Claustrophobic Labyrinths of Modernism

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INTRODUCTION

From the age of classicism, blindness has been one of the most powerful recurring themes in literature and creative arts. In postmodernist phase, it has entered one of the most complex enquiries concerning perception of reality, the reliability of the claimed truthfulness and objectivity of visual sensations. The debates of the validity of the perceived reality is likely to continue ad-infinitum. In the classical world, blindness is often analogous with a certain wisdom that begins to dawn with advanced age or deep moment of revelation inaugurated by a moment of crisis. It is not unusual to come across a blindness that is physical and metaphorical, as happens in the indian epic, mahabharata. In athenian literature, oedipal blindness almost coincides with the final moment of an act that is cathartic. In the modernist perception, there is a multiplicity of themes and imageries, that is lacking a common denominator.

It has always been a matter of extensive debate as to the imaginative detours of the blind, though a definitive idea seems to be elusive, as could be expected. What makes the matter unusually complicated as well as fiercely diverse is the sheer lack of common denominators for the imaginative leaps of the blind. The total freedom of the blind to liberate the consciousness from the confines of the geometrical and geographical specificities of the real world gives rise to the immensities of the world imagined and the colours conjured up which owes no allegiance to the actual and its labyrinthine routes to which visual sensations are forever doomed. Two possibilities seem to be emerging here. The first and the more secure path is to strike a neo-platonian deal with its promise of a world of abstractions, whereas the second brings about a euphoria of liberation bringing in its train tangential leaps into the unchartered and untenanted spaces of consciousness. This paper will make an enquiry into the web and matrix of the latter issue.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper begins with the epic, mythical and archetypal patterns, images and themes of blindness which generally leads to the suggestion which reverses the traditional notion of vision and blindness as antinomies. On the other hand, they seem to complimenting and fulfilling each other. The paper further examines the ways in which certain themes of blindness such as its cloistered innocence is finding later elaborations in modernist writings and visual cultures. In modernist writings the blindness often gets connected to the dread angst of existence, which gets analysed here through the cartesian, lockian, freudian and marxian perceptions. After providing an overview of these different dimensions of the theme of blindness and vision, the paper begins to sharply focus on the modernist short stories, since in them it is possible to find instances of blindness played out literally and metaphorically. With its sharp and penetrating
focus on the singularity of a fleeting moment, the short story is blinding out everything else that may crowd the visual space. Primarily the stories of james joyce is used to illustrate this abiding theme of blind, blinds and acts of blinding out. The paper further goes onto to examine the ways in which this modernist perception of blindness is at the core of freudian fetishism and the commodity fetishism of marx. The paper concludes by looking at the possible ways along which theme of blindness may evolve in the future scenarios.

In joyce’s dubliners, blindness serves as the most compelling motif transiting from the darkened blind of “the sisters” to blinding snowstorms of the “the dead”. It acquires a wider ramification considering the fact in fiction, snow often acts as a blinding factor, substituting reality with a wavering unreal chimera of repressed fantasies and unsuspecting virgin innocence waiting to be exploited by the ruthless acts of malefic factors. A stunning instance of this exemplary imagery is played out with intense precision and unflinching honesty by hardly in tess of the d’urbervilles, where the insane male ego of tess’s father is recklessly exploited by another marauding male ego. In joyce, the plot begins to move around a central blind spot. If it is the overbearing presence of the father that characterises tess, joyce marks the space with an absent father. It should not be ignored that in modernism, absenteeism often grows into a self-consuming metaphor. This idea has to be related to the disarming statement of daedalus that the church is founded on the ‘legal fiction’ of paternity, which in tum is resting the ever present void. Joyce is subliminally suggesting that the idea of paternity cohabits with that of void. In a certain way, it becomes the reversal of the oedipal quest for the father. The alternating and complementing themes of blinds and blindness played with insistent urgency is a poignant and inevitable reminder of the dereliction of the paternal edifices in joyce.

Obscured or baffled vision is almost endemic to the modernist short story, wherein a vast number of blind protagonists begin to populate. In dubliners, blindness is a device for fending off the insistent and tormenting psychological gaze of the character. In a way a blind or a blinding stare begins to suggest a scheme to usup the voyeuristic gaze of the imagined reader towards the inner life of the protagonist, “her eyes gave no sign of love or farewell recognition” (dubliners, page 41). Gilde’s novella the pastoral symphony begins to explore the intriguing web of relationships existing between sight and vision, sound and hearing, by narrating the story of a girl who is ‘cured’ of her blinding cataract. The story seeks to demolish the stereotypical notion that blindness and vision like deafness and hearing are poised against each other. In a way blindness complements and fulfills vision, since we always see what our minds are conditioned to see. Every act of seeing blinds out certain other things. Blindness permanently dwells at the centre of seeing, serving as vigilant, always sceptical, tactful, capturing and annulling the images that may be potentially inimical to the perceived, ingrained associative series of images that helps one live in a delusional euphoria which is self-willed, sustained and perpetrated. Stated otherwise, blindness dominates the spacial freedom and territories of vision.

There is an extensive investigation into the theme of blindness in dubliners through the portrayal of gide which reaches yet another immensity in finnegans wake when joyce writes: ‘till allearth’s dumbnation shall the blind lead the dead’ (page 68). Roycottfied points out that the roots of joycean puns on blindness could be traced back to his nagging eye disease which often caused the latter to wander of on an anarchic path. Borges makes a penetrating observation of joycean fiction when he remarks that the music of joycean language derives partly from his blindness which sharpened and fine chiseled his sensitivity to the music of language.

Nella larsen (18911964), an afro-american writer who has been a contemporary of james joyce deals extensively with the theme of “colour-blindness” in her fiction. The definitive opacity in which the reigning white racist is holding the terrible reality of the blacks becomes the dominant metaphor of her short stories. In the pervasive dominating culture of america, to be coloured is to be too visible and to be ostracised when to be white is to remain ‘invisible’, because here the ‘whiteness’ becomes an absence. Colour transforms itself into a ‘signifier’ carrying many complex socio-historical, cultural and political motifs that come to demarcate it. Nella larson’s ‘sanctuary’ explores the malefic dimensions of the pemicious connections existing between blindness and visibility of the race. To be a black is to be visible, and to be visible is to expose oneself to a world of intense hostilities, unsympathetic and anti-humanistic.

In becket’s play not i, a drama of elimination, character finds himself reduced to a brilliantly lit mouth madly talking insanities in the darkness. The playwright here insists that what you see on the stage depends on what you fail to see or deliberately avoid seeing. The vaster world is blacked out to maniacally focus on a single mouth in its assertive masculinity, annulling and vanquishing every other possible intrusion into its space. The political message becomes too obvious to be obscured. Elizabeth bowen adopts a strikingly similar vein in her short stories. Bowen’s metaphors in her stories project fiercely blinding light onto a single character so that everyone else begins to pale into shallow invisibility, into the shade and the historical oblivion.
The blind along with his inability to see is transferring that blindness to others. The reversible aspect of the word is apparent in its many sided applications as noun, verb, adverb and adjective. As happens in waiting for godot, estragon’s presence on the stage has to be vouchsafed by vladimir, in the absence of which the former will have serious issues regarding his existence. The answering gaze of the other is the affirmation of our visibility. The moment of the psychical terror a narcissus is likely to experience is when the overwhelming mirrors fail to throw back his reflection. It is the dreaded possibility of the sight of the sightless that compels humanity to close the eyelids of the departed.

It is in the media res that a short story begins to revolve. It cunningly blinds out the vaster world of multitude from the reader by the sharply focussed gaze on the singularity of event, character and spectacle. A civilisation proud of the singularity of its heritage and splendid legacy, may succeed preeminently in creating great novels, which make a heavy demand on the impregnable continuity like the russia, france and britain, whereas those cultures which have their affinity to the rapidly evolving and transforming states of reality may have a greater preference for the short story with its intense and unflinching focus on a single moment, its evanescent character, choosing to blind out the vaster kaleidoscope of vision. Dubliners is purposefully reversing the demanding continuity of the narrative novel with its heavy reliance on the complimenting motifs of humdrum and epiphanies. By the studied violation of the laws of the genre, joyce begins to manipulate the precarious balancing act between visible and invisible, blindness and vision.

It is always the atomised society that turns out to be matrix of the short story, with its intense gaze, revealing sharply focussed light, compelling the vaster world to withdraw to the peripheries and shadow lines, whereas the novel thrives on with its promise of the revelation of inner life. The short story borrows one of the major attributes of tragedies, ‘an intense awareness of the human loneliness’. It is the desperate harping on a moment of intense isolation which may not be repeated and forever is immortalised in the human memory. It is the internal pressure on the brevity which primarily keeps the short story’s distinctive identity from that of the novel, but for this brevity, it ends up paying the price of the character development as the theme is obviously reigning supreme in the short story. The short story writer keeps searching for the character who is capable of withstanding the sharp unforgiving focussed detailing of a moment, like the fate of a man posing for a still photograph that is going have a crucial significance in his life.

The short story is playing out the principle of creating opacity and blindness in the reader by its sharpening its blinding lights focused on the intensity of a character and his lived out moment, blurring and keeping out everything else that surrounds him into shallow insignificance. In due course of time, the short story has come to influence the novel in more than one way, wherein the primary purpose of the character is to carry out the plot the novelist has drawn for him, he is severely forbidden to play out his private leitmotif. So the character in the novel is destined to wear a mask to obstruct and dissuade the curious gaze of the reader, hoping to tear apart the appearances that character wears around his being. In the meanwhile there creeps in a pervasive theme of blindness both in short story and the novel, differing only in kind.

Blind geronimo and his brother, a story by arthur schnitzler is a ravishing exploration into the unfathomable depths of the state of innocence, guilt and its inalienable links with the themes of sight and blindness. Geronimo has been blinded in a childhood accident unwittingly caused by carlo, his brother. To attenuate for the mistake, carlo devotes his entire life taking care of the brother; the two must now strike the road begging for alms to subsist, the blind man strumming the guitar while his brother takes care of the money. Things sail along smoothly till a stranger intrudes into their lives with the banal accusation of carlo cheating the blind brother. The relationship is severely shattered inspite of the reconciliation at the end. The state of innocence is never regained. The cohabiting themes of sight and blindness, the slippery lines of trust that is precariously existing, its inevitable disruption and the never to be retrieved innocence at the end, is richly suggesting the weird distrust between the act of seeing and not seeing.

William paulson’s name is famously associated with the “desacralisation of the blind”, inspired by the enlightenment philosophy and medicine. This idea seeks to down the prevalent myths of which propagated the stereotypical philosophy concerning the projection of the blind sometimes as a sinner and mostly as a prophet. Paulson on the other hand wanted to see the blind as the embodiment of a certain innocence, inexperienced in the ways and forms of the world providing it an unseen hallow holding a blank space within, so capable of visualising things in ways the people with vision are incapable of. The traditional association between blindness and innocence runs back to the gospel of st.john, which acquired a new dimension during the age of enlightenment. The new perception of blindness was inaugurated with the maverick question raised by william molyneux to john locke whether the blind man ushered into the world of vision would be able to recognise the sphere and the cube which till that time remained a tactile association for him. Later analysts have pointed out that two opposing answers are possible for this historical question. Going by the cartesian philosophy, it is not
difficult to see that the man will be able to identify them, because these forms are knowable only by reason. But the lockian answer would be an assertive no, since the blind man will have to undertake the scheme of processing the information received through his newly gained sight. In the critically acclaimed movie, “ship of theseus”, the blind photographer, ‘cured’ of her blindness has to face the serious issue of relating herself to the world of vision, which she began to experience only recently.

In french philosopher, condillac’s version of molyneux’s question, the blind man is replaced with a statue whose senses are activated one after the other to analyse the way knowledge is constructed through the sense perceptions. Later diderot reorganised the concept of blindness by rejecting the earlier notion of blindness as a defect but as a different way of perceiving the world around one.

One of the most prominent associationist images that goes along with blindness in short stories is the resurrection and recuperation of the innocence that characterises the childhood. In rudyard kipling’s short story “they” this theme is played out extensively. Blindness of the heroes is used here suggesting their cloistered innocence. Sensitive fusion of the female body with that of the child is often redolent with subsisting notions of pornography, even as this female body is incapable of resonating the insistent male gaze. Another startling use of this imagery could be seen in the pastoral symphony of gide. Here the heroine is consciously stripped of her sight and sound, who is discovered in an orphaned state by a pastor. The backdrop of the snow-clad cottage is aiding a plunge to the dark interiors of the human psychology. The looming dark shadows of death, indistinguishable from the darkness around, the child is nearly ‘opaque’. As she is ushered into the waiting moonlight outside, she avidly gulps down the bowl of soup thrust into her hands. Her deprivation and malnourished state has nearly pushed her to the verge of an existence that is animalistic to the sensitised reader.

Withstanding his wife’s apprehensive resistance the pastor is bent upon extending a fresh lease of life to the child, now named gertrude, vaguely suggesting any number of romantic, tragic heroines from the classical lore. Like a passionate sculpture, he must now transform her stony silence and monochromatic face blanked out of all turbulent feelings into a sensitised soul capable of reflecting and reciprocating the gaze of the other. As the pastor discerns it, gertrude’s blindness is acting as a “blind” obstructing all possible intrusions by vision.

Conrad’s novella the end of the tether (1902) explores the philosophical, ideological and ethical issues concerning a man’s gradual transition from the world of light to that of darkness. Here captain whalley is preoccupied with the obsessive compulsive responsibility of resurrecting his daughter from deprivation and poverty. As the awareness dawns on him that his eyesight is beginning to fail rapidly, he must hide the terrible fact from the crew of the ship sofala so that he could get back the money invested for her in the ship. But now he is having an unexpected rival, the bankrupt owner-engineer of the ship who must sink her in a desperate bid to claim the insurance money. Ultimately, when the ship begins its last voyage to the dark depths of the “black sea”, for captain whalley, it becomes a journey into eternal doom and darkness. The narrative is taking a tangential leap from the circular confines of the short story.

In the “cyclops” episode of ulysses, when odysseus goes onto blinding the one-eyed cyclops, the “blind” is immediately getting transformed into a decoy, at the end of which bloom beats a hasty retreat from the pub on the pretext of visiting the courthouse, wherein the courthouse explicitly becomes a blind. Joyce plays out this strategy in an analogous pattern in dubliners, where the reader is lured into a destination which might be never reached. Most of the stories of joyce are characterised by abrupt pauses which surmises the stop of the story rather than end in the traditional pattern, playing out the ‘blind’ pattern extensively.

The anorthoscopic gaze of the short story corresponds to a fleeting vision of life captured casually through the corner of the eye, making a slit in a blind that begins to suggest unseen possibilities and realities of a vaster panorama. So here the transition is from panopticism to a truncated turbulence of vision, highly unsustainable and ephemeral. Basically the anorthoscope comprises of two rotating discs, the first of these is having a series of slits through which a figure depicted on the second disc is to be seen, through the gradual movement. So at any one point, it is not possible to have the complete image on the disc that is kept below, which will be revealed only through a series of partial images and the complete image has to be conjured up by the onlooker by combining all the associated patches in his mind. It has been found that the observers often succeeded in identifying the image, inspite of its incomplete, segmented acts of revealing. It clearly reveals that perception mostly is factored by acts of cognition rather than seeing as such.

Seeing and blindness consequently corresponds to complementing themes of void and presence. The void in turn corroborates a series of substitutions and supplanting the originals with simulacra. As has been pointed out by lacan, in the contemporary scenario the disney land is a simulacra, providing everything which reality is capable of an analogous pattern. In his essay on “fetichism”, fraud
identifies it as “scotomization,” the deliberate and stratified erasing of one perception through the substitution of another, a fetish which at once wipes out and memorializes the unbearable sight insisting that there is “nothing” to be seen. This is akin to the principle of “gnomon” in euclidian geometry, designating that part of a parallelogram that remains when a similar parallelogram is taken away from one of its corners. This device of substitution becomes an intricate strategy in the narrative pattern of *dubliners*. They serve as blinds re-covering and recovering the absence of the father. The absent father serves as the gnomon that inspires the simoniac traffic in false fathers.

It is significant that joyce begins to narrate most of the stories in *dubliners* against the backdrop of night, which terribly impedes and truncates the vision. A deceptive and illusionary light of the dusk is intelligently played out in “two gallants”. The city is apparently shrouded in ‘grey warm air’ deriving out of the dreaded acts of failure and dissipation akin to the miasma that begins to envelop thebes as a retribution of the sin committed by oedipus. A striking analogy is that of waiting for godot where the play starts off towards the dusk and setting sun, characteristic of the pre-christian calendars where the day began at dusk. In this atmosphere quasi-hallucinative, the ancient harp is beginning to impart a melancholic strain to the whole ambience, a subliminal tinge of lamentation for the city becomes distinctly audible. The two gallants are frozen in the haunting sensibilities of the harp-music. The reader too is unwittingly lured into perambulations of the primordial music. It could be due to these reasons that margot norris describes the harp as a “blind” which to some extent immunises the reader from the unsentimental narrative atrocities. In that world tuned topsy-turvy the national dirge and sex are traded for trumps and gold coins. The harpist unleashes the whirlwind of relentless destruction, disseminating profanity and banality.

With a carefully manicured ambiguity, word-play and collage of mythical and archetypal lore, there remains a hazy uncertainty as to the motifs that characters are led by. The inquisitive gazes of the reader are greated by the blinds transforming it to the level of a riddle, with a modernist sphinx serving as the blind. Gold had often been the objectified image of the ultimate temptation. But here the divergent roads leading towards the gold could sometimes suggest it as the price of sex and at other times the price of silence. Money no longer has the exchange value here, rather it comes to suggest the fetishised materiality. It shines blinding bright in its lavish visibility, much similar to freud’s insights on fetishism, wherein he represents an unidentified patient aroused by a certain ‘shine on the nose’. Freud identifies this has its roots in the childhood of the patient, when he might have stared at the genitals of his governess and discovered that in her there is the absence of a penis.

Jean baudrilliard has pointed out that what promotes fetishism is not desire for substances but “the passion for code”. Here the gold is not related to its exchange value and not the labour value that may be associated with it but the code of honour which the two gallants live by. Both marx and freud consider fetishism as a form of blindness which is elaborated in marx’s theory the commodity-fetishism, where fetishism takes the place of the human labour. Marx goes on to state that here reality is censored out of vision “scotomised”- endowing it with an object with subjective agency. It leads onto the surpass that sight relies on the see’s blindness to the act of seeing since to see is to substitute the object for the subject.

**RESULTS**

The paper reaches the conclusion that in modernist narratives, the classical theme of blindness as possessing a kind of cloistered innocence and absolution of self has evolved into sharply focussed perception of truth and reality concerning the self in its relation to the ‘other’, aided by the theories of psychoanalysis, socio-political and economic realities as well as by political ideologies such as marxism. It further seeks to prove that blindness not poised against vision, but rather complements and fulfils it, suggesting that blindness itself is a way of perceiving truth, truth and authenticity. Incidentally here the circle becomes complete as it begins to reinstate the classical ideal in a modernist syntax.

**DISCUSSION**

These ideas related to the study of blindness have some of their roots in visual cultures such as painting. Parts of leonardo da vinci’s notebooks concerning the study of light on objects have to examined here. Later in twentieth century, the invention of camera has forever changed the way we look at the reality which become the foundations of the semantics of the movies. These are some of the diverse possibilities for further research the paper is suggesting.

**CONCLUSION**

Having its beginnings from the classical ages, blindness and questions related to ambiguity of perception always remained one of the perennially fascinating topics of literary imagination and research. With the passage of time, the archetypal associations of blindness and vision began to witness a series of changes imbuing overtones of psychoanalysis, political and ideological moorings and any number of intricate themes and associations. With the arrival of semantics of the visual media, it began to acquire vaster scopes and dimensions. The modernist narratives inaugurated
by joyce and his contemporaries began an earnest pursuit of the problematic dialectics between blindness and vision carried to the heightened states of consciousness. So it could be seen that blindness acts as a pervasive metaphor in the modernist narratives, strengthened by the theoretical groundings provided by marx, freud, lacan and others. If blindness had been institutionalised in the classical narratives, suggesting its metaphorical, prophetic and archetypal richness, in the modernist narratives, it is deeply implanted in the penetrating psychological, sociological and even theories that are borrowed from optics and geometry. It is further related complex enquiries concerning the dimensions of seeing and gazing.

REFERENCES