diaries of Lanzarote* (1994) and *The Cave* (2000).

In this article, I analyze Saramago's multifaceted perspective on the environmental crisis in his work *The Cave*. Firstly, I will show how a central place of the novel, the ironically called "Green Belt", is in fact a dirty and monotonous area, and *eo ipso* an oxymoronic expression. Then, I will briefly comment on the denatured configurations of the Housing Centre surrounded by the Green Belt, a space where natural phenomena and processes, such as rain and snow, are only artificially replicated. Next, I examine the significant impact of climate change on the lives of the characters in the novel. Finally, I explore the possibility that the author's opinions about the climate crisis may extend to others of his fictional and non-fictional works.

2. Saramago started to be interested in environmental problems early in his literary career. Right in his first novel, *Raised from the Ground* (1980), trying to emphasize the importance of the landscape, he said: "Here, it is most

countryside, land. (...) The land clearly predates man, and despite its long, long existence, it has still not expired" (Saramago, 2012, p. 7).

Four years later, in *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, the novelist seeks to show that the human being and the landscape are closely linked. According to him, Nature has anthropomorphic virtues and reacts to human emotions: "Whoever says that nature is indifferent to the sufferings and worries of men is not familiar with man or nature" (Saramago, 1984, p. 117).¹

From this perspective, we can say that some works by Saramago allow an ecocritical analysis, since they seek to understand how our relationship with the non-human world is possible. As Terry Gifford (1999) emphasizes:

Ecocriticism is not going not only with the attitude towards nature expressed by the author of the text, but also with its patterns of interrelation, both between the human and the non-human, and between the different parts of the non-human world (p. 5).

However, it should be noted that the texts in which the writer most clearly expressed his concern with environmental issues were the *Diaries of Lanzarote* (1993-1998) and the novel *The Cave* (2000).

In the first of these texts, Saramago shows a deep disappointment with the destructive impact of human action on Earth, when he says:

We live intoxicated by all the pollutions imaginable, in environments where garbage has become reigning. We go out into the street, pure and bright, clean from head to toe, deodorized, perfumed, and we walk, blind again, through the cities, along the beaches, through the fields of a world that we ourselves are transforming into manure (Saramago, 1994, p. 292).²

In *The Cave*, on the other hand, the rural values of Cipriano Algor, a 64-year-old potter, are in total conflict with the increasing urbanization, industrialization and technological alienation. Cipriano has a quiet and peaceful life in the countryside, preparing his own meals and moving to the Centre one day a week, a place that practically coincides with the city and dominates it. He does not repudiate the comfort of the Centre, but he fears the day when he will have to move in with his daughter Marta and son-in-law Marçal. Cipriano is not interested in urban life and does not want to know anything about it. Each of the trips he takes to the Centre proves to be an experience of malaise and internal disturbance.

¹ My translation. "Quem disser que a natureza é indiferente às dores e preocupações dos homens, não sabe de homens nem de natureza".

² My translation. "Vivemos intoxicados por todas as poluições imagináveis, em meios ambientes onde o lixo passou a ser soberano senhor. Saímos para a rua puros e luminosos, lavados da cabeça aos pés, desodorizados, perfumados, e caminhamos, outra vez cegos, pelas cidades, pelas praias, pelos campos de um mundo que nós próprios estamos a converter em estrumeira" (Saramago, 1994, p. 292).

Living in the Centre will mean for him to remain caged in a world of simulations, manufactured sensations, artificial experience. Within it, everything is possible, especially for those who have money, power and a solid social position. In the same day, a resident of the Centre can experience the emotions of traveling on a tropical beach, climbing Mount Everest or crossing a desert; and in a single hour, he can see and touch rain or snow. Long before having heard of these experiences, Cipriano listened without interest or curiosity to the enthusiastic speeches of his sons-in-law about living in the Centre. At this point we cannot help asking: why does an old man not want to leave the poor village in which he has lived? If the Centre offers him the first opportunity to live better, supposedly desired in his last years and deserved after a life of misery in a small village, why does Cipriano stubbornly refuse to accept this change? It will not be enough to say that it will be because he misses the countryside, its birds, trees and peace. Likewise, it seems very simple to say that it will be because he resists any change, as almost all seniors do. His resistance to it is motivated by something deeper: to be well aware that all he can hope for at the Centre is to live a kind of second-hand life, a pseudo-existence, full of false experiences. His rejection of city life is not limited to criticizing material values. It is true that Cipriano shows a preference for a simpler and more natural life, but what really comes into play is not so much the opposition between urban and rural life as some moral consequences of global capitalism.

The life that Cipriano leads in the village is, without a doubt, more difficult and needy. Nevertheless, he is free to choose the place where he feels best to live, meaning where he can experience nature as it appears naturally, with all its range of smells, sounds and sights.

Cipriano is caught up in industrial development and the endless change in consumer tastes and lifestyles. His job, as well as his economic survival, is under threat when the Centre cancels orders for his ceramic products and forces him to replace them with plastic equivalents. As the chief of the department stores says, the reason that ended the Centre's interest in Cipriano's products was "the appearance of some plastic tableware imitating clay, which imitate it so well that they look authentic, with the advantage that they weigh much less and are much cheaper" (Saramago, 2014, p. 22).³

Despite everything, Cipriano ended up moving to the Centre along with his daughter and son-in-law; but only for a short period of time. Urban life is completely suffocating, first for the protagonist, then also for Marta and Marçal.

Let us now pay some attention to the two key spaces in the novel's economy: the periphery of the city and the Centre. The first catches the reader's attention through Cyprian's impressions. Together they weave a landscape of dirt

³ My translation: "o aparecimento aí de umas louças de plástico a imitar o barro, imitam-no tão bem que parecem autênticas, com a vantagem de que pesam muito menos e são muito mais baratas" (Saramago, 2014, p. 22).

and inauthenticity. On one of the trips he took to sell his products, he commented the following:

The region is dull, dirty, it doesn't deserve to look twice. Someone gave these immense areas of non-country the technical name of the Agricultural Belt, and also, by poetic analogy, the Green Belt, but the only landscape that the eye can see on both sides of the road (...) they are large flat rectangular roof structures made of plastic in a neutral colour that time and dust gradually shifted to gray and brown (Saramago, 2014, pp.10 and 11).⁴

It is not surprising that every time Cipriano has to cross this space he feels very uncomfortable, thinking that it unfair to call it the Green Belt. In fact, green is not the dominant color in it, plastic objects are everywhere, houses are chunks of ice and people have to work hard to produce some vegetables:

Cipriano Algor quickly crossed the Green Belt, without looking once at the fields, the monotonous spectacle of the plastic appendages, blurred in nature and grimy with dirt. (...) And that's what they call Green Belt, he thought, this desolation, this kind of dark camp, this pack of dirty ice blocks that melt in sweat those who work inside it, for many people these greenhouses are machines, vegetable making machines (Saramago, 2014, pp. 28 and 260).⁵

The Green Belt is actually the world "as if": it maps natural places. Note, in fact, that the predominant verb forms that characterize this place are "to imitate" and "to resemble".

Near the city, while Cipriano looks at the Industrial Belt, disgust and nausea grows for him: "The road, now more dirty, runs through the Industrial Belt, tearing up factory facilities of all sizes, activities and shapes, (...) chimneys sending rolls of toxic gases into the atmosphere, (...) smelly odours" (Saramago, 2014, p. 11).⁶ Everything around you is nothing more than remnants of forests, destroyed agricultural fields and polluted waters.

⁴ My translation. "A região é fosca, suja, não merece que a olhemos duas vezes. Alguém deu a estas enormes extensões de aparência nada campestre o nome técnico de Cintura Agrícola, e também, por analogia poética, o de Cintura Verde mas a única paisagem que os olhos conseguem alcançar nos dois lados da estrada (...) são grandes armações de tecto plano, rectangulares, feitas de plásticos de uma cor neutra que o tempo e as poeiras, aos poucos, foram desviando ao cinzento e ao pardo. (...)

⁵ My translation. "Cipriano Algor atravessou a Cintura Verde rapidamente, não olhou nem uma vez para os campos, o espectáculo monótono das extensões de plástico, baças de natureza e soturnas de sujidade. (...) E é a isto que chamam Cintura Verde pensou, a esta desolação, a esta espécie de acampamento soturno, a esta manada de blocos de gelo sujo que derretem em suor os que trabalham lá dentro, para muita gente estas estufas são máquinas, máquinas de fazer vegetais" (Saramago, 2014, pp. 28 and 260).

⁶ My translation. "A estrada, agora mais suja, atravessa a Cintura Industrial, rompendo pelo meio de instalações fabris de todos os tamanhos, atividades e feitos, (...) chaminés lançando para a atmosfera rolos de fumos tóxicos, (...) cheiros fétidos" (Saramago, 2014, p. 11).

In both Belts – Green and Industrial – men and women work tirelessly. If they lose strength and faint, “they are like rags soaked and twisted by violent hands” (Saramago, 2014, p. 91).⁷

For Cipriano, urban life means knowing social and political practices of domination, as well as ecological exploration. The presence of animals is prohibited, except birds in cages or fish in aquariums. This exclusion has a decisive influence on Cipriano's refusal to remain in the urban space, precisely where the links between animals and humans cannot be established.

It is significant that the humanized dog in the novel – Achado – has no place in the Centre, given that its presence interferes with the feeling of obsessive cleanliness. Even more so because in Saramago's fiction the dog is a fundamental entity in human relationships.

Cipriano does not regret the countryside of his childhood. In fact, the countryside is not idealised in *The Cave*. We don't identify in this novel bucolic or romantic descriptions of Cipriano's village.

3. The Centre is for Cipriano Algor a foreign land. It represents the alienation of human feelings, the destruction of the environment. The cave is a small asphyxiating place in the basement of the Centre where Cipriano and Marçal see dead human beings: themselves. The Centre's cave anticipates its own future as prisoners.

Some ideological aspects of Saramago's fiction are present in this novel and in the *Diaries of Lanzarote*: The Centre appears to function as a metaphor for modern day-to-day life in big cities. It represents the loss of traditional community boundaries, the exploitation of workers, the transformation of artisanal work into alienated work and global market capitalism. Saramago seeks to inspire the reader and raise environmental awareness. In his fictions, the contemporary environmental crisis receives attention and the author shows an ethical commitment to planet Earth, conveyed in an eco-critical perspective, one that aims at our relationship with the “oikos”, as described by Tom Bristow (2015, p. 12):

Ethically, planetary problems might ‘come home’ to us if our sense of the household was larger than the dwelling place at which we reside; if our duty of care extended beyond our families to the planet and its inhabitants over the next millennium, we might have a more relevant sense of *Oikos* for the challenges raised by environmental crisis.

References

⁷ My translation. “são como trapos encharcados e torcidos por mãos violentas” (Saramago, 2014, p. 91).

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