

Social Representation of Blindness in Maltese Novels and Folktales

Abstract

The topic under scrutiny of this paper is representations of blindness in literature. Blindness is complex to define. Although blindness refers to various kinds of visual impairment conditions, it is also a social construct. Analysis of various kinds of literature typically tend to depict blindness in a stereotypical manner, however there is an increasing body of literature that deconstructs commonsense notions of blindness.

This paper has analysed some Maltese literature in order to gain partial insight on how blindness is perceived in the Maltese culture. The main representations that emerged from this analysis were blindness as atmosphere and blindness as tragedy. The use of blindness as metaphor was also discussed where the theme of blindness as deficit has emerged.

The analysis also revealed the strong intertwining of Roman Catholic values with Maltese culture. All the literary material discussed in this paper were authored before 1970, where the predominant view being that of disability as a result of sin. The way blindness is used as a device by these authors might betray lack of contact with actual blind people, keeping in mind that up till the mid-20th century, it was not uncommon for families to hide their relatives away from public on grounds of disability.

Keywords: blindness, literature, folktales

Introduction

The theme under scrutiny of this paper is representation of blindness in literature. It will seek to explore the representation of blindness in various literary sources ranging from philosophical writings; to Holy Scriptures, mythology and legends; and children and adult novels. This paper will also be analyzing a Maltese novel, a drama, and two folktales to gain a partial insight on how Maltese society depicts blindness.

Blindness is rather complex to define (Hayhoe, 2008; Rodas, 2009). Whilst it refers to a spectrum of visual impairment, it is also cultural construct (Hayhoe, 2008). This is because the way blindness is defined, classified, and the way understandings of it are developed reflect social and cultural factors (Hayhoe, 2008). Furthermore, cultural differences on defining and classifying blindness – influenced by different social and academic paradigms, and quasi-

political institutions – provide an explanation of the lack of a single concise international definition (Hayhoe, 2008).

There is some degree of consensus on the definition of statutory or legal blindness. This is particularly so in United States and most of the European countries (Hasse, 2011). In these countries, a person is defined as being legally blind if the individual is able to see an object from the better eye 20 feet away with the same degree of clarity as an average sighted person could from a distance of 200 feet (Green, 2009; Hasse, 2011).

Medical Perspective of Blindness

Definitions of blindness that borrow from medicalized perspectives – in terms of therapeutic frameworks, or symptoms – pose a number of limitations (Hayhoe, 2008). Only a small minority of persons affected with blindness actually experience complete loss of sight (Rodas, 2009). Loss of vision seldom occurs instantly, but tends to progress gradually through time, which can take decades (Rodas, 2009). In addition, individuals with colour blindness can still see, although the extent of perception of colours varies across individuals (Green, 2009; Rodas, 2009). This has the implication that blindness is a spectrum, and thus the sight/blindness binary is illusory.

The causes of blindness are not to be confined to the eye itself, adding that blindness can also occur through brain tumours, lesions or due to idiosyncrasies of the nerves. Conditions such as dyslexia can affect perception, causing the person affected to “write figures as mirror images, causing fragments of words to disappear, or ...[making] it impossible to absorb or translate written code” (Rodas, 2009). Sacks (1970 cited in Rodas, 2009) also postulates that a person might be able to see, yet being unable to recognize people or objects around.

It should be acknowledged that medicalized definitions of blindness are useful for the medical profession in order to understand the various causes of the impairment, and develop treatments and cures. However, the medical aspect of blindness provides just a part of the whole picture, and lived experiences of blindness varies across individuals and cultures (Rodas, 2009). Finally, a medicalized definition of blindness is disempowering, since blind persons could end up being treated as objects of treatment or as objects of charity (Hayhoe, 2008).

Cultural Perspective of Blindness

Although the topic of culture is the subject of heated debates, there appears to be some degree of consensus of its importance, and its power to influence human behaviour (Cronk, 1999). From anthropological perspectives, Rosman and Rubel (1998, cited in Cronk, 1999 p. 133) define culture as “[the] way of life of a people, including their behavior, the things they

make, and their ideas.” Key to the coherency of culture are social representations, which can be defined as those processes of collective-meaning making that gives rise to shared knowledge of the world (Höijer, 2011). Social representations are created through interactions between the constituent individuals in society, each of whom is a source of knowledge (McDermott and Varenne, 1995; du Toit, 2011). As a result of these interactions, the various individual sources of knowledge – known as narratives – social representations are generated through sameness, difference and contradiction since narratives vary across constituent individuals (Bakhtin, 1940 cited in McDermott and Varenne, 1995). This has the implication that the social representations are complex, multi-layered social representations (McDermott and Varenne, 1995; du Toit, 2011).

It should be borne in mind that not all narratives are made equal, since narratives create discourses with complex relationships to power (du Toit, 2011). This inequality gives rise to what Lyotard (1979/1984) refers to as grand narratives, where science in particular claims to be the true source of knowledge (Browning, 2000). The legitimization of the so-called grand-narrative implies that common knowledge is deemed as “primitive”, and thus marginalized (du Toit, 2011). One particular consequence of the legitimization of scientific knowledge is that differences – particularly on perceptions about the human body – are intensified (Browning, 2000). This is because human bodies that do not conform to the scientific norm are deemed as less worthy, which in turn gives rise to an artificial hierarchy of human bodies. This explains the existence of a variety of social representations of disability – including blindness – that revolve around their functional limitations but at the same time ignoring the actual lived experiences of persons with disability (McDermott and Varenne, 2011).

These representations of disability, including blindness, can also be found in language, which is a cultural product (Wendell, 1996). This has the implication that language is value-laden where metaphors reflect the hegemony of vision (Wendell, 1996; Rodas, 2009). Rodas (2009) points out that phrases such as “blind rage”, and “the blind leading the blind” reflect the representation of blindness as lack of control and hopelessness. Similarly, words such as ‘blind gut’ and ‘blind arch’ have the implication of blindness as an obstruction, or a faux-pas (Rodas, 2009). There are representations that could have a double-meaning, reflecting the inherent dualism in culture exemplified by sight/blindness binary (Rodas, 2009). This is evidenced, for instance, by the word “love is the blind”, where on one hand it might signify as one’s unconditional acceptance of the loved other, but at the same time might imply vulnerability if the other party proved to be deceitful.

The hegemonic culture of vision in literature has historic roots (Rodas, 2009). Representation of blindness in literature throughout history is fraught with contradictions, where it was used as a metaphor for inspiration, tragedy, fairness, vulnerability, ignorance, insensitivity, and insight (Rodas, 2009). Literature is also replete with blind heroes, villains and other side-characters (Jernigan, 1974, Rubin and Watson, 1987; Rodas, 2009).

The following section will be discussing the various academic sources on representation of blindness. It will seek explore the various stereotypical representations of blindness, and also alternative representations in literature.

Representation of Blindness in Literature

In the preceding section, it has been mentioned that language – including literature – is value-laden (Wendell, 1996; Rodas, 2009). Rubin and Watson (1987) reveal that although the recognition of the effects of the representation of blindness in literature is relatively recent, such effects cannot be overlooked. This is because stereotypical representations of blindness in literature can create potential harm to blind people, particularly because these could maintain the unequal status quo in society (Rubin and Watson, 1987). Jernigan (1974) also reveals that representations of blindness is bewildering, with a complex web of intersections, conflicts and contradictions that hinder the understanding of blindness.

This state of affairs stems from a flawed, simplistic model of blindness, which Kleege (2013) refers to as the Hypothetical Blind. The use of this simplistic model of blindness has historic roots, evidenced in religion, philosophy and medicine, as well as due to other political and cultural factors (Hayhoe, 2008; Kleege, 2013).

However, it should be acknowledged there is an increasing flow of literature about positive, non-stereotyped views of blindness, a number of which reflect the lived experiences of their respective authors.

Stereotyped representations of blindness

One typical representation is that of blindness as a result of punishment for wrongdoing (Jernigan, 1974; Kelley, 2005; Macpherson, 2007; Rodas, 2009). This has religious roots, and is reflected in various myths and Holy Scriptures such as the Bible (Macpherson, 2007). The kind of wrongdoings – and the method – that led to blindness in Greek mythology vary considerably. Oedipus, for instance, gouges out his eyes upon discovering that he has fulfilled the prophecy of killing his own father and marrying his mother (Macpherson, 2007). On the other hand, Polyphemus is blinded with a stake by Odysseus as a result of his own greed and due to

mistreatment of Odysseus and his shipmates, some of whom he devoured (Macpherson, 2007; Rodas, 2009). The Old Testament is also replete with references to blindness as being the result of punishment from God: Kleege (2013) asserts that there are various Biblical characters that are blinded by a wrathful God as a result of their disobedience. Macpherson (2007) also points out that the Old Testament reinforces this stereotype through laws that forbade blind individuals to serve as priests (Leviticus 22:22) to the threat of infliction of blindness to people who disobeyed God's commandments (Leviticus 22:16).

Sometimes, the punishment of blindness from a divine being was accompanied by other kinds of punishment, which underscores fear of retribution if one strayed from religious beliefs. Gonzalo de Berceo, a medieval cleric, had a number of writings that carry this kind of moral message, including the story featured in *La Iglesia Robada* in which an attempt to rob a church is prevented by divine intervention, with the culprits losing their minds and sight and unable to escape (Kelley, 2005).

The notion of blindness as punishment complements the representation of blindness in terms of ignorance, evil and even death (Kelley, 2005; Macpherson, 2007). Perhaps this mistaken notion of blindness is best epitomized by Hod, a deity in the Nordic sagas. Hod, a blind deity, ends up slaying his own brother Baldur unwittingly, as a result of manipulation by Loki, a deity with a reputation for mischief (Munch, 1926). In turn, Hod is murdered by another deity named Vali in reprisal (Munch, 1926). This saga plausibly reflects the assumption that blindness implies vulnerability to deception that in turn could give rise to evil, even if perhaps unintentional.

This representation stems from the doctrine of light, which assumes that light represents closeness to the divine, and thus being more knowledgeable (Kelley, 2005). It explains why the restoration of sight was deemed as a sign of divine grace, with the implication that the person has repented from any wrongdoings (Kelley, 2005; Macpherson, 2007). This is particularly illustrated in the conversion of Saint Paul, which features in the New Testament (Macpherson, 2007; Rodas, 2009). Paul, previously-named Saul, lost his sight as a result of persecuting Christianity due to his ignorance about the Christian faith (Rodas, 2009; Macpherson, 2007). His subsequent restoration of sight symbolises enlightenment about his newly-found religious faith (Rodas, 2009). This kind of symbolism can also be traced in various stories that at times include examples of individuals being healed from other maladies as well. There is a story by Berceo – in a book named *La Vida de Santo Domingo de Silas*, where a woman is healed from multiple

afflictions besides blindness, following an admonition from Saint Dominic to avoid sin (Kelley, 2005).

The legacy of the notion of blindness as ignorance was also carried by philosophy and medical sciences (Hayhoe, 2008). Molyneux's enquiry as to whether a person – who has been blind since birth – could be able to identify a cube from a sphere by sight alone upon being cured might have reflected the assumption that lack of vision is equated with lack of knowledge (Kleege, 2013). Strangely, the debate around the Molyneux Question is still raging nowadays, despite historical and medical case studies of blind people actually able to recognize things following medical intervention, even though they were born blind (Kleege, 2013).

The representation of blindness as ignorance is somewhat similar to the representation of blindness as imprisonment (Rubin and Watson, 1987; Kelley, 2005). It might reflect the use of blindness as a metaphor for physical lack of mobility and dependence, with freedom as something akin to restoration of light (Kelley, 2005). If we were to revisit the story of the conversion of Saint Paul, blindness is portrayed as a barrier to prevent Saul from persecuting Christians further (Rodas, 2009). This notion also features in Berceo's *Santo Domingo*: a character named Pedro invokes God's deliverance following his imprisonment by the Moors, which is fulfilled through the interventions of Saint Dominic (Kelley, 2005). In this story, although the protagonist is not a blind person, the phrases used – such as *tan ciega prisión* (your blind prison) – and the description of the intervening saint amply illustrate this damaging representation (Kelley, 2005). In a similar vein, blindness is at times depicted as being akin to lack of self-control, and hence lack of morality (Rodas, 2009). Not even Helen Keller was spared from this kind of stereotyping. This is perhaps epitomized by Hermann (1999, cited in Crowe, 2000, p. 7) who described Keller as being “transformed from this semi-wild child into this saint-like child, this angel child. She was groomed to play a part.” Such a statement indicates a misunderstanding of Keller's behaviour in her childhood prior to meeting with her tutor, besides failing to realize that Keller's grasp of language was an inspired, gradual process, rather than a miracle (Crowe, 2000).

The notion of blindness as akin to imprisonment – with the implied isolation – might also provides a plausible explanation of the propensity of portraying blind persons as side characters in novels and in children's stories (Rubin and Watson, 1987). Conklin's (1983) *Summer Dream* children's novel is a case in point, where a blind teenager is merely included as a prop, through which a male and a female character are brought together (Rubin and Watson, 1987). This story reflects the flawed assumption that blind persons have nothing much to offer because of

misconceptions about blindness as limitation (Jernigan, 1974; Rubin and Watson, 1987). This might stem from the assumptions that blind people cannot experience the joys of life due to their inability to perceive light and colour, hence the assumption that blind people are gloomy. This, in turn, might also explain the existence of the representation of blindness as “tragedy” (Jernigan, 1974; Rubin and Watson, 1987).

Literature is replete with the association of light with knowledge, reflected in religion, philosophy, and the medical sciences (Hayhoe, 2008). Yet, there is also a contradictory representation of blindness as insight (Bolt, 2006; Macpherson, 2007). Stories and myths about blind seers harking back to Classical Greeks evident in literature appear to suggest that blind people possess hidden knowledge (Macpherson, 2007). This “hidden knowledge” might at least in part reflect that most blind people have the ability to use residual sight, which is unbeknown to those who are not knowledgeable about blindness.

Blindness as insight might also reflect the assumption as being a sort of compensation for loss of sight (Macpherson, 2007; Rodas, 2009). This can be exemplified by Odin, who is the chief of the gods in Norse saga (Munch, 1926). Odin is depicted as the wisest of the gods in the Nordic sagas, who loses an eye in order to draw knowledge from the well of the giant Mimir (Munch, 1926). This representation might also be associated with blindness as tragedy, since the acquisition of knowledge came as at a high price of forgoing something precious, namely sight.

The lack of understanding about blindness as being a spectrum gives rise to the assumption that blind people rely entirely on other senses, particularly the sense of touch (Bolt, 2006; Kleege, 2013). These assumptions about extraordinary senses also give rise to what Bolt (2006) referred to as the animalization of blindness. Wells’ (1904) *The Country of the Blind* is a case in point: the book is sprinkled with references of blind people using the sense of smell to find their way, where Bolt (2006) likens this mannerism to canine behaviour. However, one also needs to point out that there are contradictory representations in this regard, which assume that the other senses are underdeveloped as a result of lack of sight (Bolt, 2006). This perhaps reflects people who rely heavily on sight deem the other senses as subordinate to it, perhaps even assuming that all the other senses as influenced by sight.

The assumption of the other senses as being subordinate to sight might explain the representation of blind people as being unable to empathize. Diderot assumed that blind people are unable to empathize through an obviously flawed hypothesis, namely that

[as] all the external signs which raise our pity and ideas of pain the blind are affected only cries. I have in general no high thought of their humanity. What difference is there to a

blind man between a man making water and one bleeding in silence? (Kleege, 2013 p. 410).

Diderot might have assumed that blind people could not communicate with others effectively since they lack visual cues, with implications of a lack of emotions because they are isolated in their inner worlds. This supposed lack of emotions in blind people could plausibly explain the other misrepresentation of blindness as perfect virtue, with the implication that blind people are removed from the ordinary dimensions of life, and hence humanity (Jernigan, 1974). This assumed remoteness could perhaps also explain why the media overlooked certain aspects of Helen Keller's life that ran counter to the stereotype, such her Socialist leanings and about her intimate relationship she had early in her life (Crowe, 2000).

The assumed remoteness from worldly matters could also provide a plausible explanation of the tendency to associate blindness with laziness (Rubin and Watson, 1987). In Synge's (1905) *Well of the Saints*, blind people are described as being so much engaged in complex thoughts that they do not involve themselves in ordinary aspects of life such as work (Bolt, 2006). This is because literature tends to assume that blind persons do not seek employment out of their volition instead of the various societal barriers imposed on them (Jernigan, 1974; Bolt, 2006).

The association of blindness with asexuality could have also stemmed from the assumed remoteness of blind people (Rubin and Watson, 1987; Crowe, 2000). However, there are representations that counter this notion. There are various novels that depict blind persons as sexually active, but nevertheless undesirable (Bolt, 2006). The theme of haptic seductions is evident in a number of novels, with the underlying misconception being that blind people have the power to seduce non-disabled people via their overdeveloped sense of touch (Bolt, 2006). In Carver's (1893) *Cathedral*, the blind character is allowed to touch a female character on her last day at the office, whereby he touches various parts of her face, and her neck (Bolt, 2006). This novel reveals that she has become deeply affected by this experience, and even attempts to write poems about it (Bolt, 2006).

Alternative Representations of Blindness

In the preceding section, we have covered some of the bewildering array of misrepresentations of blindness. As one could note, these reflect a limited, binary thinking which reflects only stereotyped extremes that have little to do with reality of many blind people. However, it is also evident in literature that there are alternative representations of blindness.

There is literature where blindness has been used to convey messages about social injustices. A case in point is Browne's (1861) *My View of the World*, which was published in three volumes. The story revolves around a female character – named Lucy – where it is alluded that her gradual loss of sight is due to her anxiety caused by husband's failing business, and his harsh attitudes towards her (Tilley, 2009). Matters are also exacerbated by her husband's doctor – also a male – who forbids her to read and write to ostensibly treat her blindness (Tilley, 2009). Browne (1861) – herself also blind – attempted to convey the notion that that females in her time were treated as passive objects (Tilley, 2009). Lucy's suicide in Browne's (1861) story appears to be symbolise female protest against patriarchal society (Tilley, 2009).

There is literature that portrays blind people in a realistic way, where their impairment is neither minimized, nor over-emphasized (Rubin and Watson, 1987). A case in point is Kent's (1978) *Belonging*, which featured a blind protagonist called Meg. Drawing from personal experiences, Kent's (1978) novel depicts Meg's interactions with other people realistically, both in terms of valuing of one's uniqueness and also in terms of resolution of conflict to belong (Rubin and Watson, 1987). There is also evidence of literature – including novels – that depict blindness as a characteristic that is at odds with the traditional, stereotyped representations. Kendric's (1987) *20/20 With A Twist* is a good example. This story starts in a futuristic, utopian setting where blind people were treated at par with sighted peers (Kleege, 2013). The main protagonist – Mary Seymour – recounts the oppressions faced by blind people during the 1980s and 1990s where blind people were denied access to information, which was the trigger for a peaceful rebellion, which targeted the media and the power supply (Kleege, 2013). Even though the rebels were caught and an attempt to “normalize” them by the implantation of optical sensors was made, this failed to change the rebels (Kleege, 2013). Eventually, the rebellion succeeded through the shutting-down of the power supply that led to the fall of the government, with the rebels released in triumph (Kleege, 2013).

There is also a number of academic literatures that challenges the conventional wisdom of blindness. A number of were contributed by blind authors that contained personal lived experiences. Kleege's (1999) *Sight Unseen*, is a case in point, where the author turns conventional wisdom on blindness on its head in many ways. One of them is the allusion that there is a spectrum of vision: Kleege (1999) asserts that though her visual acuity is less than 20/200, she “she is nonetheless able to “pas[s] as sighted” in certain social situations” (Mintz, 2007 p. 73). In her essays on *Sight Unseen*, Kleege (1999) does neither portray herself as a freak nor a hero, but inviting her readers to challenge misconceptions about blindness (Mintz, 2007).

Just as importantly Kleege (1999) overturns the traditional notions of blindness and knowledge, asserting that there are limitations of sight as being the main or sole means to accessing knowledge (Mintz, 2007). What was unique in Kleege's (1999) essays is that she does not limit herself to personal experiences, but through the critique of various literature and even movies to deconstruct the visual hegemony (Mintz, 2007).

As one can observe, there are differences in the way the identity of blindness is perceived by culture, and as perceived by blind people. As we shall see, the identity of blindness identity is a cultural construct, but is also a personal construct.

Literature and Identity Formation

An individual's identity formation is neither a transparent, nor a straight-forward process (Hall, 1990 cited in Weedon, 2004). Identity formation involves a series of psychological processes, where one's identity is neither monolithic, nor fixed but it is dynamic, imperfect, and multi-faceted (Haraway, 1991 cited in Weedon, 2004; Campbell and Oliver, 2006; Shakespeare, 1996 cited in Murugami, 2009). In addition, the development of an aspect of one's identity – which in turn has a bearing on one's overall identity – is never complete, and is subject to change over time due to various factors, particularly those of social, biographical and cultural nature (Haraway, 1991 cited in Weedon, 2004; Campbell and Oliver, 2006).

Contrary to commonsense discourse, one's own identification is not independent of one's culture (Weedon, 2004). Althusser (2001) asserts that the process of one's own self identification is only possible through language and ideology. In order to ensure the continuity of society, cultural meanings are passed down to future generations through various agents of socialization such as parents, legislation, religion, media, and education (Althusser, 2001). This might have the implication that literature – in conjunction with various agents of socialization – could impact on the formation of the identity of a blind person, besides influencing perceptions on blind people.

Identities are relational because in part they are socially, culturally and institutionally assigned where they are internalized through performativity, manifested through attire, argot and other mannerisms (Butler, 1990 cited in Weedon, 2004). However, hegemonic knowledge fails to represent all constituent individuals in a given society on an equal basis, with the implication that mannerisms associated with blindness become distorted (Browning, 2000; Weedon, 2004; du Toit, 2011). Moreover, du Toit (2011) also asserts that knowledge is multi-layered, hence the existence of representations of blindness that mutually reinforce each other (such as blindness as “tragedy” and blindness and sexual undesirability) and those that contradict each other (such as blindness as ignorance and blindness as insight).

However, the relational aspect of identity also has a subjective nature, and hence also personal construct with the implication that it is impossible to create a unitary identity of blindness (Johnstone, 2004; Weedon, 2004). It also explains the discrepancies in the meaning of blindness as assigned by a blind person and society, and across blind individuals within the same cultural context (Weedon, 2004). Whilst there are blind individuals who accept the hegemonic identity of blindness, there are those who dis-identify from the blindness identity (either through denial of the existence of their impairment or because they perceive themselves in terms of abilities but the same time acknowledging the existence of their impairment (Johnstone, 2004; Weedon, 2004; Murugami, 2009). There are those who reclaim the identity of blindness, where it is seen in a positive, non-tragic way and hence counter-identify against hegemonic discourse on blindness (Johnstone, 2004; Weedon, 2004).

The next section of this paper will be exploring representations of blindness that has emerged from a limited selection of Maltese literature, both in terms of usage of blindness as metaphor and in the mannerisms adapted by blind characters. It will be exploring the context and styles of the chosen authors, and the particular links of literature with religion.

Representation of Blindness in Maltese Literature

This section will be discussing various representations of blindness in the Maltese literature. I have chosen two folktales – namely *L-Irjieħ (The Winds)* and *Is-Sansun Malti (The Maltese Samson)* from Magri's (1967) *Ħrejjef Missirijietna (Tales of our Forefathers)*. I have also chosen Lombardi's (2010) novel entitled *L-Għama ta' Lourdes (The Blind [Man] of Lourdes)* and Diacono's (1969) drama named *Erwieħ Marbuta (Constrained Souls)*. Their summaries are included on Appendices A, B, and C of this paper.

I have chosen these three books to ensure diversity in terms of authorship, contexts and representations as much as possible. However, I was partially constrained by what I managed to get hold of. Out of eight book titles that I have come across that contained blind characters, I have managed to get hold of five thereof, three of which were authored by Emilio Lombardi.

This section is divided in three parts, where it will be discussing blindness as metaphor, the way blindness is featured in this selection of literature, and also the Maltese context at the time each piece of literature was authored.

Blindness as Metaphor

In the selected literature, there are instances of terminology that is commonly-used in the Maltese language, but at the same time reflecting the assumption of blindness as tragedy. In

Magri's (1967) folktale *Is-Sansun Malti*, the phrase “*iħobb l-ommu daqs id-dawl t'għajnejh*” (the apple of Samson's eyes was his own mother) (p. 34) deems sight as something precious, which implies that loss thereof is a tragic deficit. At times, phrases reflecting this notion are more overt. Lombardi's (2010) novel is replete with phrases like *iddisgrazzjat bħal Freddy* (unfortunate like Freddy) and *l-imsejken għama* (the poor blind [man]), that reflect the mistaken notion that blind people are helpless and lacking agency.

There is also evidence of phrases that reflect the representation of blindness as ignorance. Lombardi's (2010) novel includes phrases like “*jgħix fl-għama*” (being kept in the dark), especially on matters concerning religious faith. This kind of representation also extends to the description of characters. The character *Sittazbrilja*, the principal nemesis that features in Magri's (1967) folktale *L-Irjieħ* is particularly revealing. Like the lion in Magri's (1967) *Is-Sansun Malti*, this character falls asleep with her eyes open, and is awake when her eyes are shut. The notion of blindness as ignorance is further heightened when she refuses baptism by the pope during her pursuit to hunt down the protagonist, which ultimately led the protagonist to reunite with his family and cure his father's blindness.

Blindness as Plot Device

One of the most common misrepresentations of blindness identified is blindness as atmosphere. In Magri's (1967) *L-Irjieħ*, the king's blindness serves as a clue to his youngest son as to where to go and retrace his brothers and sisters in addition to the king's cure of his sudden blindness. Lombardi's (2010) novel uses blindness as a device to convey the message of Roman Catholicism as the only true religious faith, where Freddy's cure of his blindness leads to the conversion of his brother to Roman Catholicism, which in turn leads to demise of the novel's main antagonist.

Blindness as tragedy is the other most common misrepresentation identified in the selected literature. In Magri's (1967) *L-Irjieħ*, the king's incurring sudden blindness following the abduction of his three daughters elucidates his grief. The phenomenon of sudden blindness features occasionally on various media sources. The movie named *Tommy* (1975) – an adaptation of a rock opera by The Who – is one example the main character is affected with sudden blindness, coupled with two other impairments, following the witnessing of his father's demise at the hands of his stepfather (IMDb, 2014a). McMahon (2014) asserts that sudden blindness occurs in real life, which arises due to factors such as damage to the retina and medical conditions like stroke or brain injury, but was silent about emotional causes.

In the case of Diacono's (1969) *Erwieh Marbuta*, and Lombardi's (2010) *L-Għama ta' Lourdes*, the respective protagonists incur blindness to elucidate human depravity and worldly injustices. Notwithstanding these similarities, there is a marked difference in the way the respective characters are depicted. In Diacono's (1969) drama, Semion Kolos is blinded by the Nazis during his capture, who eventually collaborates with the invaders, ending up as an object of contempt by his compatriots even after his death. The portrayal of Semion Kolos mirrors one of Shakespeare's plays, *King Lear*, and the biblical character of Isaac, which portray blindness as object of manipulation (Green, 2009). In Lombardi's (2010) novel, Freddy Chancerelle is blinded with acid out of vengeance. Unlike Semion, Freddy perceives blindness as an opportunity to redeem himself to what he has done to his wife and his son, thereby making it his mission to forgive his assailant and attempt to convert him to Roman Catholicism. This supercrip representation in Lombardi's (2010) novel resembles to an extent the movie *Daredevil* (2003) – itself an adaptation of a comic book character by Marvel – in which the main character dedicates himself to justice after being doused with toxic chemicals, which also includes the hunting-down of his father's murderer (comicbookdb.com, 2014; IMDb, 2014).

The stereotypical fates of blind characters in literature are also worth mentioning here. Ben-Moshe (2006) asserts that blind characters in literature typically end up being cured, rehabilitated, pass away or commit suicide, or end up being left to their devices. This observation also holds true in the selected Maltese literature. There are two blind characters that are cured, namely Freddy in Lombardi's (2010) novel, and the king in Magri's (1967) *L-Irjieh*. Diacono's (1969) character end up being isolated and despised by his fellow Russian citizens, and is killed by his captors immediately after he manages to strangle the Gestapo officer who manipulated him. Furthermore, in both Magri's (1967) folktales, the lion and *Sittażbrilja* end up being outsmarted by the protagonists of the respective tales. Such representations may perhaps reflect the fear of blindness, because sight is deemed as something taken for granted. I suspect that this stems the fear of the unknown especially death, hence the propensity of association of blindness with death but at the same time failing to appreciate the flexibility of the human body (Shakespeare, 1994 cited in Swain and French, 2000; Ben-Moshe, 2006).

Styles and Context of the Chosen Authors

It is worth noting the styles and contexts adopted by the authors. There are at least two other books authored by Lombardi, in which a blind character is featured namely *Oreste Rockman* (1924), and *L-Ghamja* (1923) (emiliolombardi.com, n.d.). Both novels hinge on the themes of revenge, greed, depravity and justice (emiliolombardi, n.d.). Cilia (2005) asserts that

Diacono's dramas tend to serve as an exposé of the cruel realities of life, in which human beings are both perpetrators and victims. Magri's (1967) *Hrejjeġ Missirijietna* is a collection of tales recounted by third party, with the overarching theme being the triumph of good over evil.

The use of blindness by the above-mentioned Maltese authors is similar to Saramago's (1995) novel, which is named *Blindness*. Like the Maltese authors, Saramago (1995) uses blindness as a device to convey a moral message, namely the impossibility of grounding human morality (Gallagher, 2006). Another similarity with Lombardi's (2010) novel and Diacono's (1969) with Saramago's (1995) novel is that the respective authors elucidate the extent of human potential to commit acts of depravity (Ben-Moshe, 2006).

However, one should also take the context into account. All the first editions of the chosen Maltese literature were authored prior to the 1970s. It should be pointed out that up till the mid-1960s, persons with disability in Malta were not valued because they were perceived as morally-impure (Camilleri and Callus, 2001). It was a common practice amongst Maltese families to keep relatives hidden from the rest of society on grounds of disability due to the heavy stigma associated with it (Camilleri and Callus, 2001). The notion of disability in terms of moral impurity suggests a link between traditional Roman Catholic values and the Maltese culture (Camilleri and Callus, 2001; Camilleri, 2006).

All the chosen Maltese literature reflects this kind of link, which is not merely confined to representations of blindness. In Diacono's (1969) drama for instance, Semion borrows some characteristics from the biblical Samson in some respects, ranging from his fighting prowess prior to his capture, the incurring of blindness during his capture, besides incurring an unnatural death. One of Magri's (1967) folktale characters is also named after Samson, while the pope featured as a side character in another tale. Lombardi's (2010) novel elucidates this link strongly: the plot includes the conversion of some characters to Roman Catholicism, the discovery of Arturo in a cathedral and his subsequent encounter with his biological father later on in the novel, and even a miraculous cure for two of its characters. Lombardi's (2010) principal antagonist is laden with anti-Semitic references, with the fate of the character being similar to the biblical Judas Iscariot. Furthermore, Lombardi (2010) conveys the message that Protestant religions are not true religions. I suspect that these authors were so much deeply-ingrained with the traditional Roman Catholic perspectives of life, together with lack of exposure of actual lived experiences of blind people, has created a situation where the authors took the traditional views of blindness as given instead of deconstructing them.

Even with the advent of the disability movement in various countries around the world during the 1960s, persistence with traditional view of blindness is evident. In Saramago's (1995) novel, blindness is portrayed as a sort of plague to be feared, eliminated, a blessing in disguise, and a moral lesson (Ben-Moshe, 2006; Barnes, 2007). Such traditional views of blindness fail to embrace diversity and human potential because various authors accept cultural assumptions about blindness uncritically. It could also reflect that sight has been taken so much for granted that blindness is seen as a threat, because of the assumption that correlates the sense of wholeness and functionality of the human body. However, this correlation is misleading: Swain and French (2000) assert, persons with disability could have positive experiences in life since the impairment has opened to them opportunities they might have not had otherwise.

Conclusion

Due of the mortal nature of humanity and its associated fear, the existence of culture serves to facilitate the understanding of the universe, which also extends to the way one perceives the human body and impairments, including blindness (Foucault, 1977; Hughes, 2004). Ultimately, the existence of culture is to ensure survival and continuation of the human species, but since it is based on the principle of efficiency, there is an unequal hierarchy of human bodies (Foucault, 1977; Hughes, 2004). This has the implication that culture is made by non-disabled people to non-disabled people (Hughes, 2004).

No human being is independent from culture, and thus one's own actions and thoughts reflects the nature of society one is living (Weedon, 2004). As can be seen from this study, the misrepresentations of blindness in the majority of literature has less to do with deliberate intent by the authors to dehumanize blind people, but it has more to do with the failure to deconstruct cultural values and norms.

As Weedon (2004) asserts, identity also has a subjective element. The fact that there is increasing body of literature that deconstruct the stereotypical views of blindness reflects this fact. As literature is an important tool to convey cultural norms, literature that deconstructs traditional view of blindness has the potential to broaden people's horizons on the extent of human diversity and human nature.

References

Althusser, L. (2001), *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*, New York, Monthly Review Press
(first published in 1971)

- Barnes, C. (1997), Legacy of oppression: a history of disability in western culture, in Barton, L., and Oliver, M. (Eds.), *Disability Studies: Past, Present and Future* (pp. 3-24), Leeds, The Disability Press
- Ben-Moshe, L. (2006), Including Disability in the Curriculum: The Case of Saramago's *Blindness*, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 26(2), Retrieved from <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/688/865>
- Bolt, D. (2006), Beneficial Blindness: Literary Representation and the So-Called Positive Stereotyping of People with Impaired Vision, *New Zealand Journal of Disability Studies*, 12, 80-100
- Browning, G. K. (2000), *Lyotard and the end of grand narratives*, Cardiff, University of Wales
- Camilleri, J. (2006), *The Genesis of disability studies in Malta: from a colonial past to an independent future?*, Retrieved from www.knpd.org/pubs/opus/0609_lancaster_camilleri.pdf
- Camilleri, J., and Callus, A. M. (2001), Out of the cellars - disability, politics and the struggle for change: the Maltese experience, in Barton, L. (Ed.), *Disability, Politics and the Struggle for Change* (pp. 79 -92), London, David Fulton Publishers
- Campbell, J., and Oliver, M. (2006), *Disability Politics*, New York, Digital Printing
- Cilia, M. (2005), *L-Ewwel Jien - Ġużè Diacono: L-Ewwel Jien! jippreżenta t-traġedja li jwaqqagħna fiha l-egoizmu. Ikkummenta*, Retrieved from http://www.malti.info/studenti_l-ewwel_jien.htm
- comicbookdb.com (2014), *Daredevil (Marvel)(01 - Matt Murdock) - Chronological Listing*, Retrieved from http://www.comicbookdb.com/character_chron.php?ID=371
- Cronk, L. (1999), *The Complex whole: culture and the evolution of human behaviour*, Boulder, Westview Press

- Crowe, L. (2000), Helen Keller: rethinking the problematic icon, *Disability and Society*, 15(6), 1-14
- Diacono, G. (1969), *Erwieh marbuta*, 2nd edition, Valletta, Union Press (first published in 1965)
- du Toit, A. (2011), Narratives, in Sim, S. (Ed.), *The Lyotard dictionary*, [Kindle version], Retrieved from Amazon.com
- emiliolombardi (n.d.), *Merħba*, Retrieved from <http://www.emiliolombardi.com>
- Foucault, M. (1977), *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*, New York, Pantheon
- Gallagher, D. (2006), On using blindness as metaphor and difficult questions: a response to Ben-Moshe, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 26(2), Retrieved from <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/690/867>
- Green, S. (2008), *33 worst mistakes writers make about blind characters*, Retrieved from <http://booklocker.com/books/3888.html>
- Hasse, J. (2011), *Perfectly able: how to attract and hire talented people with disabilities*, New York, American Management Association
- Hayhoe, S. (2008), God, money and politics: English attitudes to blindness and touch from the Enlightenment to integration, [Kindle version], Retrieved from Amazon.com
- Höijer, B. (2011), Social representations theory: a new theory for media research, *Nordicom Review*, 32 (2), 3-16
- Hughes, B. (2004), Disability and the body, in Swain, J., Finkelstein, V., French, S, and Thomas, C. (Eds.), *Disabling barriers, enabling environment*(pp. 63-68), 2nd edition, London, SAGE Publications Ltd.

- IMDb (2014), *Daredevil (2003): Plot Summary*, Retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0287978/plotsummary>
- IMDb (2014a), *Tommy (1975)*, Retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073812>
- Jernigan, K (1974), *Is literature against us?*, *Address delivered by then president Kenneth Jernigan during the NFB annual conference of the 3rd July, 1974*. Retrieved from: <https://nfb.org/Images/nfb/Publications/convent/banque74.htm>
- Johnstone, C. J. (2004), *Disability and identity: personal constructions and formalized supports*, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 24(4), Retrieved from <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/880/1055>
- Kelley, M. J. (2005), *Blindness as physical and moral disorder in the works of Gonzalo de Berceo*, *Hispanic Review*, 73 (2), 131-155
- Kleege (2013), *Blindness and visual Culture: an eyewitness account*, in Davis, L.J. (Ed), *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4th edition, [Kindle version], Retrieved from Amazon.com
- Lombardi, E. (2010), *L-Għama ta' Lourdes*, 5th edition, Tarxien, Gutenberg Press (first published in 1932)
- Magri, M. (1967), *Hrejjeġ missirijietna*, Malta, Problemi ta' Llum
- Macpherson, H. M. (2007), *Landscapes of blindness and visual impairment: sight, touch and laughter in the English countryside*, (Doctorate thesis), University of Tyne, Retrieved from <https://theses.ncl.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/10443/258/1/macpherson07.pdf>
- McDermott, R., and Varenne, H. (1995), *Disability and culture*, *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 26(3), 323-348
- McMahon, M. (2014), *What is Sudden blindness*, Retrieved from <http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-sudden-blindness.htm>

- Mintz, S. B. (2007), *Unruly bodies: life writing by women with disabilities*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press
- Munch, P. A. (1926), *Norse mythology: Legends of Gods and Heroes*, New York, The American-Scandinavian Foundation, Retrieved from http://www.rendingtheveil.com/documents/PDFs/Norse/Norse_Mythology_Legends_of_Gods_and_Heroes_by_Peter_Andreas_Munch.pdf
- Murugami, M. W. (2009), Disability and identity, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 29(4), Retrieved from <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/979/1173>
- Rodas, J. M. (2009), On Blindness, *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 3(2), 115-130
- Rubin, E. and Watson, E. (1987) Disability bias in children's literature, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 11(1), 60-67
- Swain, J., and French, S. (2000), Towards an affirmative model of disability, *Disability and Society*, 15(4), 569-582
- Tilley, H. (2009), Frances Browne, the "Blind poetess": toward a poetics of blind writing, *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 3(2), Retrieved from <http://www.questia.com/read/1P3-1989841661/frances-browne-the-blind-poetess-toward-a-poetics>
- Weedon, C. (2004), *Identity and culture*, Maidenhead, Open University
- Wendell, S. (1996), *The rejected body: feminist philosophical reflections on disability*, New York, Routledge

Further Reading

- Bragg, L. (2004), *Oedipus borealis: the aberrant body in old Icelandic myth and saga*, Madison, Dickinson University Press
- Cheyne, R. (2013), Disability and modern fiction: Faulkner, Morrison, Coetzee and the Nobel prize for literature, *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 7(1), Retrieved from <http://www.questia.com/library/journal/1P3-2957343101/disability-and-modern-fiction-faulkner-morrison>
- Eloit, A. (2004), Oedipus Rex by Pier Paolo Pasolini the palimpsest: Rewriting and the Creation of Pasolini's Cinematic Language, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 32(4), Retrieved from <http://www.questia.com/library/journal/1P3-781649161/oedipus-rex-by-pier-paolo-pasolini-the-palimpsest>
- Kleege, G. (2009), Introduction: blindness and literature, *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 3(2), Retrieved from <http://www.questia.com/read/1P3-1989841631/introduction-blindness-and-literature>
- Kleege, G. (2010), Dialogues with the blind: literary depictions of blindness and visual art, *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 4(1) 1, Retrieved from <http://www.questia.com/read/1P3-2010157281/dialogues-with-the-blind-literary-depictions-of-blindness>
- Larrissy, E. (2007), *The blind and blindness in literature of the Romantic period*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press
- Linett, M. (1999), Blindness and intimacy in early twentieth-century literature, *Mosaic (Winnipeg)*, 46(3), Retrieved from <http://www.questia.com/read/1G1-348568640/blindness-and-intimacy-in-early-twentieth-century>
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (2002), Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 1(2), 165-181

Salem, L. (2006), *Children's literature studies: cases and discussions*, Westport, Libraries Unlimited

Wilde, A. (2009), God, money and politics: English attitudes to blindness and touch from the Enlightenment to integration (review), *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 3(9), 212-214

Appendix A: Summaries of Selected Folktales from Magri's Hrejje Missirijietna (1967)

Is-Sansun Malti

This story revolves around Samson, a person who loves to hunt, and is deeply affectionate to his mother. One evening, he spots a dozen men coming his way, which turns out to be a band of thieves. After managing to kill eleven of them, he enters their hideout, where he discovers a vast amount of wealth. He makes up his mind to tell his mother about it, without telling her that he had shed blood. He also manages to persuade her to move together to the cave.

Unbeknown to Samson, the leader of the thieves has evaded the fate that befell to his colleagues. No sooner than Samson brings his mother to this cave and goes out hunting, the thief comes to Samson's mother, convincing her through deception to help him get rid of her own son. After three failed attempts to kill him, the thief hatches a plot to convince Samson to bring the water of life, located in a place called Bugibda. In order to do so, Samson's mother has to feign illness.

Before setting off to his adventure, Samson pays a visit to his fiancée' (herself a sorceress). She warns him of the dangers, and gives him instructions what to do besides giving him a washing basin, a scented soap, a shaving razor, and some food. Samson eventually locates the hideout thanks to the guidance of the wise men, and manages to get past the sleeping lion unnoticed. He retrieves the water of life, and frees a princess who is imprisoned there by the lion. They egress unnoticed but some time later the lion wakes up. The lion immediately gives chase upon realizing what has happened, but is unsuccessful.

Samson takes the princess to her father's palace, and subsequently goes back to see his fiancée', spending the night with her. While he falls asleep, the sorceress substitutes the water of life with

ordinary water. As the story unfolds, that kind of water is eventually used to resuscitate Samson himself, following his brutal murder at the hands of his own mother and the leader of the thieves.

The story ends with Samson taking revenge on the thief and his mother, and his marriage with the sorceress.

L-Irjeh

There is a king whose three daughters are abducted separately by three winds, with the result that the king incurs sudden blindness due to grief. The doctors are unable to restore the king's sight, but recommend that *Sittazbrilja's* milk could do the trick. In a bid to rescue their sisters and restore their father's sight, two of the princes end up being enslaved in an island by a queen after losing at a game with her. As it turns out, this task falls on the youngest prince.

The prince sets sail on a galley where he eventually manages to retrace his sisters. There, one of his sisters instructs him how to access *Sittazbrilja* without getting himself harmed.

After eluding capture by *Sittazbrilja*, the protagonist rescues his brothers and sisters. However, at some stage he ends up marooned on an island. He is rescued after a while, winding up in the land of the pope.

Sittazbrilja does not give up the chase however, and eventually retraces his whereabouts. She goes to the pope claiming that the young prince is betrothed to her, to which the prince counters that he would take her as his bride if she gets baptized. She refuses, and eventually the pope helps him go back to his home country. The plot ends with the restoration of the king's sight, and the proclamation of the youngest prince as the heir to the throne.

Appendix B: Summary of Diacono's Erwieh Marbuta (1969)

As the German invaders in Russia are having a hard time with the Russian guerrillas, Mueller (a Gestapo officer) hatches a plan, whereby he would turn a former renowned guerrilla fighter – namely Semion Kolos – into a Nazi collaborator. Semion, who was captured and imprisoned by the Germans, experiences severe brutalized and incurs blindness as a result.

Mueller's rationale is that the Russian people would heed to Semion, since he has built up reputation that is akin that of the biblical Samson. At the same time, the Gestapo officer feels that Semion is cracking up under the brutal treatment, and thus can be manipulated by his captors. In order to achieve this goal, he decides to ply Semion liberally vodka and women, with the occasional beatings to soften him up. Key to his plan is Anja – Semion's former lover – who is forced to collaborate through deception and blackmail.

Colonel von Seiler deems the plan as too dangerous, but Mueller remains adamant that the plan will succeed. Eventually, von Seiler gives his consent to carry out the plan proposed by Mueller, albeit still harbouring reservations.

Semion is suspicious at first with the change of treatment meted out to him. His initial reaction on meeting with Anja is violent, out of jealousy for dumping him in favour of Pecenka. Gradually, his affection for Anja, his liberal consumption of vodka, and his subsequent appointment as magistrate got the better of him. Without realizing it, Semion ends up collaborating with the Nazis, which alienates him from his fellow Russians. Pecenka leads a group of protesters, but he pays for this action with his life at Semion's whim.

Two days following Pecenka's murder, what has begun as a protest snowballs into a revolt. Eventually, the Russians partisans gain the upper hand over the besieged Germans. Sensing what is going on, Anja attacks Mueller, begging Semion to intervene. No sooner than Semion subdues the Gestapo officer with his bare fists, he is gunned down by Lieutenant Wibbel. Anja is left unscathed until the partisans enter the building. Upon spotting Semion's corpse, the jubilant partisans hurl abuse at it, subsequently being dragged off from where it fell. The partisans' retribution also falls on Anja, who is thrown to her death from the building.

Appendix C: Summary of Lombardi's L-Ghama tà Lourdes (2010)

The novel starts with Jacob Metternich vowing to take revenge on Luigi Chancerelle for refusing to be an accessory for smuggling pornographic books. During the Franco-Prussian War six months later, he fulfils his revenge by murdering Luigi and his wife, and taking away their children (Freddy and Ugo) to Germany. In order to rub additional salt on the injury, Jacob instructs one of his henchmen (Claudio) to take the children to separate schools in Berlin, emphasizing that they are to receive Lutheran religious doctrine.

Both Ugo and Freddy meet Jacob separately immediately after their respective graduations. Whilst Ugo settles in Paris, Freddy eventually moves to Marseille. There, he meets Nora, whom he marries. Jacob is enraged upon hearing that Freddy has been married to a Catholic family, exacerbated with Freddy's conversion to Roman Catholicism. This leads Jacob to hatch a plan to sow mistrust, where he tries to convince Freddy that Nora is unfaithful. Freddy takes the bait, where he eventually kidnapped his own infant son with the intent to murdering him. However, he is stopped by a gypsy, who warns him about Jacob. Freddy subsequently goes to court, whereby he arraigns his wife for the abduction of their son and for being unfaithful. The proceedings proved inconclusive, with Freddy eventually confessing everything to his wife. They desperately search for the gypsy and the infant son, but proves to no avail.

Upon noting that Freddy's marriage with Nora has remained intact, Jacob decides to take a drastic action. Together with an accomplice named Nikolinu, Jacob stabs Nora to death, and blinding Freddy with acid that is supplied by Ugo (who is not privy to this crime). Jacob rationalizes that Freddy would relapse from his Catholic faith.

However, this strategy has the opposite effect, with Freddy paying Jacob a visit with intent to make him repent and convert to Roman Catholicism. As the story unfolds, Freddy regains sight through divine intervention. This in turn leads to a domino effect that eventually leads to the reunion with his brother, and rediscover his son. This also leads to Rebecca's miraculous cure of an illness, and Ugo's conversion to Roman Catholicism.

The novel ends with Jacob committing suicide by hanging himself in his cell during his arrest, and the marriage of Freddy's son with Ugo's daughter.