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WILLIAM GOLDING'S APPREHENSION OF THE ORIGIN OF EVIL AND
VIOLENCE IN *LORD OF THE FLIES*

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Abstract:

William Golding's novel Lord of the Flies is famously known for its depiction of evil and violence. Though the novel is based on the lives of the children on an uninhibited island, it deals with the eternal problems of evil and violence. It is an ambitious novel dealing with the problems of evil and violence and its root causes. The present paper deals with the writer's delineation of evil and violence in the novel. The novel explores the human mind to understand the causes of evil and violence. Rather than accepting the established notions of evil as originating from Satan or external influences he puts forward his apprehension of the problem supplied by the fresh perspectives offered by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. He deals with the problems of evil and violence from a rational and scientific approach. It is a novel written in counter-argument to J. M. Ballantine's novel The Coral Island. The two writers have put forward contradictory images of man. The human beings are seen as carrying evil and violence within themselves. Rather than locating evil externally, it traces their roots into human mind.

Keywords: *Lord of the Flies, Evil and Violence, Beelzebub, Dystopian Novel, etc.*

Sir William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies* has secured a place in the classics of the world literature. The novel, though about a fantasy dystopian world, speaks to every generation of readers. It has helped the reading populace in understanding evil and violence from a rational and psychological point of view. Though it does not give any definitive solutions to these eternal problems, it points towards an important direction. The problems of evil and violence have been explored for their origins in their past lives, his lineage from Adam and Eve, the influence of Satan and man's upbringing. However, the man's composition as frail and susceptible to evil and violence was brought to the public discussion by William Golding. His novels explore the questions of evil and violence as the inherent traits of human mind. His novels are the part of enlightenment project in understanding these old problems with a fresh perspective supplied with Sigmund Freud's analysis of human mind. His life experiences contributed to his understanding of the problem.

William Golding, the Nobel laureate in literature, had a firsthand experience of the Second World War. He had joined the British Royal Navy to serve his country in 1940. After witnessing the cruelty of mankind and the horrors of the War, he wrote about it that during that period of the War, "I began to see what people are capable of doing. Anyone who moved through those years without understanding that man produced evil as a bee produces honey, must have been blind or



wrong in the head". His debut novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954) is dystopian in a sharp response to a Utopian novel *The Coral Island* by R. M. Ballantyne. In 1983, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for "his novels which, with the perspicuity of realistic narrative art and the diversity and universality of myth, illuminate the human condition in the world today". Patrick Reilly comments upon the structure of the novel as fable: "*Lord of the Flies* is one of the most important texts of the twentieth century, for both literary and extra-literary reasons. It is a fable vital to our times for three reasons: the urgency of its questions, the audacity of its answers, and the formal originality of its investigation (Reilly, 7). His story indeed teaches a good lesson. However, unlike the features of a fable, his characters are not the simplistic types acting like a puppet; they have a depth and act like living human beings. They carry contradictions in their actions.

Golding sets his novel during the Second World War. It was more opportune and relevant that the people of Europe had the nightmarish memories of the War still fresh when the novel came out. The people had experienced the human capacity for evil first-handedly in their recent pasts. The holocaust, the massacres of the innocents, the dropping of the atom bomb, the brutal killings of Jews and the destruction of the countries during the War had a tremendous economic and psychological impact on the generation of the intended readers. The frailty of the civilizing effects of Christianity and the limitations of the enlightenment project were clearly experienced by the people. The people were reminded of the inherent evil in the human nature which brought the destruction and a moral decadence to the so-called civilizers of the world. The book has been adapted for theatre performances by Nigel Williams which was a hit. It was also adapted in four parts for a radio dramatization by Judith Adams for BBC Radio 4 Extra. It has influenced the popular culture through many songs, books, and films.

The novel approaches the question of evil in a different view altogether. The view of the novelist is against the commonly held belief that human beings are essentially moral and the evil in the human nature comes from the moral corruption. In the novel, the existence of evil neither is denied nor is it projected on the influencing factors external to the mankind. It attempts to answer the question why, after thousands of years of consistent efforts, the evil persists. It does not see the evil ruling the mankind in the absence of spirituality or moral teachings instead, it locates the evil in the essential human nature. At one point, Piggy questions about the basic nature of human beings, "What are we? Humans? Or animals? Or savages?" Moreover, Ralph also wonders, "What's wrong? What makes things break up like they do?" The questions are original as they do not point to the external factors like education, social and economic conditions. Instead, the readers gain, "a renewed sense of difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity, perhaps even the evil, of people" (Reilly, 10).

The novel forces the readers to recognize the truth of the human nature which can help in understanding the world at large better. The boys don't hunt simply for meat; they enjoy killing. They shout out loudly when they are hunting, "*Kill the beast! Cut her throat! Spill her blood!*" They enjoy the second hunt more than the first. Golding brings to the fore the idea that the human beings have a terrible capacity for evil. It is not seen only in Jack and Roger but in Piggy, Simon, and Ralph also. However, they control their evil impulses and show that the human beings need not necessarily succumb to the evil. Contrastingly, Jack and Roger are the examples of how the lack of moral and ethical control leads to more and more violence and barbarism. The larger society on the continent is not free from evil, rather their evil has achieved a huge monstrosity in the form of war. The acts of the children have put the existence of the islanders at risk whereas; the deeds of the adults on the continents have put the existence of the mankind at the risk of



extinction through the nuclear war. Golding puts forward his vision of mankind in the novel as, “at once heroic and sick”.

The children enjoy the idyllic pleasures of the island in the beginning. They are innocent and guileless who think others also as good-hearted. However, it turns out that their innate savagery was dormant and suppressed under the societal pressures. Initially, their intentions are good and constructive but they destroy the whole island till the end of their stay there. They hunt a pig and put its head upon a stick. It turns out that, the monstrous beasts were always waiting within themselves to be released. Their habitation away from the societal conditioning only proves opportune to gratify their heretofore-suppressed instincts for violence, superstitions, and bloodlust. Ultimately, they become vicious hunters, torturers, and killers, not wishing to return from it. In the course of his stay on the island, Ralph achieves the knowledge of his true self which leads him to the maturity. When he is saved by a naval officer, he weeps, “for the end of innocence, the darkness of man’s heart, and the fall through the air of the true wise friend called Piggy” (182).

The journey of the society from barbarism to the civilized life has taken a course of thousands of years; however, the journey from civilized life to savagery and barbarism doesn’t take much time. Initial plans of the boys are to lead a peaceful co-habitation on the uninhibited island. They start building shelters, maintain a signal fire, and practice the democratic principles to ensure equality of right to expression. They distribute the responsibilities among themselves and also care for the little children. As their stay on island prolongs, their impulses for fun, anarchy, selfishness, quick gratification and violence start overpowering their initial impulses for peace and order. Soon, the boys let the fire go out, disrupt the huts, hunt like wild dogs, let a child die in fire, kill Simon and Piggy and burn the whole island to smoke out Ralph. The novel becomes the story of a mini-society reverting to savagery. As Encyclopedia Britannica notes it, the novel becomes, “imaginative and brutal depiction of the rapid and inevitable dissolution of social mores”.

The novel reminded the contemporary readers of the violence and destruction in the two World Wars. The plane evacuating the boys is shot down by the enemies. The smokes raising high on the island reminded the readers of the cities and farms burnt down by the war forces. The parachutist pilot’s body hanging on a tree and raising its head by the forces of the wind must have been the most memorable scenes from the novel for that generation of readers who lost their best youths to the war. The English readers had experienced in their recent past the genocide, the massacres, the war crimes, the innocent victims of war, and no safe place to go. The European liberal democracies had already seen the limitations of the rationality and righteousness in controlling the evil like Hitler and the Nazi forces.

Though there are no predatory animals on the island and no apparent threats to the children, the children are terrified. Their terror is not due to any external life endangering factors; they have their innate, instinctual fear with them. They fear the beasts of several kinds like beast from air and water. They are terrified by “snake-thing” however; nothing of the kind ever appears. Their instinctual fear makes them behave irrationally and immorally. Even Jack, who shows courage to kill the beast, is terrified. He says that while hunting sometimes one feels that he is not the hunter but being hunted instead. With more time, the fear creeps in more and more. Ralph’s group becomes smaller and smaller until Ralph remains alone. The fear of the unknown forces them to get disorganized. Jack forces his group to abide by his dictates on the basis of fear of severe punishment. In their fear of the beast, they become the terrible beasts themselves.

Rationality cannot solve all the problems unless we confront our inner nature. People don’t simply act on the rationality but there are often different sets of features at work. Piggy’s thoughts



and his demands are logical but they don't work; they get him killed. Thus, to rest the civilization on the principles of rationality and scientific progression would not be enough. The mankind has much more than the rational faculty of mind. The instincts for fear, violence, and competition are much more powerful than for the peaceful, cooperative, and harmonious living. Golding stated the dilemma faced by the modern men in the era of science and technology in his Nobel lecture in these words:

Since most scientists are just a bit religious and most religious seldom wholly unscientific, we find humanity in chemical position. Scientific intellect believes in the possibility of miracles inside a Black hole while his religious intellect believes in them outside it. Both, in fact, now believe in miracles- credimusquia absurdum est. Glory be to God in the highest (Nobel Lecture).

The novel also deals with the issue of beast and bestiality in detail. The beasts which are commonly imagined are the predatory or venomous animals. The beasts of which the children are afraid are of this kind. In the course of the time, it dawns upon the readers that the real beasts on the island are the boys, the humans! When Ralph announces the arrival of human beings on the island by blowing a conch, the birds and the beasts are terrified. "Clouds of birds rose from the tree tops, and something squealed and ran in the undergrowth." Thus, the sound of the shell heralds the arrival of a monster. It is this monstrous beast which makes the island a burning hell even though the island is lush green and Edenic with clear sunlight, plenty of food and fresh water. The search of the boys for the beast goes fruitless. They discuss a lot about the existence and non-existence of the beast. They also talk about the features of the beast. Piggy tells, "I know there isn't no beast—not with claws and all that, I mean—but I know there isn't no fear, either. ...Unless we get frightened of people" (Golding, 92). The group gets divided on the subject of beast. Ralph explains there can't be a beast while, Jack promises to kill it. The truth about the existence of the beast which epitomizes evil is known by Simon. In his epileptic seizure, he has a conversation with the Lord of the Flies. The head of the pig talks to him: "Fancy thinking that beast was something you could hunt and kill!" "You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close!" "I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are?" (Golding, 158). Simon achieves this truth about the beast and bestiality but before he could communicate it to the others, he is killed by the boys. In their frenzy, they mistake the pure hearted Simon for the beast and kill him.

To conclude, the novel approaches the problems of evil, bestiality, violence in the world from a rational and psychological point of view. The religious understanding of the issues is put aside by him. He sees violence, selfishness, greed and evil as the inherent parts of human mind. Though the novel shows Ralph and Simon as the spiritual characters and Jack as an evil character, it does not clarify what makes them what they are. It does not offer any answer to the question why Jack is an evil boy. He does not delve into their past lives, upbringing, or their genetic lineage. However, the novel brought to the anvils of common parlance one important aspect of human nature. It made the people understand that as a species, human beings are built by nature to survive, thrive and rule over one another. It is an ever going fight for survival and supremacy. It points out that all external rational and spiritual teachings need to take into account what is within



before they think of eliminating the forces without epitomized in the form of Satan, Beelzebub or the external influences.

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