

From Innocence to Cruelty: A Reading of *Lord of the Flies*

GAYATHRI SURENDRAN

Gayathri Surendran

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Sree Narayana College of Management Studies, Periya

Kanhangad, Kasaragod

Kerala

Abstract

The article aims at analysis of the major characters in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* to trace the journey from innocence to cruelty. The paper deals with the concept of power illustrated in the narrative with the help of Michel Foucault and his concepts on power. The characters in the narrative are analyzed as secret carriers of power in order to establish a system on the island. The plot of the narrative is analyzed and the characters are closely criticized for a better understanding of the concept. The arrangement of the setting in the narrative is illustrated with the concept of panopticon by Foucault.

Key Words : Power, Innocence, Cruelty, Panopticon

INTRODUCTION

William Golding marked his presence in an age when a major change occurred in the objectives of literary works. Literature in the twentieth century witnessed a big transition from that of the Victorian era. The difference is largely visible in the objectives of writing. The function of art was to instruct and please, but the production of literary works was for its own sake during this period. The didactic purpose of art is no more discussed and the age supported the position art for art's sake which put forth a philosophy that the intrinsic value of art is away from didactic, moral, and utilitarian function. Literature of the age focused on mere pleasure. The notion of art for art's sake naturally arises among artists wherever they are out of harmony with the society around them. The change in the social system can be considered as the base for the shift from life centred works to the promotion of literature for the sake of mere production. As Bernard Shaw

pointed out, “art should extend beyond itself to become an act of ethical reform, influencing public opinion, public action, and public contribution” (Brustein 184).

The literature of the age was dominated by war with common themes of alienation, isolation, and fragmentation. The works are influenced by the changes in beliefs, political ideas and the disappearance of the British empire.

Lord of the flies has opened the space for many interpretations that resulted in the celebration of the text among popular English narratives. It can be read along with the eighteenth century narrative Robinson Crusoe as both the texts deal with the distinct version of human life expressed in a similar fashion. It is said that “ Crusoe takes a piece of paradise and make it a sovereign state. He is the king of vale, Lord of Country and squire of the manor” (Seidel 10). During an interview , Golding remarked about an incident in *Lord of the Flies* that differentiates the way in which the notion of life is carried out by the two writers. To quote his own words,

I felt a tremendous visional force behind the whole book... At the end, for example, there’s a scene where Ralph is fleeing from the fire on the island, and the point is not just that the boy is being hunted down, but that the whole natural world is being destroyed. (qtd. In Haffenden 106)

The analysis of these texts will help one to see the difference in the vision of these writers on life. It was Aristotle who said that “ man who is unable to live in society, or has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god” (qtd. In Wagner 31). Such a portrayal of man can be seen in both the narratives with difference in the approach of the writers. It is the background of *Lord of the Flies* that makes it different from Robinson Crusoe. The Second World War serves the background of the narrative. The narrative focuses on the social reality portrayed through the life of a number of boys on an island. It is important to consider the stimulus that worked in Golding in the production of a narrative like *Lord of the Flies* inorder to understand the significance of the book over other works. It can be explained through a few lines from the poem “ Choruses from ‘The Rock’” by Eliot.

The world turns and the world changes,
But one thing does not change.
In all my ears, one thing does not change,
However you disguise it this thing does not change:
The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil. (Jain 101)

Golding tries to bring out the evil present in the human mind to show the world the reality that they hesitate to accept. He teaches the modern world about the illness inside them to make them aware of curing the self by entering into the dark regions of human heart. *Lord of the Flies* is a well thought out comment on man's basic nature as was revealed in the explosion of atom bomb, the violence and cruelty which put an question mark on the future of human civilization. In the Afterword to *Lord of the Flies*, Golding expressed his concern for the Second World War as implied in the narrative. He said,

If you had met me before the Second World War, you would have found me to have been an idealist with a simple and naïve belief. From the Second World War we learned something. The war was unlike any other fought in Europe. It taught us not fighting, politics or the follies of nationalism, but about the given nature of man (Haldar 206).

Lord of the Flies tells the story of a group of British school boys who are abandoned on an island during war. The narrative is the first exploration of the themes of Golding, an examination of innocence, the dark truth about human nature and a distinction of his vision of the world. The narrative portrays the transition of the boys from the state of good nature to the state of primitive and blood thirsty savagery. "We've got to have rules and obey them. After all we're not savages. We're English; and the English are best at everything. So we've got to do the right things" (37).

The root cause for the change in the nature of the boys is visible in the very beginning of the narrative during their occupation of the land. They have the class consciousness that they are English, so that the idea that they hold the centre gives them power to act later ends in bringing out the real instinct. Golding tries to highlight the role of society in the behaviour of the group of boys. It is to be noted that the hierarchy formed by the boys on their class is the result of what they have been taught in the society. They act in a similar pattern to which they are exposed. The establishment of power as part of civilization on the land has the root in the mindset of their boys that they are superior. The boys attempt to establish certain rules of social organization; but as the plot progresses, the social order is undermined by what the narrative would have us believe.

Lord of the Flies depicts a clash between law makers and law breakers, between the champions of order and the forces of anarchy. The fire made by the boys represents human sociability whereas the pig hunt is expressive of man's thirst for blood. In other words, it represents the conflict between the utilitarian democracy and authoritarianism. The narrative shows how civilization gets greater power of destruction. The boys' situation on the island is the result of the civilized nations going for war. The initial disaster the boys experienced had been brought by the civilized adults. Rene Dubos observes:

... The behavioural defects described by William Golding may not have their origin in human nature but rather in the system of values taught to the English school boys. Boys from other parts of the world might not behave as William Golding imagined on the basis of his English experience. A few years ago, indeed a group of Micronesian children, from twelve years of age to toddlers, were actually marooned by accident for several months on an isolated atoll, yet there was no violence or terror among them. They survived the experience without physical or emotional stress. Their fortitude was probably due to the fact that, whereas western culture is dominated by the competitive spirit, Polynesian culture makes children aware of their dependence on the community and therefore makes them socially tolerant of each other. (Subbarao 16)

The state of contemporary society forced Golding to include elements of moral in the narrative. As he loved the themes related to human life, his treatment of the subject could have a deep impact on the life of the readers and thereby a hold over humanity in reforming the situation. The act of depicting the cross section of the society completes only when the characters are analyzed as the representatives of people living in the world whose action defines the status of the society.

Lord of the Flies apart from being a mere children's story has a larger message to the readers. It is read as a story of group of boys, their life after a plane crash. The incidents that are included in the plot have their own significance apart from a creation of fiction. The narrative depicts the way in which a life begins. Here it is the life of the boys that is used to illustrate the real life events of the world. The sequence of the plot can be compared to the life events of human beings. The boys reach the island unknowingly. They are totally unaware of the life outside like a new born baby which is ignorant about life. Slowly their experience on a new land imbues knowledge and thus the flowering of a desire for power. Like the child losing innocence through interaction with the outside world, the element of childish nature is lot in the minds of boys when they become part of the social system which involves constructed rules and regulations. Here begins the transition in their life when they travel from innocence to their innate human behavior and power plays a key role in the changes that happened in the life of the boys.

The narrative is concerned with the primal loss of innocence. It deals with the capacity of man and the state when man fell from the perfect state of innocence into total loss of innocence. Evil enters the world through humanity, and through other creatures. *Lord of the Flies* depicts how man moves forward stumbling along haphazardly generous and gallant, and also foolishly and meanly wise. Ralph is chosen the leader of the boys, but despite his generosity and gallantry and his earnest desire to get rescued, he fails to keep up order in the island and also fails to cope with the opposing force.

Jack is the devil figure, the 'lord of the flies', as Beelzebub was usually called with his pride, aggression, cruelty and thirst for power Jack is a typical twentieth century autocrat who

went savage and persuaded almost all the boys to disobey the rules formed by Ralph. Piggy, the fat boy suffering from asthma and myopia for intelligence and common sense, but he is foolishly wise as his wisdom fails to save him from the clutches of violent passion. Simon is rendered as the Christ figure with his innate goodness.

The narrative expresses Golding's view that understanding human nature is the ultimate savior of mankind. The plot and the incident that happen are based on this description of the nature of characters through which the voyage through human behavior reach the destination, the point at which the writer expected to reach. *Lord of the Flies* may look like an expression of utter frustration and pessimism, because the innocent and the good natured boys are killed and the rule of discipline and good sense is ousted by savagery. But this show is a real one, based on the experience of the evil forces active in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. This prompted Golding to say that whatever he depicted about man's nature in *Lord of the flies* was taken from life. He remarks,

You cannot write about man without including his evil nature and this evil is more prominent than good. He has the original evil – original sin as Christians would say, but he also has original good. Perhaps the color of original good is not as strong as the color of the original evil. So original evil, when it is portrayed, appears to dominate the picture. So I don't think pessimish has been dominating concern of mine. It is simply there because it is what we notice. (qtd. In Haldar 5)

Golding finds a struggle between reason and savagery tat springs from terror and the narrative is structured on this struggle. The way the children converted the paradise like coral island into a virtual hell is a replica of the demonical way adopted by the adults. The chikdren will go back to the world of the grownups after innocence disappears from them.

Among the discussed themes and symbols in the text, the concept of power holds an important role throughout the narrative. Power can be viewed as a supporting factor that acts as a connecting point in defining the characters, and the incidents occur in the text can also be related. The text defines power in several ways based on the behavior of characters, power being a major impact on their life. This study is based on the notion of power relation in the text. Power holds

various dimensions which can be defined by different theories. The notion of discourse of power is one of the important concepts based on which power relation in the text can be analyzed. The idea of power put forth by Foucault is taken as a touch stone for the analysis and the constant shift from good to evil is carried out by the notion of power. The theme of *Lord of the Flies* is itself the best example to understand the role of power in the act of organizing thoughts in human minds.

The present study extends to the presence of good and evil within the human self. *Lord of the Flies* has a systematic move from goodness to savagery that occurs due to the presence of evil inside and also the existing power relations. The powerlessness of the boys maintained qualities with which they are born, but the chances of getting a powerful existence along with their experiences in the early life brought out the nature of savagery. The boys' fall from grace can be analyzed through the notion of power within the concepts of Michel Foucault. The ideas of Foucault have been made use of to have a better interpretation of *Lord of the Flies*. Foucauldian notion completes the function of *Lord of the Flies* as a narrative as the entire plot can be observed using the notion of power. The ideas of Foucault can be incorporated on the basis of power relations existing in the narrative which make it possible to analyze the characters with distinct qualities. The change in the nature of characters can be observed with the help of the notions introduced by Foucault.

Power plays a major role in the life of the boys on the island. The behavior of the boys change through power relations. The innocent nature of the characters transforms when the established system and order fails to make the island structured. It is power that acts to spoil the nature of the situation. The narrative becomes a mere description of the destruction of life of boys on the island when the notion of power begins to play. Power is the element which helps the plot to progress. The boys reach the island powerless and the acquired knowledge makes them powerful in course of time. The existence of difference makes it possible to perform the power relation. At first some of the elder boys become the voice of the powerless as the presence of a dominant force is essential for a system to perform to maintain discipline among the group. This concept of domination creates the desire for power among the boys in order to establish their autonomy over the land.

So it can be argued that the desire for power is the building block of the violence experienced on the island. The concept of power is defined as the ability or capacity to do something or act in a particular way; the capacity or ability to influence or direct the behavior of others in the course of events. Power is usually seen as a tool of oppression that is used to impose control over the subject. In the negative sense power makes others feel inferior. The characters are the carriers of power. It is not to be taken as a phenomenon of one individual's consolidated and homogenous domination over others or that of one group or class over others.

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is employed and exercised through a net like organization and individuals circulate between its threads. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always the elements of its articulation, "individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application" (Power 98). Power relation in the narrative can be analyzed through the characters as they hold different types of power. The boys are represented as power holders, who use power as a tool for promoting knowledge. As the boys in the mainstream are concerned, it is evident that each of them represents different versions of power associated with their natural characteristics. When the characters in the narrative are analyzed, it is clear that the instinct in each person is different in its own way.

Among the boys, Ralph holds a leadership quality that helps him in his effort to make an order in the isolated life on the island. He establishes a hold over other boys with the help of the conch shell that he gets from the land. "S'right. It's a shell! I seen one like that before. On someone's back wall. A conch he called it. He used to blow it and then his mum would come. It's ever so valuable –" (16). Thus using the conch shell as tool of power, Ralph becomes the leader of the boys.

But there was stillness about Ralph as he sat that marked him out: there was his size, and attractive appearance; and most obscurely, yet most powerfully, there was the conch. The being that had blown that, had sat waiting for them on the platform with the delicate thing balanced on his knees, was set apart. (24)

Ralph stands for his subjects and he is more caring for the “littluns”. He likes making the land civilized by implementing law and order. He is more mature in his approach. He stands for democratic power. For him power is what makes us what we are. Power is diffused, embodied and enacted. Power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge and truth. It is a major source of power of social discipline and conformity achieved without any forceful attempts or violence. Ralph is interested in establishing power through a normal mode without any act of violence. He represents the democratic principle. He behaves like a social being through his action. He works for the society through justice. In a way Ralph represents a democratic society which works upon power for the sake of law, thereby achieving the goal of civilization.

Jack behaves like possessing supreme power. He establishes power through violence and he wants autonomy in governance. Jack also wants his own kingdom and its subjects under his control. He acts like a dictator having a strong hold over others and the real face of Jack unveils towards the end of the narrative. He represents the darkness of human behavior. Jack a foil to Ralph is interested in hunting and he considers it more important than escaping from the island. He is uncivilized in his character, also directs other boys to his way of savagery. “ I went on. I thought, by myself... The madness came into his eyes again. I thought I might kill” (37). He desires power over other things.

Foucauldian notion of power fails in Jack when his real nature is revealed. He is the product of the innate animal instinct in him. He is at the peak in thirst for domination. He lost his innocence and acts exactly like a cruel power holder. A kind of competition in becoming the leader of the boys was there in the beginning itself. But that is solved and he also accepted Ralph as the leader, leaving the spark of jealousy in him. His hunger for power makes him behave like an animal and he tries to fulfill his instinct through the act of hunting.

Roger is presented as the companion of Jack. He advocates sadism in his company with other boys. His evil motives are different from Jack. Unlike Jack, who is interested in pursuing leadership and enjoying the thrill of hunt, Roger just likes to hurt people, he is introduced as an autocrat in the narrative. Golding calls him a kind of Hitler figure, who is noted for atrocity and murder. He tries to make it clear that the sadistic nature of Roger remained suppressed by

discipline and order in their early life. Another character in the narrative Simon stands for ‘pastoral power’ in Foucauldian term. “It is not mere a form of power which commands; it must also be prepared to sacrifice itself for the life and salvation of the flock. Therefore it is different from royal power, which demands a sacrifice from its subject to save the throne” (Subject 8).

Piggy is another character who is a silent carrier of power. He is presented as one who holds no power, he is strong enough in his utterances and he uses words as a tool of power.

The narrative can be analyzed as the depiction of a formation of life. It deals with the life experience of a group of boys on an island, and they are beginning a life extremely different from the way they lived. The theory of panopticism helps in illustrating the system of social order. As Foucault illustrates with the example of an enclosed space, a provided space is closely observed and the movements of the subjects are strictly supervised.

CONCLUSION

The shift from childish behavior to savagery is the point at which critics got the way to enter deep into the narrative. The end of the narrative marks the distinction between good and evil where the evil nature is innate in every human being comes into play against the goodness that drives the human life to innocence. Golding remarked, “ I started to write late and I have always been struck by the things which men do to other men” (George 124). The ideas of Foucault help to distinguish the condition of the newly formed island between the state before and after the practice of power. The narrative deals with the decline of a civil society to the life of savagery which can be analyzed in the same way power relation is explained. The progress of the plot is through the conflict between right and wrong in the consciousness of the character.

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