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Biblical Interpretation of *Lord of the Flies*

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Abstract:

Lord of the Flies is an avaricious story which will appeal to generations of readers. *Lord of the Flies* showcases Golding's faith that every detail of human life has a religious significance. This is one of the reasons why he is unique among new writers in the '50's and why he excels in narrative ability. Among the writers of the '50s, there is an uncertainty about human values and have a fundamental doubt whether the life has any importance what so ever. Golding, in contrast, can describe guilt, friendship, horror and pain with a full sense of how deeply meaningful these can be for the individual. Having seen the two World Wars, Golding is aware of the darkness lurking in the hearts of human beings. Keeping this notion intact, Golding has introduced Biblical themes in the novel to show that the devil is not outside but within and it continuously tempts mankind to commit sin. In this way, Golding tries to avert the human soul from the clutches of the devil by recreating Biblical allusions in the novel.

Keywords: Good, Evil, Sin, Expiation, Seven Deadly Sins.

Introduction

Many interpretations of the novel *Lord of the Flies* have been given by various intellectuals and a re-reading of the novel gives a deeper level of understanding due to the Biblical elements incorporated by William Gerald Golding. In this context, the Bible becomes an important issue of discussion. The religious book of the Christians, the Bible lays down the doctrines of Christianity. The Bible is the only religious book of the Christians and it contains all the norms of conduct and rites of a Christian. The Old Testament is about the affirmation of oneness of God and His relationship with His chosen people and the New Testament consists of all the preaching of Jesus Christ and the expansion of Christianity. The Bible may be regarded as the literature of faith, everything has its own place in the scheme of God and mankind is viewed as one. Thus, we may assume that the Bible is the source of spiritual knowledge for Christians.

The Biblical themes contain all the aspects of human life and these have influenced many writers. Biblical allusion means referring to the Bible directly or indirectly by any writer artistically to enhance the effect of the purpose of his or her writing. From the varied themes of Bible many allusions are drawn by writers. Biblical allusions have been used by several writers in accordance with their requirements. For instance, Dante has applied the concept of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven in *Divine Comedy*. Dante probably has used this concept to avert man's inclination to sin by showing the sufferings in Hell and focusses on the peace of Purgatory and the bliss of Heaven. Christopher Marlowe has employed Biblical themes like the seven deadly sins and the combat of vice and virtue to show the ravages of excess ambition in *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Dr Faustus*. Marlowe shows the parade of the seven deadly sins tempting Dr. Faustus, since he is desperate to conquer knowledge, he proves to be an easy prey to temptations.

Biblical allusions are employed by numerous writers but Golding is singled out for analysis because Golding seems to be a fascinating writer as he connects our spiritual life with our physical life in a very crucial time of human history where materialistic achievement has become the only aim of life. In the pursuit of achieving more and more than others, man has gone very far without looking back to such an extent that he lands in a rendezvous where everyone seems to contest each other. Entangled in a strange amalgam, man turns against man, confusion and chaos echo in each heart leaving no room for spiritual realization. Thus, men are entrapped in the pandemonium of evil challenging God's plan.

In this regard, human civilization seems to return to the primitive stage of development. In the pursuit of endless goals man has neglected his spiritual side of life. This hinders man's stable life and the equilibrium is disturbed leading to the degeneration of human civilization. Since human civilization has reached its zenith it is sure to fall to its nadir because it is a natural cycle, to rise and fall and vice versa. "Or else he would forego his mortal nature" (Keats 30). Even drama always moves towards its denouement once it reaches its climax because art is an imitation of life.

Golding lived in a world shattered by the two world wars and he also gave services to war. He joined Royal Navy in 1940 during the Second World Wars and was involved in destroying the German battleship Bismarck. Golding having experienced the horror of the Second World War and seen its ravages was aware of its capacity to destroy. In this regard

V.V. Subbarao quotes William Golding in his text *William Golding: A Study*: “World War II was a turning point for me. I began to see what people were capable of doing” (14).

Golding, son of a distinguished schoolmaster, born in Cornwall, became proficient in Greek and he is influenced by the Greek masters; the way they perceive life at its intensity, the balance they maintain between reason and passion, mind and sentiment, desire and fate. This fixes in him a belief that man is invulnerable in a structured society. But the extremity of man’s action in the war changes his previous notion. Golding sees our civilization as decaying.

Golding reveals the evil in man’s nature and at the same time accepted Christianity as the sole resort; it fetches him a unique place in world literature. Golding argues that man’s fault is apparent when man goes against his own maker. God is the thing we turn away from into life and therefore we fear and distance from Him and make darkness within. Thus, man is rendered as the author of his own troubles and all his troubles are traced to his selfish nature.

In *Lord of the Flies* the dual between good and evil may be metaphorically observed through the pair of characters that is Ralph and Jack. The Catechism of the Catholic Church considers the Seven Deadly Sins as murderous because a deadly sin destroys grace and charity in one’s life and exposes one to the threat of eternal damnation. In order to preserve life from eternal destruction, the Catholic Church also recognizes seven virtues against each deadly sin. The pairs of vices and sins are: Wrath – Patience, Greed – Charity, Sloth – Diligence, Pride – Humility, Lust – Chastity, Envy – Kindness, and Gluttony – Temperance.

Our efforts to acquire these great virtues can save us from the clutches of the Devil. Ralph a rational boy represents the virtuous side and Jack the evil side. Moreover, Jack’s regressing towards sin can be looked as a result of his personality. According to the Bible, all humans beings are descendants of Adam and Eve, therefore, all human beings are born sinners because of the original sin. Golding’s intermixture of the adventurous story of the boys with the Genesis story from the Old Testament is presented in the novel and it invites our attention to his writing style.

Analysis

In a meeting regarding the filming of *Lord of the Flies* at the Connaught Hotel with Sam Spiegel, film producer and Peter Brook, the British theatre and film director; Golding focusses on the purpose of writing the novel. The conversation between Spiegel and Golding goes as:

SPIEGEL: Mr Golding, I think it would be a much better story if there were girls as well as boys... young girls?

GOLDING: Mr Spiegel, I wanted the film to be an allegory on the human race. 'Man' suggests all, 'boy' equally – if you bring in boys and girls you're forced to bring in secondary side issues, sexual attractions, conflicts, problems of puberty...!

SPIEGEL: (very disappointed) Mm... (Carey 216)

From this statement of William Golding, it is clear that he wanted to focus on the nature of man solely. At the primitive age, man tried to improve and upgrade all the aspects of life. However, when gradually man due to everlasting endeavour rose and reached the zenith of civilization, man took a reverse turn and regressed to the primitive sect of life. The regress was marked by the world wars. This return journey of civilization to primitive stage can be traced in the novel. Peter Green remarked that “at one level *Lord of the Flies* portrays a gradual reversion to the most primitive and bloodthirsty savagery” (Green 27).

In the novel *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding seems to employ the Biblical elements to show the traumatic disintegration of human civilization through the story of the boys. Andrew Sanders writes that *Lord of the Flies* “is shaped intellectually by an intermixture of the Christian concept of original sin” (Sanders 278). Original sin means the first sin committed by man against God. The concept of original sin is found in the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden in the Old Testament.

The setting of the novel *Lord of the Flies* is very beautiful and the island “was filled with a blue flower, a rock plant of some sort; and the overflow vent and spilled lavishly among the canopy of the forest. The air was thick with butterflies, lifting, fluttering, settling” (Golding 26). The scenic beauty of the island is pleasant to the eyes, “The shore was fledged with palm trees” (Golding 4). And the island was uninhabited because “There was no village smoke, and no boats,” (Golding 28). The island had food in abundance “Flower and fruit

grew together on the same tree and everywhere was the scent of ripeness and the blooming of a million bees at pasture” (Golding 58). It also provided very convenient place to dwell “a criss-cross pattern of trunks, very convenient to sit on” (Golding 7). In this way, William Golding seems to reframe the Garden of Eden as the setting of the novel and he creates a group of boys to reside in this idyllic island. Having set the stage fit for heavenly existence, Golding then proceeds to show the dramatic fall of the boys from their innocent life to savagery.

The island was cut off both from the disciplined harmony of the boys’ musical background and from a disharmonious world of grown-ups at war. The boys without a centre to hold them gradually broke away from the genteel civilization that had so far shaped it and they retreated into dirt, barbarism, and murder.

The boys in their newly begotten abode which was a gift of war “reveal their innate depravity but the whole human race” (Sanders 4). The world of the boys cleanly dissected from their earlier existence was the replica of the world of adults which has turned to savagery waging war creating disorder and uncertainty. The boys’ predicament was the direct result of war. The plane in which the boys were boarded was crashed due to an attack. When the adults are lost in the crossroads of belief, what can we expect from the children?

In the veil of this picturesque and adventurous story of the children, Golding has a deeper message to convey. His thoughts and views are expressed through a sea of symbols and metaphor.

At one level of the novel, the very want of Jack to be the leader is the seed of discontent in his heart which leads to outburst his innate nature which was so long governed by the teaching of his previous life and the brotherhood of his fellow friends. Jack and Ralph begin as brothers. Ralph gives the charge of the choir to Jack. They discover the island along with Simon. But soon the boys are entangled in the deceitful traps of evil.

Moreover, as their stay prolongs they are steadily entangled in the angst of desire, fear, hatred and conflict. When Ralph is busy making shelters, Jack comes back from hunt, when Ralph inquires him about the task of building shelter; Jack replies that, “We want meat” (Golding 52). But Ralph is annoyed to see such lust for meat. There is a sense of disrespect and bitterness for each other. At this point of turn in their relationship Golding comments: “Now the antagonism was audible” (Golding 53). However, their blissful stay in the island is

stripped by the menacing presence of a beast or a snake thing. This fear brings about a chaos among the boys in spite of Ralph's negating its being. It is the presence of the beast in the mountain which prevents the boys to make their signal fire, a means to get redeemed. The mountain presumably signifies stairwell to heaven but the beast which is in fact a harmless dead parachute man prevents the boys to climb the mountain. Simon is the only boy who discovers that the beast is not outside as in the Garden of Eden but inside one's one being. Simon is able to see the innate evil in one's heart which does not allow it to follow the ways of God, barring the heart to commune with God.

Simon brings this crucial news to the boys but the boys, having feasted on the roasted pig which Jack has hunted, are engrossed in performing a wild dance of hunt. In the dark, the boys doubly blinded by their exuberance of mock hunting and the literal darkness of night mistake Simon for the beast and brutally kill him. In their unconscious state they commit the sin of murdering their compassionate friend. In this regard, Simon may be considered as a Christ like figure because he confronts the lord of the flies or the head of the sow which Jack has offered to the beast. Simon is tempted by the lord of the flies but he is able to look through the veil of deceit and learns the most essential lesson of human life, of the nature and harbour of evil. Since he knows the cause of evil, it becomes easy to correct their feeble steps. But he is misunderstood and misjudged and he silently accepts their verdict. He sacrifices his life trying to save them.

Simon's predicament nearly resembles the story of Jesus Christ. Christ is tempted by Satan for forty days in wilderness, but He defeats Satan. Christ is resolved to stand the deceitful words and false promises of Satan. Moreover, Christ is condemned of polluting the moral of young minds while trying to shape and save them, He is crucified. The Lord lays down His precious life to enlighten our souls. But Christ resurrects. His resurrection implies the awakening of numbed souls by allowing them to realize their faults which in turn bring repentance and repentance is necessary to purify the soul and it also gives a hope of redemption and salvation.

The smooth flow of life of the boys in the island degrades when Jack, the antagonist becomes obsessed with power and his envy against Ralph can be observed in the novel, when Jack says "... He isn't a perfect and we don't know anything about him. He just gives orders and expects people to obey for nothing...." (Golding 142). In the context of the envious nature of Jack, The Bible says in Proverbs 14:30:

A heart at peace gives life to the body,

but envy rots the bones (7).

Golding comments that the suppressed anger was clear then. Jack's inclination to be an autocrat is rooted deep down in his being. From the very beginning he wanted to be the chief. He is possessed with the greed for power and exerts that he ought to be chief. However, Ralph wins by majority in the vote. Ralph is a rational leader and resorts to establish order by blowing the conch to summon an assembly to discuss their further plan of action. He believes in collective effort and dislikes the sloth of the little boys. Ralph tries to maintain decorum in the island.

However, Jack wishes to be his own master. Jack's wrath explodes when Ralph ignores his question about his hunters to fight against the beast but Ralph is only worried about the signal fire. Jack feels humiliated and humiliating tears runs down from the corner of each eye. Thus, wounded Jack turns to devil and let mere anarchy loose upon the island. Regarding the predicament of Jack, it can be said that "The 'God of Flies' is none other than the Devil, lurking in the hearts of those fledging and waiting to reveal himself only until such time as he is no longer held in check by the taboos of civilization" (Legouis and Cazamian 1419).

Jack revolted against Ralph and left stating that he would no longer be in Ralph's group. Thus, he left the conch, the last symbol of rule and left the assembly behind and went away. Jack's leaving Ralph's party suggests discarding rule and regressing into unruliness. He also said that anyone who wished to hunt could join him. Later Jack attracted the attention of the boys by provoking lust for food among them. He announced that they had killed a pig and they were feasting, so everyone was welcomed. All the boys, even Piggy and Ralph were helpless before the lust for food and finally went to Jack's feast.

Jack drunken with pride and savagery brings about a horrifying scene. To this Golding commented that evening has come but not with calm serenity and beauty but with the threat of horror and violence. Jack then proposed to start their wild dance. Having absorbed by gluttony, the exuberant boys was then completely absorbed with their bloody dance of hunting. Meanwhile, Simon crying out something rushed out of the forest. Simon came back with the knowledge of the beast, after his confrontation with the Lord of the Flies,

the Pig's head on a stick and the dead soldier tied to a parachute, the assumed beast, that the beast was horrible but harmless and he thought that the news must be conveyed to others immediately. But he was brutally attacked by the boys mistaking him for the beast. Simon cried out loud about a dead person on a hill. But it was inaudible because the screaming of the boys was too noisy. They bit, struck and tore him, thus, Simon was murdered mercilessly. And the angel-like boys were eventually turned into hunters and murderers by Jack's promise of meat and it shows gluttony's tight hold engraving them in their own lives.

The children in the novel symbolise either good or bad qualities, though they were at the same time capable of growth. From the beginning the good and the evil were demarcated. Simon was full of human qualities as well as intellectual and spiritual. He brought fruits for the small boys and supported Piggy and undertook difficult job for other's benefit, again he used logic to prove that Piggy had also contributed to make fire by lending his specs. His intuition told Ralph that they would be rescued and his spiritual quality was evident in his understanding that there was no beast outside and that evil was in the mind of man. Simon, the assumed incarnation of good, was killed when the hunters in their mad frenzy mistook him for the beast and hunted him. Simon was in contrast with Jack, Roger and Maurice who symbolised jealousy, hankering for power and cruelty. Piggy stood for dry intelligence and commonsense and he was also killed by the cruel force. Ralph stood for democracy, decency and good sense; but as a common human being he too, got affected by evil and joined the group of hunters that killed Simon. He was yet innocent about the ways of the evil forces and did not properly understand what Jack and his hunters were going to do with a stick having both sides pointed. The horror of hunting Ralph was perhaps the cruelest revelation of the evil in man's mind and this darkest aspect was set against Ralph's innocence in regard to the use of stick with both sides pointed. After he had been chased for a long time, Ralph cried for mercy and this cry for mercy elevated the story of cruelty to one with spiritual implications.

The incidents took a new turn when Ralph, much to his surprise, looked up to see a naval officer, fully uniformed. When Ralph was sure of rescue, he was not overjoyed as he was expected to be. Instead he started weeping for what had happened on the island.

Ralph's weeping for the end of innocence highlights the theme of sin and expiation. He had earlier accepted the responsibility of being a party to Simon's killing. He told Piggy that the figure that was killed might not be the beast that they had witnessed on the mountain

top for the figure was much smaller, he also heard something uttered by the dying figure that seemed to tell something about a dead body on the mountain top but his voice was drawn by the cry of the hunters. The voice of goodness and of spiritual reality had been drowned by the noise of cruelty and superstition when Lord Jesus was crucified. Later on, the people had to expiate for their sin inherent in them in order to be saved. Here, it becomes evident that Golding consciously introduced the Christian theme in the novel because the concept of original sin seemed to him to be appropriate for expressing the innate evil he found in man's nature.

Conclusion

The soul is the source of everything. The soul is enriched and fruitful when it receives spiritual food from God. God's blessings can only be received when we commit ourselves to Him. In spite of this knowledge man has landed to a space from where the return journey seems impossible. The novel, *Lord of the Flies* is a "...philosophical allegory on the duality of human nature" (Legouis and Cazamian 1419).

There is always tug of war between good and evil contesting the human soul. Soul is the root of every action as well as the great achievements and contributions. Soul which draws inspiration from the Almighty is at peace. Though we know evil is harmful and deceitful, we fall prey in its clutch, we become the demonic human. Golding wrote this novel after the Second World War and during the cold war when the status of mankind was declining. During this period man regresses from a height of civilization to barbarism. This image is reflected in the novel. During those days of wilderness where fertile earth was turned to barrenness, Golding resorts to Christianity as the sole remedy from the upheavals of mind and world at large.

Thus, he brought in Biblical themes in the novel to explore the root cause of the turmoil and he suggests that it is man's fleeing from God which results in dark soul which is an easy prey of Satan; thus following the reverse direction and annihilation.

The Biblical allusion in *Lord of the Flies* describes the eternal theme of the conflict between sin and expiation or between evil and good, where in the first round evil is the winner and then the scene is suddenly turned and the good which still exists is saved; sin is expiated too.

Bible contains many legends which have significant values to the Christians and its influence in English literature is predominant. Myth is a legendary or traditional story that depicts usually a hero or a happening with or without using real or literal explanation. Myths are usually concern with deities or demigods and narrate some rites and natural phenomena. Moreover, a myth is involved especially with historical occurrences and worldly beings. There are several types of myth, such as religious myth, classic myth and modern myth. In shaping English literary work, Biblical stories and myth have contributed a significant part. For instance, John Stein Back focuses on Biblical myth and stories in his novel *East of Eden*. In *Lord of Flies*, Golding also embraces the same theme where Eve tempted by the serpent and is held responsible for bringing sin into this world which is seen clearly in medieval literature. T.S. Eliot too adopts two significant myth to frame structure of his poem *The Wasteland*, the Fisher king and the Grail of Quest are the myths originated from Gaelic traditions and later annexed to the Christian civilization. Though Eliot has not collected these myths from Bible, both are important for Europeans, as they have united them into European mythology. These histories are based on the account of the death and resurrection of Christ.

The religious sphere of Golding's work – his prepossession with the Biblical theme of the fall of man – has been noted by many writers. For instance, John S. Whitley says that “*Lord of the Flies* is governed by the idea that man is a fallen creature” (Whitley 7). Many intellectuals agree that Golding's main prepossession is the fall of man and yet he utters his concern for the possible exit of this fallen condition through upliftment of human feelings. That is why he does not prefer to be branded as a pessimist. He preferably likes to be called a realist.

In fact, Golding is primarily a religious novelist. His central theme is not the relationship of man to man but the relationship of man, the individual, to the universe; and through the universe to God. He is a spiritual cosmologist.

Thus, William Golding is very much concerned with the cruelty of men. He has lamented for the safe of the human civilization. He has tried to fix firmly the root of love and peace among the human race of the world. In this way Golding narrated his passionate interest in both moral and physical life. His narrative style has a transparency and vitality because he never fails to remain in his memory the concrete in his search for symbolic action.

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