
**Understanding Death's relation to Society: A Reading of Jose Saramago's
"Death with Interruptions"**

Priyanka SinghPh.D. Research Scholar, University School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University

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Abstract

Jose Saramago's *Death with Interruption* imagines a society momentarily abandoned by death. Though the masses initially celebrate the freshly gifted immortality, it does not take long for them to realize the morbidity of the situation. This is followed by the crumbling of social institutions like religion, healthcare and the government. The story makes us question the existing concepts of ethics, morality, justice, and religion. Moreover, it brings forth the responses and reactions by the masses, the government, the church authorities, healthcare institutions, undertaking businesses, insurance companies, old age homes, the mafia, the family, the army and other social institutions to the phenomenon of death. The paper aims to engage with the hypothetical situation presented in the novel, which is a momentary absence of death from human society in a landlocked country. This paper seeks to understand how absence of death would affect meaning of life in human society, and how death is used as a tool to manipulate the masses by different social institutions. Moreover, it critically analyzes the existential implications of human immortality, and the irrationality that underlies it. Finally, the paper explores death personified in life, manifesting the possibility of love.

Keywords: Death, society, immortality, existentialism, phenomenon.**Introduction****Understanding Death's relation to Society: A Reading of Jose Saramago's "Death with Interruptions"**

Death.

Hush, hush, thou shalt not speak the word

For God forbid the truth becomes concrete when you speak it.

Human existence is no stranger to the existence of death, and yet the existence of death never stops being strange. The strangeness of death is in its absurdity - the fact that the one who knows it is not there to talk about it, and the one who is there cannot talk about it except in fiction. Death as a phenomenon does not exist in isolation; it exists in relation to life. There is life; therefore, there is death. Life and death are two complementary forces of nature that interact with each other constantly, though we are only made aware of them when the interaction involves us. This paper is an attempt to read the problematic of life and death in relation to human beings as individuals as well as, as a society.

“The following day, no one died.” (Saramago and Costa 2009, p. 7) This is how the story begins and progresses further with how the rumor turns into news at the hands of the newspapers, the radio, and the television. Saramago hits the nail right on the head by painting such a realistic picture of the state of media houses and journalists. The narrator scathingly writes of the people involved in the media: “...they’re trained in the ability, when it suits, to make those events seem even more major than they really are.” (Saramago and Costa 2009, p. 8) What follows is a series of television debates, heckling of the common individuals by the journalists, and “pseudo-scientific”, as the narrator calls it, assurance by the politicians. Regardless of the matter at hand, the responses by the media and politicians hit too close to home.

The next to get trapped in the storm caused by the absence of death is church, and all its immaculate participants. The cardinal, after hearing the prime minister’s address to the country on a late broadcast show, is disappointed by a statement made by the prime minister that implies that the absence of death is “a will of God” (Saramago and Costa 2009, p. 11). In response to the prime minister’s address, he calls him and confronts him about the implications of his statement. The cardinal remarks, “Without death there is no resurrection, and without resurrection there is no church, more than that, how could it even occur to you that god would ever will his own demise, such an idea is pure sacrilege.” (Saramago and Costa 2009, p.11) The novel sheds light on how death as phenomenon is one of the key foundational elements in the establishment and persistence of a religion like Christianity. As the cardinal points out to the prime minister, without death, the church loses its significance. The absence of death not only challenges the existence of an afterlife, hell, and heaven, but also the existence of God. The novel points to the corruption that prevails within the confines of the church. The cardinal himself signals to the prime minister that there is not much difference between politics and religion, considering both indulge in making speeches. The cardinal remarks later, “our specialty has always been the neutralization of the overly curious mind through faith.” (Saramago and Costa 2009, p. 12) The statement made by the cardinal points out how the church succeeds in dodging questions in the name of faith. Religion,

especially church in this case, plays on the fear of death and a promise of the afterlife. It provides the human ego with a false sense of immortality. In his article, “*Faith and the Fear of Death*”, Jonathan Jong elaborates, “Most religions offer some way of defeating death directly, whether through reincarnation, resurrection, or an afterlife. Compared to the promise of paradise - or Jannah or Svarga or Akanishta or Valhalla - the prospects of fame or genetic propagation are pale facsimiles. But even if religion is the best immortality project, it is an immortality project all the same: a human attempt to assuage our existential anxiety. The gods, strong as they maybe, are ultimately born of our mortal cowardice.”

The novel sheds light on other social institutions as well. In response to the absence of death, the collective union of the undertaking businesses proposes, “that the government should make the burial or cremation of all domestic animals mandatory, and that such burials or cremations, regulated and approved, should be carried out by the funeral industry.” (Saramago and Costa 2009, p. 16) This shows the apparent insensitivity of the funeral industry, which is more concerned about business than humans. Just like the funeral industry, other social institutions come up with alternatives to sustain themselves. The healthcare institutions send the people barely alive back to their homes. Eventide homes propose to build more of them. The insurance companies come up with an especially peculiar alternative. The alternative is that the policy holder has to pay the premiums until their eightieth birthday, after which they will receive the “full sum stipulated in the policy”. All of this presents the underlying reality of these social institutions, which seem morally and ethically motivated on the surface. Devaleena Kundu, in her article “*Transacting Death*”, writes about how “the advent of industrialization, urbanization, commercialization, and specifically medicalization has brought about a radical attitudinal change towards death and dying, in the process modifying and magnifying them into complex structures of exchange.” In the novel, Saramago satirizes the commodification of death in modern human society. He presents us with the underlying economics of death that take place in the industries associated with the business of death and dying.

The novel also sheds light on what happens when the age-old longing for immortality is actually fulfilled. The reaction of the masses shows the blindness that they share in their collective state of frenzy. The newly received immortality is perceived by the masses as humanity’s victory over its Scythian enemy, death. The initial reaction shows the ignorance of the masses about the implications of immortality. It does not take long for the masses to realize the implications, though, not because they have thought it out but because they actually start to see the implications of immortality. The injured, the diseased, the old, and all those on the edge of life keep adding up. The hospitals started sending back the ones they thought were incurable. As a result, every family has one or more members in a suspended

state of life. One of the many implications of immortality that the novel highlights is the family's response to their loved ones. There is one case in the novel where the old man of the house suggests to his family members that he be carried outside the borders of the country (where death occurs naturally) and be buried there. Even though initially the family is shocked by the suggestion, they carry on anyway. It does not take much time for this rumor to become news. The family is initially shamed for their act of inhumanity, but soon everyone starts adopting the method. It is interesting to note the case from an ethical point of view and ask, if it is better to see someone suffer for death or be put to death. The case is similar to what happens in euthanasia. This shows the absurdity of having well-defined ethics because it ignores the specific cases of human experiences that subvert the very foundation of ethics. Also, the novel points out the callous zones where murder, suicide, capital punishment, and euthanasia¹ cannot be distinguished from one another. Sandra M. Wierzbica, while discussing the dilemmas linked to health law in her article, talks about "the legality of the practices associated with euthanasia and the multiplicity of circumstances that it may involve."

"Death with Interruptions describes the individual and collective distress deriving from the fact that further care must be given to people who would have died under normal circumstances. That situation makes life really difficult for relatives and cohabitants. The author also describes decisions concerning the end of life of ill people, and relatives opinions on such decisions, all of which is well explained in the following passage: "...My father-in-law and my nephew died last night, we took them to the other side of the border, where death is still active; you killed them, exclaimed the neighbour, in a way yes, given that they could not go there under their own steam, but in a way, not, because we did it at the request of my father-in-law and, as for the child, poor thing, he had no voice in the matter and no life worth living." (Saramago and Costa 2009, p. 60).

Another aspect of the social system that the novel brings forth mirrors our reality. In the novel, when the government fails to deal with the situation, the "maphia" comes to the rescue. The maphia is a group of people in the story who make a business out of the act of disposing the people on the cusp of life and death across the borders. The interesting thing to note is that even though the story is fictive, the idea of gangsters taking governance in their hands does not sound completely strange.

The second half of the novel turns from the sociological aspect of death to the personification of death as a woman. It so happens that death, with a small "d", decides to return. However, with a hint of twist to the conventional ways of death and dying. On her

homecoming, she decides to make her return official by sending a letter to the director-general of a media house, in which she explains the reason for her absence “was to give those human beings who so loathe me just a taste of what it would mean to live forever, eternally.” (Saramago and Costa 2009, p. 65) Later in the letter, death informs her readers that “from now on everyone will receive due warning and be given a week to put what remains of their life in order” (Saramago and Costa, p. 66). This is followed by a new circle of frenzy by the masses, the media houses, the government, and the social institutions once again. However, this time Saramago focuses on the character of death, personified as a woman, and its relation to love.

Death as a phenomenon is unknowable. However, that has not stopped human society from trying to understand it, interpret it, and, in turn, represent it in different forms. The forms in which death has been conceptualized through the ages differ from “culture to culture, from country to country, and even from person to person, shaped as they are by multiple factors, including language, mythology, and religion, as well as literary and artistic depictions. While in the West, the predominant representation of death has been the Grim Reaper, a male skeletal figure dressed in a long, black robe holding a scythe, probably as a result of it being the culturally dominant paradigm of Anglo-Saxon traditions, different figurations of death occur in individual countries.”² Maria Aline Ferriera gives a brief account of how death has been personified in the realm of art across time periods and how it has evolved thematically. “A significant manifestation of death in art occurred towards the end of the 15th century, in which death was represented as a male skeleton interacting with a young woman, often with erotic overtones, an artistic subgenre described as ‘Death and the Maiden’, derived from the artistic depictions in the late Middle Ages of the ‘Dance of Death’, allegorical paintings in turn, which were a potent reminder of the universality and inescapability of death.” In her article “Death and the Young Man”, she argues Saramago “provides a striking antithesis to the ‘Death and the Maiden’ theme in art and literature, with its depiction of Death as a woman and lover, Death the Bride.”

The latter half of the story shifts the spotlight from the social theater of death and human society to the intimate theater of death and the individual. The individual that is under the radar of death is a cellist, who, despite death’s best efforts, happens to evade her three times. As a consequence, death takes it into her own hands to deliver the violet-colored letter to the cellist. It is at this point that death is humanized, or rather, womanized. Saramago personifies death as a woman and justifies his choice for the gender of death on linguistic grounds. The narrator justifies to the reader “that it was no mere chance that had made her

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begin by transforming herself into a woman, indeed, as a grammatical soul might be inclined to think, and as we discussed earlier, since both death and woman are female, it was her natural gender.” (Saramago and Costa 2009, p. 84) Saramago does not just present death as a woman; but he also provides her with the attributes of a seducer. He gives her power over the man, who is the cellist in this case. It is the cellist, who is under constant surveillance of death, a woman. “The man didn’t know her, but she knew him” (Saramago and Costa 2009, p.88). The story is played out under the gaze of a woman. However, the hierarchy that exists between the cellist and death eventually falls apart. Initially, it is death who is the seducer, the knower, and the superior. But then, the story falls right on its head with the breaking down of the apparent hierarchies. Death, who takes the form of a woman to deliver the violet-colored letter to the cellist herself, ends up falling in love with him. She becomes human in a complete sense by surrendering her powers, which is shown in the way that she destroys the violet-colored letter that holds the death of the cellist: “she who could make the paper vanish with a single glance and reduce it to an impalpable dust, and yet it was a simple match, an ordinary, that set light to death’s letter.” (Saramago and Costa 2009, p. 138) The words “ordinary”, “simple”, and “everyday” suggest the turn that death’s form has taken. Saramago completes the humanization of death with the ending, “when she, who never slept, fell asleep”. Saramago leaves it to the reader to interpret the “sleep” of death. The death, with a small “d”, metaphorically dies, and thus, the novel ends right at the beginning. “The following day, no one died.” (Saramago and Costa 2009, p. 138)

“If, for example, you were to think more deeply about death, then it would be truly strange if, in so doing, you did not encounter new images, new linguistic fields. – Wittgenstein” (Saramago and Costa 2009, p. 6)

Indeed, that is what Saramago succeeds in doing. The novel is populated by prose, which challenges the conventions of the novel. The sentences are long, filled with commas, epilepsies, and dashes. The prose makes the reader pant at times with the speed at which the words seem to shoot forward. And like the prose, the theme itself shocks from the start. Thinking about death eliminates death in Saramago’s story, and death’s absence becomes a gateway to studying human society and its relation to death. Through his novel, Saramago makes us see, consider, and question the existing social structures. He uncovers the underlying reality of the institutions that constantly try to exert power on humans and manipulate them into believing in age-old thought systems. Saramago shows how fear is used as a tool to serve the agendas of different sectors of human society, from government to religion to business houses to families. Saramago uses the biggest fear of humanity, the fear of death, and shows that death is not the worst thing that could afflict human society.

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