



Subversion of Civilization in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

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Abstract:

William Golding's Lord of the Flies (1954) is the most remarkable novel of the 20th century because it transcends all the trivia produced in its times and emerges as the most significant and valuable critique of human civilization. Golding makes his children enact a miniscule World War on an uninhabited island to demonstrate that neither religion nor rational humanism could save the world from the fury and madness of the war raged between totalitarian and democratic powers of the world. This paper is an attempt to show how Golding works out an allegorical subversion of human civilization through a micro world war in which Ralph represents democracy and Jack totalitarianism; Piggy stands for rational humanism and Simon for religion. The novel shows how powerless the traditional democratic values of civilization and religious wisdom gathered over the ages couldn't prevent the brutal and devastating world wars in which millions of young men died before they could realise what they were fighting for. In the novel Ralph's democratic wisdom and Piggy's rational humanism are easily deconstructed by Jack's power play making other children follow him and his instinct to kill and overpower. It is a demonstration how Jack's dictatorial methods deem democracy and religion powerless. Piggy's brutal murder is the murder of rational humanism and Simon's ritualistic murder the murder of religion. Ralph's narrow escape from the hunt at the end of the novel is the narrow escape of democracy as at the end of WW II. The stunning experience of the novel has been an eye opener for generations together. The implicit thesis of the novel is that humans are self-destructive by nature and the only thing that can save the world from falling is agreement by common sense.

Key words: *civilization, rational humanism, democratic, totalitarianism, religion*

Sir William Gerald Golding (Sept. 19, 1911 –June 19, 1993) was a British novelist, poet and playwright who received worldwide acclaim with his first novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954). He had been awarded the Booker Prize of 1980 and the Nobel Prize of 1983 for his contribution to literature. He had been a self proclaimed optimist but had been labeled as a pessimist because of the grim depiction of human nature in his novels. Golding himself had stated that he had been “characterized as a pessimist, though ... an optimist” (Golding 1983a).

Golding, in his lecture "Fable" has stated that *Lord of the Flies* "is highly and diversely explicable" ([1965] 2007, 35). The novel would neither lose its relevance ever nor would it be exhausted of meanings. It is "a very good novel, one as exciting, relevant, and thought provoking now as it was when Golding published it in 1954" (King 2011, xv). It is a story of a group of British boys under the age of 13 dropped on an uninhabited island while being rescued from the devastative war. "Golding's island is a hundred years and two world wars away from the blithe and callous optimism of Ballantyne..." (McCarron [1994] 2010, 7) and the distance has made Golding deeply probe the nature of man and his ontological implications. The novel got a great critical acclaim for two reasons. Firstly, it is an appealing story that interests children and adults alike and secondly, it is more than a story of boys meant for boys.

Halle argues that Golding depicts the "struggle between civilization and barbarism" ([1955] 2007, 25). Golding juxtaposes the basic human instincts viz. the irrational instinct to kill and overpower and the rational instinct which advocates wise and harmless agreement between people holding different opinions. It can be argued that the antidemocratic totalitarian institutions have sprung up from the previous one and the democratic from the latter. The democratic institutions are based on reason and are humanistic. These institutions propagate rational decision making procedures about human action with a purpose of greatest good of the greatest number of people. While the antidemocratic institutions follow biased decision making procedures about human action with a purpose

of greatest good of a limited group of people. They are totalitarian, authoritarian and dictatorial in nature. The conflict between the said ideologies pushed the world in the vortex of WW II in which Golding participated in action as an officer in the Royal British Navy. His first-hand experience of the war disillusioned him of the glorified facade and made him see it as mere uncivilized cannibalism. It can be argued that the haunting memories of the destructive war unprecedented in human history inspired the novel.

"The novel...certainly...would not have been written had Belsen and Auschwitz never existed, or indeed had Dresden never been bombed by the Allies...Golding's early fiction is as much indebted to literature itself as it is to 'reality'." (McCarron [1994] 2010, 4)

The four human institutions which have had and continue to have the greatest and everlasting influence on the world are religion, dictatorship, rational humanism and democracy. Conflicting ideologies disguised as human institutions shape and constrain the subjectivity of individuals and hence it can be argued that Ralph, Piggy, Jack and Simon are all products of the institutions that constructed their subjectivity in the British network of institutions of the early 20th century. Golding systematically subverts the said institutions which formed the core of human civilization in recent history. Golding depicts a free play of the said human institutions in his *Lord of the Flies*. By placing a 'gimmick' ending to the novel he incites the readers to retrospect and introspect and think wisely about the prospect of human race. His concerns are global.

In the novel, religion is represented by Simon who discovers the truth about the beast on which Jack's dictatorship thrives. But he is killed by Jack's hunters in ritualistic manner before he conveys it to his fellow beings. Jack is the dictator, the hedonic, who wants the world his way and succeeds on the fear and insecurity of the ignorant boys. On the other hand, Ralph is a noble and careless boy who tries to establish democratic procedures on the island so that their rescue becomes possible and he is assisted and inspired by the rational humanist, Piggy.

The British boys are products of the British schooling system and the social, cultural, economic and religious institutional network that bred colonisers some time ago. Their ideologies and value systems are being threatened by another axis of vicious imperialistic powers. It is like a boomerang.

Ralph is a careless boy who is more interested in the beauty of the lagoon and curiosity about the shining shell which lies at its bottom in the beginning of the novel. Golding described Ralph as "man of goodwill and common sense" ([1965] 2007, 35). The discovery of the shell and the noise it makes is the starting point of a society when the boys get attracted to it and come out of bushes and gather around Ralph. Ralph is happy that there are no grownups on the island. That means it is an escape from the clutches of order. He is absorbed in himself in the beginning until Piggy helps awaken his social consciousness. He is not worried about other children like Piggy. Ralph is not a leader owing to his physical prowess. Ralph's "association with the shell rather than his size or attractiveness makes the children choose" him "as their leader" (Kinkead-Weeks and Gregor 1967, 18). Piggy provokes him to blow the conch again to call a meeting of the boys to decide the course of action to escape from the island. The shell or the conch has nothing in itself only an object used by Ralph and Piggy to call a meeting. The shell becomes:

"...the symbol of assembly...identified with its procedure with democracy and right to free speech...Every time the boy cries 'I've got the conch', he is drawing on the funds of order and democratic security." (Kinkead-Weeks and Gregor 1967, 18)

But the idea to call a meeting makes Ralph democratic since it suggests that Ralph thinks beyond himself and wants to arrive at an agreed decision. He represents the democratic values and procedures, in other words, embodies "the values of civilization" (King 2011, xiii). Ralph proceeds rationally to establish that the land on which they are marooned is really an uninhabited island and to burn a fire in hope of rescue. He assigns the task hunting for food to Jack and his band of boys. Some of the boys are instructed to build shelters. Though Ralph's emphatic assertion "This (island) belongs to us" (Golding 1954, 31) is possessive and unknowingly imperialistic,

he never attempts to dominate other boys. He believes in persuasion and collective decision making process. But one may always wonder how a leader like Ralph would lose his support and fail in his programme. Ralph's physical weakness compared to Jack and Jack's promise of food and security from the beast sweep away Ralph's support. Ralph's inability to think (105) leads to deterioration of democratic order. He asserts "Things are breaking up. I don't understand why" (110). It is fear of the beast that Ralph cannot convince the other boys that the fear is nonsense. His leadership fails. The assembly called by Ralph breaks down and Jack rebels against Ralph and promises to hunt down the beast if there is any. He shouts "bullocks to rules" and goes away and other children follow him. Ralph cannot overcome his own fear and fails to bring them back in spite of the awareness that under Jack's leadership there won't ever be any rescue.

Ralph's failure is the failure of democracy. The conch loses its symbolic value and becomes a thing again. In the context of WW II the democratic powers France and UK could not contain Germany and Italy. Japan was far beyond. It was a close call for democracy. Eventually USA came to rescue and the totalitarian axis powers were defeated. Ralph's narrow escape is narrow escape of democratic powers. Probably, Golding wants to suggest that democracy cannot sustain without the deterrent of power and that too, nuclear power. Enforcement of agreed decision also needs power.

According to Peter Green *Lord of the Flies* "reveals a terrifying microcosm of political totalitarianism" ([1960] 2007, 28). Jack, the rebel, represents antidemocratic values. He represents the irrational element of chaos in human nature transformed into a totalitarian rebel leader. Considered in the context of WW II, Jack is another Hitler or Mussolini pushing the world in the ghastly abyss of war. Golding, through Jack, doesn't only satirize the power of ideology and dictatorship but analyses the very physical and metaphysical roots of totalitarian leadership and its consequences.

Jack represents inhuman brutal instincts of the postmodern capitalist order that enflamed the most violent wars in human history in the last century. Fear pervades the island. The dead parachutist hung in the trees is the beast of the children's imagination. The same fear, insecurity and drives

construction and strengthening of Jack's tribe and the tribe doesn't only kill for food but for sport also.

In the beginning Jack couldn't even kill a piglet, something stopped him doing so. He didn't like "the enormity of the knife descending and cutting into living flesh; because of the unbearable blood" (Golding 1954, 33-34). But it becomes a necessity to hunt to satisfy not only his own hunger but of other boys also. He receives encouragement and he starts enjoying blood. He gets transformed into a killer who doesn't hesitate to kill other children. Jack becomes the evil incarnated. He succeeds in snatching away power from Ralph unlike Lucifer who was defeated by God. Jack becomes an unsworn totalitarian king of the tribe and dominates all other boys.

The description of Jack's party of boys matches that of Nazi soldiers (Golding 1954, 20-21). Jack is a combination of the western dictators of the 20th century. His red hairs symbolize communist dictator Stalin. His "crumpled and freckled" face matches that of Mussolini. His blue eyes remind us of Hitler. Jack is a combination of communism, fascism and Nazism.

Jack breaks the rule of assembly and speaks without the conch and nobody minds it (Golding 1954, 118). His rebellion is successful. If we try to relate Jack to a broader context he is another imperialist who sweeps away power from the natives. He is another Asoka, Aurangzeb, Hitler, Mussolini or Stalin who brutally kills his power competitors.

Ralph and Piggy feel that they won't be ever rescued from the island because Jack doesn't care about the signal fire. But ironically the fire put to the whole island by Jack and his party to hunt down Ralph brings in the rescue. The unintentional and incidental rescue of the boys from the island closely resembles the narrow escape of democracy at end of world war.

Jack embodies the enthralling power of totalitarian ideologies which engulfed the world in the inferno irreversible. Golding's depiction of Jack is an implicit critique of totalitarianism. It makes the world blind and brutal. It pushes the human race in primitive barbarism based on instinct. Golding rejects the thesis that dictators can lead the world to civilization.

Piggy represents “rational humanism” and his physical deficiency is a critique of humanism. Piggy’s specs and asthma reflect that he is tired and can’t see without specs. And breaking of his glasses symbolize the blindness of the human race and breaking of the conch symbolizes the failure of the democratic institution (Kinkead-Weeks and Gregor, 1967). Piggy and the conch with which he associates democratic values die together. It is Piggy’s idea to have meeting to decide things. (Golding 1954, 17)

Piggy, the rational humanist, is intimidated by Jack Merridew and his “uniformed superiority” (Golding 1954, 22). He is helpless without his glasses and Ralph. His belief in reason doesn't guarantee him life. Piggy's most remarkable gesture is his brave effort to get back his glasses and making Ralph insist on signal fire while dealing with Jack. Piggy is the rationalist who fails to prevent the world from falling. Rendered against the background of WW II, Piggy represents the blindness of the human race when deprived of the borrowed vision of sanity. Through Piggy Golding reemphasizes the point that neither democracy, nor rationalism without power and support can guarantee progress of human civilization. Can religion come to rescue of civilization?

Simon is a visionary and represents religion in the novel. According to Golding Simon is the Christ-figure who reaches commonsense attitudes not by reason but by intuition. He converts a part of the jungle into a church, not physical but spiritual (Golding [1965] 2007, 35). Simon is the only boy who knows the real nature of the beast on the mountain and who has had a communion with the Lord of the Flies i.e. pig's head on a stick. According to Peter Green Simon the saint who sees "the others' fear and superstitions for what they are" and discovers that the evil is within themselves ([1960] 2007, 28). But he is killed in the frenzy of hunters when he is about to tell them about the discovery that no beast exists on the island. And ironically he discovers that beast is concealed within his own fellow beings. It is rather a revelation that nothing can destroy human civilization except humans since they are self-destructive by nature. Can Simon's death be interpreted as the death of religion? Religion can be seen as the earliest attempt by humans to establish order among themselves and to hold this order together they invented a centre, God. Simon's death

is death of order and simultaneously of knowledge and hence of God. It can also be interpreted as failure of religion to do away with violence; rather it falls prey to violence. Simon's sacrifice doesn't prevent Piggy's death. So both reason and intuition fail to prevent the destruction of human civilization at the hands of human beings.

Golding's thesis of "darkness of man's heart" can be interpreted as an attempt to show that human civilization has already deconstructed itself. Man, who is the centre of civilization, possesses a dark heart, the evil within himself. What can one do in such a situation? Try to escape like Ralph. Where? In the world in which a fierce cannibalistic conflict involving weapons of mass destruction is raging pushing it on the verge of utter destruction. Wait for the second coming. If somebody saves you, you can only weep for the loss but cannot undo or reverse what has happened.

The parachutist who is dropped on the island represents the gift from the adult world. Frank Kermode states that according to Golding "the man (the dead parachutist) 'is' history...an ugly emblem of war and decay" ([1960] 2007, 26).

The Pig's Head on the stick is the most appropriate symbol which represents the blind civilization. I wouldn't be inappropriate to state that the nations at war were not killing for food but play. Ralph's narrow escape at the end of the novel is the narrow escape of democracy. Golding suggests that no democracy succeeds without power by making Ralph loose power to Jack who is guided by his animal instinct to kill and overpower.

The gimmick ending of the novel shakes the reader out of a mesmerising dream and cuts it short and resolves the action in an unusual way. It reminds *deus ex machina* of Greek theatre (McCarron [1994] 2010, 7). One is tempted to say like Blake that the ghastly vision I saw is owing to your metaphysics, not mine. But the deadly vision doesn't disappear like a ghost. It lingers in the mind of reader and makes him think.

Had there been a cordial coordination between democracy, rational humanism and religion the story wouldn't have been a nightmare or a dystopia contrary to Ballantyne's utopia. Golding didn't see it the Ballantynean way because he was aware of the realities around. Golding's boys are more

convincing than Ballantyne's. The world was being stormed by the most brutal war of human history. Subsequently the attempts of the boys at "recreating 'civilization' quickly founder" (McCarron [1994] 2010, 3).

Golding was a philanthrop, who like Shakespeare, understood human nature very deeply. He had seen the brutality of the most devastating war in human history, the World War II. He had served in the British armed forces during the said war. But he was disillusioned by the war. Though he subverts the traditional values of civilization by depicting a grim side of human nature in the novel, he is an optimist and still has faith that we can do better. Golding wished "...all borders were as easy to cross and all international exchanges as friendly" (1983a). He always thought that wars can be avoided if only people, especially leaders and rulers, share common sense.

"I have been in many countries and I have found there people examining their own love of life, sense of peril, their own common sense. The one thing they cannot understand is why that same love of life, sense of peril and above all common sense, is not invariably shared among their leaders and rulers. Agreement between you does not need cleverness, elaboration, maneuvers. It needs common sense, and above all, a daring generosity. Give, give, give!" (1983a).

Golding juxtaposed the democratic and anti democratic elements in an isolated setting and shows the terrible consequences of the disagreement discovering the roots in the human nature itself. Civilization is turned upside down. But Golding had an implicit faith that human can be good if they want, provided that they understand and agree. *Lord of the Flies* shows the deadly consequences of disagreement between humans in a microcosmic form, whatever are the roots of such disagreement. Golding believed that:

"We need more humanity, more care, more love. There are those who expect a political system to produce that; and others who expect the love to produce the system. My own faith is that the truth of the future lies between the two and we shall behave humanly and a bit humanely, stumbling along, haphazardly generous and gallant, foolishly and

meanly wise until the rape of our planet is seen to be the preposterous folly that it is" (Golding 1983b).

Like Plato, Aristotle and Sidney, Golding believed that art can move men to virtue. One is always reminded of Matthew Arnold's message to seek refuge in poetry. Golding said, "It may be by books, stories, poetry, lectures we who have the ear of mankind can move man a little nearer the perilous safety of a warless and provident world" (Golding 1983b).

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