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THE WOMEN OF JOSÉ SARAMAGO

This article presents the manner in which female characters are depicted in José Saramago's novels. Two perspectives are assumed in analysing female protagonists. One of them involves asking how the author presents his women characters, who they are; reflecting upon their social status, values they represent or their features of personality. The other consists in analysing the role of female characters in narrative structure. The starting point is the assumption that throughout his life Saramago apparently writes one and the same novel, whose structure is presented below. Then it is concluded that the female character is essential to the structure. Also female and male protagonists from selected Saramago's books are compared to determine the relationship between them, as well as the background of the relation.

The 1998 Nobel Prize Presentation Speech described José Saramago as one of those writers who seem to invent new worlds and styles in every book they write (K. Espmark 1998). And as much as we honour the great Nobel Prize winner, it is fair to say that the referenced statement is not absolutely accurate. In fact, I suppose it cannot be totally accurate when used to describe the work of any writer. Because every person who creates, actually presents – in this way or another – herself or himself, her or his own yearnings, desires, obsessions. The creator is a master, the God of all creation, who shapes the protagonists in the likeness and image of his or her own self, and cuts them from the available cloth of own experience, prejudice, world view or set of values. The very same cloth is used for cutting the shape of the whole world depicted in a book, even if this world is most improbable, even if this world should be as abstract as *The Matrix* or *Star Wars*, we can always find a number of features which the various fictitious worlds share when they are created by the same writer. They reflect the cultural context in which the writer grew up, shaped her or his personality, matured both culturally and socially. In this depicted world we can find not only the writer's own fascinations but also predominant fascinations in the writer's cultural context and the surrounding environment. What every person essentially is, is an individual and a social being shaped by the environment, as Ortega y Gasset famously put it in his well-recognized essay *Meditaciones del Quijote*: „Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia”, which is why a depicted world will always be, though sometimes only to a limited extent, a projection of the real world. A

writer may strive to create a whole new and different world, or a world which is the exact opposite of the writer's world, but a detailed text analysis will lead to discovering the essence of the writer's reality.

The aim of this article is finding the qualities which Saramago's novels share in depicting female protagonists in relation to their social roles as attributed by the author, and considering the possible reasons for this manner of portraying women – whether it is the consequence of reflecting the social reality of Saramago's upbringing, which moulded his personality, or an intentional work of fiction, which serves a purpose of, for instance, criticizing the social roles of women prevalent in Portugal for a few last decades, and also – a woman's status in a given cultural context, drawing attention to these roles. We will also consider whether the fact that female protagonists appear in the writer's novels can potentially be of purely functional, technical or aesthetic significance. Perhaps all female characters are devoid of any cultural or social message, or this message is unimportant to the overall message of the novel, and their role is ancillary in structuring the text, as they serve as an element of construction, an auxiliary element in developing a narrative which focuses on other subjects and problems, invariably male-centred. Is Saramago a literary misogynist or his manner of portraying women is rooted elsewhere – deeper in the society and culture of contemporary Portugal? This is the issue we will try to explore in this article.

Striving to define the roles of women in Saramago's novels, their image and the evolution of the female character in the Portuguese writer's body of work, and in order to determine possible reasons of the evolution, I have analyzed all the female characters of all novels. Nevertheless, the most significant ones seem to be *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, *The Stone Raft* and *All the Names*, in which the women characters play an outstanding role. The author treats them in a way which is typical of him and, at the same time, has nothing to do with the usual pattern of his storytelling.

It must be noted that almost all Saramago's books follow the same pattern he applied while creating his first "mature"¹ book, that is *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*, in which, by the way, he seems to claim that everything we write, turns to be our autobiography, which proves to be right in the case of this author, because in our opinion this author writes only one book – *the book* – the book

¹ In fact, before this novel, Saramago had already written two novels. The first one, entitled *Terra do pecado*, was published in 1947 but to no success. The novel's style was typical of the times of fight against salazarism and was not much appreciated by readers. What is more, it did not have Saramago's characteristic style because it was yet to be developed. The second book to be written before *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy* was written in the early 1950s but was not published – the author sent it to a publishing house which never responded to his offer; the book surfaced as late as in 2012, years after the author's death. Although these two novels may have the status of debuts, it is difficult to compare them to anything Saramago wrote throughout the rest of his life, which is why they will be excluded from this analysis.

about maturing². What is common for the *History of the Siege of Lisbon* and – in fact – most of his other books, is that the female character shows the same characteristics, which is why we will concentrate mainly on the *History*... because it represents novelist's other works, and next we will analyze *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, *The Stone Raft* and *All the Names* for their features which differentiate them slightly from all other novels.

THE HISTORY OF THE SIEGE OF LISBON

The female character pictured in *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* is typical of Saramago's novels. As it is the case in all other novels and characters, also in this one little is known about her appearance or personality. The author doses the information about the main female character, revealing only what he considers relevant or indispensable to depict the person in the scenes, as justified by the construction of the novel. Therefore, we do not know at the beginning what Maria Sara looks like, but certain pieces of information are revealed as the plot unravels, e.g. in her first appearance, when the proof-reader Raimundo Benvindo Silva is summoned by the director after his terrible and audacious transgression, the author roughly describes the main female character, limiting the description only to the features really visible at first glance:

They had failed to notice that there was nothing severe about the woman's expression, nothing but a playful smile, as if, at heart, she were enjoying situation. Disconcerted, Raimundo Silva looked at her, she is still young, not quite forty, obviously tall, she has a pale complexion, brown hair, if the proof-reader were closer he might detect a few white hairs, and her mouth is nicely shaped and fleshy, but her lips are not thick, a strange encounter, and a hint of disquiet stirs inside Raimundo Silva, perturbation would be a better word, now we must choose the right adjective to accompany it, such as sexual, but we shall resist the temptation (*The History of the Siege*: 76)

This rather extensive extract is quoted here on purpose to focus on the way the author uses the female character's descriptions for the construction of the story. Introducing, seemingly unintentionally, just a few words about the features of the woman, the author uses the narrator to send us two more messages: first of all, he informs us that the woman, whose name is not revealed until a little later in the story when she will be introduced to us as Maria Sara, is not indignant at Raimundo Silva's misdeed and she does not reproach him. Quite on the contrary, her attitude is rather friendly. Secondly, we are hinted in a manner which could be considered almost casual that the poor proof-reader is attracted by the

² Main male character of his novels is typically a man in his fifties who is tired of his life, but later finds a new sense after a woman character emerges. It is a pattern detectible in the *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*, the most autobiographic of all Saramago's books. (Cf. A. P. Arnaut: 2007)

charm of *senhora doutora*. It is not communicated *expressis verbis*, which would be atypical of Saramago's style, the writer suggests it to the reader, insinuates Raimundo Silva's sexual interest and immediately withdraws. On the one hand he withdraws so as not to distract the attention of Raimundo Silva (and of the reader) in the scene which develops into some kind of emotional tension unrelated to the introduced woman: after all we are waiting for the judgement of the poor proof-reader. On the other hand, the writer does it to entice the reader, it is a bait to catch the reader. The description is typical of Saramago, who throws some seemingly unimportant remarks in an apparently casual way to withdraw immediately, only to come back to the same words or suggestions after a few pages, follow them, develop them into long discussions or even – as it is the case in this novel – into the main plot of the novel. Thus far, we may state beyond any doubt that these few short phrases about Maria Sara, do not only serve to present a female character, but also have a profound constructive impact and introduce a new thread which will later emerge as the main plot of the book.

In line with the point made above, there are not many equally exuberant descriptions of Maria Sara in the novel, apart from the descriptions mentioned above. Out of narrator's scarce pieces of information and innuendos, however, the reader can patch together an image of the character. Perhaps it is not three dimensional, but in comparison with other Saramago's women, still relatively exhaustive.

What is worth noticing is the selection of Maria Sara's clothes; it is absolutely evident that she is a modern (Saramago's contemporary) woman, a businesswoman type: a silk blouse, short tight-fitting skirt, she drives a car and smokes cigarettes. She is not a traditional house-wife nor a 25th April revolutionary who discusses the extremely important national matters shrouded in thick smoke of cheap cigarettes. Maria Sara is a woman of modern times: elegant, educated, smoking (!), driving her own car – which in 1989, the year of the publication of *The History of Siege of Lisbon* was not common, at least significantly less common than it is now. Her discreet elegance does not involve wearing jewellery, which also implies that Maria Sara does not wear a wedding-ring, a fact which is of much interest of Raimundo Silva, and that is why it is mentioned in the text. On the other hand it shows us that Maria Sara is not one of those women dripping with gold, or showing off their wealth, which was traditionally often done by Portuguese middle-class women. Consequently, also this narrative manoeuvre sends out two messages, one of which defines the social and mental position of the woman.

The modernity of the *senhora doutora* is further emphasized by a few phrases referring to her life situation and conditions. In Maria Sara's own words:

(...) I got divorced three years ago, that I ended an affair three months ago and haven't had any more affairs since, that I have no children but would dearly love to have them, I live with a married brother, and the person who answered the telephone was my sister-in-law (...)
(*History of the Siege*: 212)

The reader learns that Maria Sara is modern, divorced, she makes decisions about relationships herself. On the other hand, she declares to Raimundo Silva, in an absolutely traditional way, that she is ready to start a family. Of course it is not surprising in any way that a thirty-year-old woman might want to have a child, but taking into account the rest of her presented characteristics: the fact that she is a modern, dynamic and self-dependent woman, the desire to have children may seem discrepant with the rest of the image or perhaps the writer introduced it as an element he considers discrepant in his own image of women, even if the elements might match perfectly in other images drawn by other writers. That is why we dare state that the woman character is a battlefield on which the two visions of woman clash: the traditional vision with the woman's role consisting in doing housework and looking after the family, and the modern one, which prioritizes work and leaves little time or desire for women to assume the traditional roles. Of course, we do realize the complexity of roles and variety of possible manifestations of balance between career and personal life, and the growing tendency to avoid stereotyping, but it was not quite as obvious in Portugal in the period of changes of the 70s and 80s.

On the constructional level, the character of Maria Sara is typical of Saramago's novels. Her appearance causes a revolution in the main character's life: his boring and insipid life gains new dynamics. Bored with life and getting old, the proof-reader begins to notice some kind of joy of existence and the possibility of changing it for the better thanks to the appearance of a woman who is interested in him. It is through love that Maria Sara influences the transformation of Raimundo Silva, makes him abandon the boring routine and shows the world as he has never seen it before. The woman turns out to be his guide, motivator, at last a teacher, thanks to whom the man grows up, matures, begins to be a self-confident, strong man.

A similar role of a woman character is also observed in other novels, e.g.: Mary Magdalene in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, Blimunda in *Baltasar and Blimunda* and even the Death in the *Death with Interruptions* (Cf. A. P. Arnaut 2007: 5).

THE YEAR OF THE DEATH OF RICARDO REIS

As far as women characters are concerned, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, is a unique novel. In fact, there are two female characters: Marcenda and Lydia. Marcenda is a middle-class young girl, delicate, educated, ethereal, much like the Lydias of Reis' poems. She seems to be an incarnation of a classic ideal woman from Reis' poems. Though insipid and absolutely uninteresting, built of sighs, she is a projection of the poet's ideal, which is pinpointed by Fernando

Pessoa himself in the Saramago's novel: „(...) how do you know what the Lydia of your odes is like, supposing such a phenomenon exists, an intolerable embodiment of passivity, thoughtful silence, and pure spirit(...) (*The Year of the Death: 97*)” That is why we will not waste time on elaborating on this character, but will instead concentrate on the real Lydia, the one who paradoxically is a servant, a simple woman, but at the same time she is tough and enticing. Probably, as Saramago gives his servant character such a name, he winks at the reader, and mocks F. Pessoa's and Reis' poetry. The poet character is confronted with a tough girl in the novel, while in his poetry Reis praises ideal, ethereal women, who are ultimately unreal – pure creations of his poetic imagination.

By transgressing the borders of poetry and entering the real life, Lydia enlivens Reis, she makes the jaded poet laugh and behave in a way which would not be typical of a disillusioned poet: he rents a flat, furnishes it, meets the lover. Soon he is no longer like a hero of Pessoa's poems and begins a normal, common man. At the end he even shows some joy as he is waiting for his child to be born.

Apart from making intertextual jokes of Pessoa's poetry, perhaps Saramago seems to confront the two women in the novel for the sake of its construction. He makes the text more attractive, more reader-friendly. But for the women, the text could be difficult to read – meditations of Ricardo Reis, long descriptions of Lisbon, events completely unrelated to Ricardo Reis, who is a mere onlooker, like an uninvolved contemplator of the show of the world, probably might not be as interesting for the reader, even if one takes the author's outstanding literary style into account. Both women characters can also be viewed from the symbolic perspective. Both are like projections of Reis' desires or – to be more accurate – one is projected by Reis-poet and the other – by Reis-man, or maybe some other heteronimium? Ricardo Reis is torn between the two women, one of whom is taken from his poems, ethereal but defective, whereas the other one, although she has a name that frequently appears in the poet's verses, is a vivid person, full of life. Like in a labyrinth, which is frequently alluded to in this novel, Reis stays at forking paths, one of the which leads to Marcenda and the other one to Lydia (Charchalis 2000: 10). Taking into account the absolute antithetic features of those characters, we can assume that Saramago invests this dichotomy with symbolic significance, which can be understood as a necessity of choosing of Pessoa himself between the poetry and life. Pessoa did not hesitate and chose poetry. Reis is undoubtedly faced with a similar dilemma and is not able to decide until the last moments of his life. When the pregnancy of Lydia comes to light, Ricardo Reis dies, and the reader never learns the secret of what he considers the most important when he gives out his last breath: poetry or life.

Lydia is a commoner, a chamber-maid in the Bragança hotel in the Rua do Alecrim in Lisbon. Little is revealed about her in the novel, we know that she is beautiful but the author does not provide the readers with any details about her

appearance. Neither do we know what she wears. Her behaviour can be considered typical of people of her social status/class, but as a matter of fact, all she does throughout the novel is clean hotel rooms, Ricardo Reis's flat, have sex with him, and sometimes get jealous. Nevertheless, unlike Marcenda, she is a modest family woman who is apt to smile. Her strong family ties are seen, for instance, in the scene of her sorrow and distress caused by her brother – a navy sailor – getting involved in conspiracy.

It is crucial to note that Lydia has features which all Saramago's women share: a strong character and unshaken knowledge of what she wants, while Ricardo Reis, like other Saramago's male characters, hesitates, lacks self-confidence and shows the tendency to split hairs and not for uncompromised activities. Lydia will not waste time on useless reflexions, for such reflexions may complicate her life or draw her away from the aim she is heading at. It can be pointed out that Ricardo Reis is an educated person, what is more, he is a poet, so he is more sensitive and he has a natural inclination for meditation much more complex than an uneducated commoner. Yet we can easily refute this point when we compare Ricardo Reis and Lydia with other male and female characters from other novels of that author. Both of them follow the same pattern and embody the features represented by other characters of the same gender in Saramago's writing.

When Ricardo Reis starts to live in the Bragança Hotel, it is Lydia who aims at approaching him. It can be seen as early as in the scene of the flood of Cais de Sodré when both, Lydia and Ricardo Reis laugh as they look through the window and watch people carried across the flooded street (*The Year of the Death*: 43–45). It is Lydia who tells Reis about the inundation and it is she who approaches the window, almost dragging Reis along. Reis is evidently fascinated with the beauty of the girl. He surrenders to the fascination, confesses to her that he finds her beautiful and then he feels so remorseful about his confession that he even considers a possibility of coming back to Brasil. He torments himself with the unforeseeable consequences the situation and the confession may have, he is ashamed and afraid of making himself ridiculous like Álvaro de Campos in the poem entitled *Poema em linha recta*. Lydia does not experience such doubts: she likes the doctor, so when she makes Reis' bed the same day in the evening, she puts two pillows on it, which constitutes an evident sign that Reis may wait for her night-time visit, which actually takes place, which Reis awaits worried, yet anxious. Therefore, Lydia is a simple person but she is also simple in aiming at her purpose, desires, we can say that she has a hedonistic nature: „(...) it won't be the first time a guest has taken liberties, twice I gave into them, why, because the life is so sad (...) (*The Year of the Death*: 78)”, we are informed from Lydia's thoughts quoted by the narrator.

Like in other Saramago's novels, also here the woman character triggers profound transformation. Lydia makes Ricardo Reis return to his medical practice

and try to find fulfilment. Unfortunately, the process is interrupted by his inevitable death that comes to him with the definite death of Fernando Pessoa³.

THE STONE RAFT

The Stone Raft features two female characters: Joana Carda and Maria Guavaira. Both of them are outstandingly wise and good. Both were chosen by an undefined force (fate, god, accident, cosmic energy?) for unknown reasons to play a surprising role in the history of Iberian Peninsula. Joana Carda makes a scratch on the ground with a stick and it does not disappear, no matter how hard it is erased. For a change, Maria Guavaira unravels a sock that never finishes, while wool threads stick to the muzzle of a dog which brings the rest of the people that constitute the group to Maria Guavaira's house in Galicia. Both Joana Carda and Maria Guavaira stand out from their communities. Either of them has unbroken character and can make an unmistakable and bold decision, which is evidently not typical of other Saramago's female character. Their uniqueness is in no way different from the uniqueness of all other characters of this novel, i.e. the male characters: Josér Anaíço, Joaquim Sassa and Pedro Orce. The men also experience some supranatural incidents, so they do not differ them the female characters in this respect. And although these events are considered strange and improbable in the fictional world of the novel, in the case of the group they are not.

Despite an apparent equality in the writer's attitude to male and female characters, it is interesting to notice some differences in the representation of men and women in this novel. So, we do not know anything about the appearance of men, except for Pedro Orce, in many occasions referred to as an elderly man. Both Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço did extraordinary and astonishing deeds, both of them have jobs. The reader is also informed in a seemingly casual manner of their attitudes to work. We are supplied with information about their marital status, but in no scene can we learn what they look like, what they wear or how old they are. There are, however, some descriptions of the women, but they are described as seen with men's eyes, and consequently are treated as sexual objects. When Joana Carda meets José Anaíço in a Lisbon hotel, as the man talks to her, he analyzes her beauty, thus revealing Joana Carda's beauty to the reader:

³ Exactly nine months after his real death, as Pessoa himself explained: „The usual period is nine months (...) I believe it's a question of symmetry, before we are born no one can see us yet they think about us everyday, after we are dead they cannot see us any longer and every day they go on forgetting us a little more, and apart from exceptional cases it takes nine months to achieve total oblivion” (*The Year of the Death*: 64).

(...) she seems pleasant, even pretty, she is wearing blue slacks and a matching jacket, of a colour that might be described as indigo (...) (*The Stone Raft*: 100), her voice is pleasing, low but clear (...) Her eyes are the colour of a new sky (...) She is indeed pretty, and her hair, which is almost black, doesn't clash with her eyes, the colour of a new sky by day, the colour of a new sky by night, they go well together (*The Stone Raft*: 102)

We do not receive any more information about Joana Carda. Maria Guavaira is described in the narration of Joaquim Sassa's thoughts and impressions and in this case the author used more ink to describe the character, although the description still is very laconic:

(...) She isn't pretty, he thought, nor is she ugly, her hands are rough and worn (...) she is dressed in black (...) fortunately her eyes shine, and there is the blue cloud that doesn't seem to belong to this house, her hair is brown, and she has a rounded chin and full lips, and her teeth, I caught a glimpse of them a moment ago, are white, thank God, this woman is pretty after all (...) (*The Stone Raft*: 165)

The above constitute the whole of the passages (not to say descriptions) devoted to the aspect of the female characters in this novel – perhaps besides the mention on of Maria Guavaira hanging her coloured clothes out “(...) in the sun to allow the miasma of chemicals and the musty smell to evaporate” (*The Stone Raft*: 173), which marks the change from the black widow dresses after the beginning of the relationship with Joaquim Sassa. Nevertheless, in comparison with the descriptions of male characters, it is beyond doubt that Saramago treated his women characters with exceptional exuberance. In the case of men, the only thing we know about Pedro Orce is that he has white hair. The appearance of other characters is not spoken of, probably as irrelevant or insignificant for the text.

Let us pay attention, however, to the descriptions of women characters. We think that the author did not write them to show us the appearance of the women, which – judging from the contents of the book – is of no interest for him. After all, these microscopic descriptions do not show the women as they appear for the first time but when they are seen by their prospective partners for the first time. It can be seen clearly in the case of Joaquim Sassa: not until he begins to see a woman in Maria Guavaira and sexual attraction develops, is the woman's appearance described. Moreover, the poeticity of the description signals that the man has been charmed by the woman. Therefore, the function of the descriptions is not to present a novel character but to show a new social situation, let the reader know that the man has fallen in love.

As we have already said, both women are wise and indulgent, more mature than the men – maybe with exception of Pedro Orce who is wise because of his age. The women more frequently make important decisions and manifest sensibility. The men behave themselves rather like young boys, which does not escape the women's attention, which is best expressed by the narrator: „Joana Carda and Maria Guavaira exchange smiles at the men's childishness (...)” (*The Stone*

Raft: 227) The decisiveness of the women is apparent in the conversation about the robbery of the horse, during which the initiative is taken by the women and Pedro Orce (*The Stone Raft*: 225-7). Next example and, in our opinion, one of the most important scenes of the novel, the portrayal of the crisis of the group, when Joana Carda and Maria Guavaira provoke a sexual relation with Pedro Orce out of compassion and sentiment for fraternity. For the second time in this novel each one of the women violates the traditional model of the male-female relationship. Joana Carda leaves her husband and does not obey the decision of the family, whereas traditionally the family had the decisive voice as far as the future of a single woman was concerned (as it was, and sometimes still is customary in Portugal). Maria Guavaira is a widow and cultivates her land herself, which is not approved by the local society, although it is only implied in the words of men who propose to her (*The Stone Raft*: 173). This time the violation of the convention resides in being an independent decision-maker in terms of what they do with their own bodies, although both of them were in a relationship – not formal but after all a relationship. Both women make the decision of a sexual relationship with Pedro Orce themselves and they do not want to resign from the stable relationships they are in. Nevertheless, the next scene shows us that they do not want to save the relationships at any price. They propose a partnership, in which decisions related to the future of both persons of the relationship would be made together. They do not plan to compromise or play games to save the relationship. It is obvious that they do not want to be the weak link of the relationship, they do not agree to be subordinate to the partner and that is why they prove to be more mature and more conscious of their own value and of the value of the relationship itself. Imposing such conditions on a relationship even in the contemporary Portugal, not to say in the middle of 80 when the book was published, would be absolutely unacceptable for a man who, traditionally, is the head of the family. The behaviour of both women is a sign of new times, it is revolutionary, the more so as the situation takes place not only during the revolutionary times in the fictional world of the novel but also in the real life of the Portugal as the country joined the European Union in 1986.

Lack of a serious and modest approach to men's life, which, at the same time, emphasises the wisdom and maturity of women, finds the best picture in the scenes of the serious conversations made after the collective conception of all the women of the Iberian Peninsula. Both Maria Guavaira and Joana Carda accept the maternity with humility and calmness, with force drawn from the consciousness of having a new life in them. Their wisdom is enforced with the impact of the wise nature that eliminates everything that is not related to maternity, establishes their philosophy of life in a definitely conservative position. They are transformed from reasonable and sensible life partners into wise mothers-to-be. We cannot say the same about men who are tossed between insecurity and doubts if they should acknowledge the children, not being sure of their fatherho-

od. Their position of deceived fiancées does not allow them to take a similar approach to that of the women: generous unselfishness when there is a necessity of doing their duty. The men are torn because of the necessity of defining their status? – they will recognize the children when they are sure that they really are the fathers. This attitude disturbs the balance of the group, destroys it and ends the period of bucolic life. On the one hand, the women in this novel are a vanguard of thinking, as opposed to the men they are a forefront of unconventional activities, atypical, innovatory, so that they are in a way revolutionary, although on the other hand, they are closer to the nature than the men, they are submitted to the nature and at the same time to the Christian love of the neighbour. The male, dominant by nature, is in fact passive in Saramago's novels: he desires domination but cannot impose it, he takes the conservative position, according to which the *status quo* should be preserved. Consequently, the man wants to preserve his traditional social roles but they are not able to manage it, so they assume conservative approaches, traditionally rather in a woman's dominion. In this novel the woman is a fighting person, revolutionary, she is the one – in a stereotypical imagery – to fight for fire, while the man guards it at home. Normally, a woman instinctively aims at the affirmation of her need of affiliation, but not in this novel.

ALL THE NAMES

Saramago's *All the Names* is paradoxically both typical and atypical as far as the female characters are concerned. There are four female characters: a cleaning lady, an old downstairs neighbour, a girl and her mother. If the first three do not have any or have hardly any importance for the text, the fourth character plays an essential role. It is difficult to say how we should understand the message of this book, but it seems obvious that the role of the girl, who besides Mr Jose is the most important character of this novel, is not so different from female characters of other Saramago's novels, such as *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* and *The Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*. The only thing which is absolutely new is that the girl never appears personally in the book. Not even in one of the last scenes, when Mr Jose finds her grave at the cemetery, can we be absolutely sure if the grave really belongs to her, because a shepherd swapped the crosses, which made it absolutely impossible to find the right grave. The woman appears only through letters, photographs, archives and projections of Mr Jose's desire. She seems to be the aim of his life, the purpose at which Mr Jose aims, she is a symbol, incarnation of dreams, and at the same time the mere fact of looking for her turns to be a parable of the human life. Mr Jose, evidently a Kafkaesque character fights against the system (let us remember that José is Joseph in English,

an equivalent of Josef, as in Joseph K., the main character in Kafka's *The Trial*); he struggles and wants to break free from the system, to avoid it by finding another person.

Although the girl does not appear during the whole text and the information about her is extremely scarce, she is a typical case of Saramago's women, or perhaps generally – all Saramago's characters: she is alone, divorced, bitten by life, and finally decides to commit suicide. Unlike other female characters, she lacks the strength to continue her existence. Her life is too difficult for her, nevertheless she is strong enough to commit suicide. Therefore, it is difficult to decide to what extent this case is typical, all the more so because the author gives us little information about that character, and we only learn that the woman killed herself. Nevertheless, the woman plays the role provided by Saramago for women in his world of fiction. Though unconsciously, she influences the man, leads him along the path of maturing, shows him the way out from torpor, nihilism, impassiveness and vanity of life. Although we cannot see her or cannot say what type of person she is as she does not enter any interactions with Mr Jose, we can undoubtedly take for granted that she is a wise, kind, generous and self-sacrificing woman. Unfortunately, we can only but assume it. Yet we are absolutely sure that even if our assumption is wrong, in the world of fiction she has such a role. As he lacks a strong woman, who would guide him through the tortuous path of life, Mr Jose invents her, creates her according to his needs. He does exactly what don Quixote did when he created Dulcinea according to his needs, without taking into account who she was and what she was like (*Don Quixote*: 201).

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Reassuring, we can state that Saramago has a utilitarian approach to his female characters, serving the novel's structure; without women the narrative structure would be completely reorganized. The appearance of a woman in each Saramago's novel is a crucial moment, because it is the woman who becomes the driving force of the plot at a certain point. The intrusion of the woman into the world of a man – a man who is tired with life and bored with existence, who drowns in the senselessness day by day, who is unable to get along with his life, who is defeated by it, who cannot live his normal life because of his burn-out or because of other reasons, as it is the case of Baltasar of *Baltasar and Blimunda*, makes the man find the lost sense. Hence, construction-wise the role of a female character is priceless, it is essential for the development of the story in every one of the analyzed novels of the author.

At the same time we should notice that the author favours the women with the features inaccessible for men. The women are more mature, in some cases they are gifted with supernatural powers, inaccessible for the men, e.g. in *The Blindness* and *Baltasar and Blimunda* (S. de S. G. Carreira 2001) the principal

female characters are gifted with a strange and meaningful capacity of seeing. Wise women guide men along the tortuous paths of maturing, sometimes they ascend to the vanguard or even revolutionary positions, although in the social hierarchy they always occupy places which are equal to those of the men at best. Pedro Fernandes de Oliveira Neto in his article „Acerca do Feminino em *O Conto da Ilha Desconhecida*, de José Saramago” draws similar conclusions about the functional role of woman in the Saramago’s short story but we will expand it to all novels of the author:

Femininity is the symbol of creation and, at the same time, is responsible for leading a man towards self-discovery; his extension or complementation, her role is to shape the masculinity through affection (P. Fernandes de Oliveira Neto 2009, translated by the author of the article).

Nevertheless, it is always a man that is in the centre of the Saramago’s universe and women, though gifted with outstanding wisdom which is out of men’s reach, play an inferior, auxiliary role. They are subordinate to the man, and – in terms of their social position – she almost never equals the man. Although they are fascinating, rarely can women become somebody more than a housewife, servant or secretary. Therefore the role of women is double ancillary – they are subordinate to men in terms of social functions and are have auxiliary functions as characters in terms of the structure of the novel. Auxiliary – yes, but still fundamental, because without women characters neither the male protagonists nor the text itself could exist.

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