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Human Evil and Power Politics: a Study with reference to *Lord of the Flies*

Abstract

Since time immemorial, human beings have exhibited an unquenchable thirst for power which has often led mankind astray and eventually to the path of destruction. As a study of Sir William Golding's best known novel *Lord of the Flies*, this paper explores the power of evil a group of children succumbs to, as they deviate from the path of rightness and degenerate into ultimate moral bankruptcy. They are far lost in darkness, away from the light and glory of innocence. Theirs is an irredeemable downfall from which recovery is impossible. The good that beckons the evil to surrender, is crushed and murdered by dint of being present in majority. This is what is happening today in the world around us. It is attempted to show how Golding offers the path of conscience as an alternative to make the world a better place to live in.

Introduction

“Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,
And burned is Apollo's laurel-bough,
That sometime grew within this learned man.”

- (Marlowe, XIV. 86-88)

The above quotation is from the famous tragedy of Dr. Faustus, wherein the protagonist and tragic hero had to give in to eternal damnation for the sheer lust for power, only in his case for

the power that comes not with wealth but knowledge. The universally acknowledged idea that ‘absolute power corrupts absolutely’ reflects the indisputable relationship between power-politics and human evil, and more so in the context of postcolonial studies.

There are two aspects to power depending on the way it is exercised. If it is made good use of, which it seldom is, it is good and if misused as in the case of Dr. Faustus, leads a man to depravity in character. The consequence of the use of power therefore, reflects the goodness or evil in a man. At the same time, we may note that how a man is going to use power is decided by the precedence taken by either good or evil within his character.

It is well known that by the 18th century the imperialist powers switched their justification of colonialism from economic and expansionist pursuits to that of the ‘civilising’ mission. That the ‘savage’ natives are ignorant ‘barbarians’ devoid of the light of European civilisation and therefore, need to be enlightened with the wisdom of their colonial masters is the sole vindication of the civilising mission. However, some unbiased writers such as Joseph Conrad and William Golding have questioned the very essence of this mission by casting colonialists in a negative light. For instance, through the creation of the character of Mr. Kurtz as the embodiment of the underlying darkness of white skin, Conrad has posed an interrogation for colonisers and their authenticity regarding civilisation. It is questioning the absolute power which had been enjoyed by the colonisers. There is no objection to the holding of power by the Europeans and their philanthropic mission of spreading knowledge but the question arises when we take into account the main agenda of the same: of establishing their supremacy in accordance with Eurocentric beliefs, which is nothing but power-politics. That the white rulers are themselves in dire need of civil behaviour when far away from the established and expected norms of society is evident in these writings. It remains to be seen how power-politics and human evil are shown going hand in hand in William Golding’s 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies*.

Absolute Power Corrupts Jack Merridew Absolutely

That human nature has a store of innate evil within it and that the same manifests itself during man's quest for power is lucidly depicted in Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*. Power itself has got very little to do with good or bad because if we go by the general definition of power as some kind of governing body, it is rather a necessity for the maintenance of order, discipline and civility; and this kind of tempered power is held by Ralph in the novel. Power remains neutral and clean only as long as it is politicised. So, it is the 'politics' related to power which is often synonymous with evil because it leads to contests and conflicts in the pursuit of increasing one's power, thereby hampering the harmony of society. In other words, when power or the thirst for it becomes 'absolute', it is nothing but a manifestation of the evil in human heart. In the novel, Jack Merridew gets involved in the dirty politics of power and succumbs to evil practices.

The implication of the very title of the novel corresponds to an 'unspeakable rite' mentioned in Joseph Conrad's 1899 novel *Heart of Darkness* and that is Mr. Kurtz's act of hanging skulls of the native Africans upon poles outside his station. Both the acts of hanging the pig's head and the human skulls are grotesque reminders of the atrocities committed by colonisers in their display of power. Also, the pig's rotting head with the swarm of flies around it gives one the impression of Beelzebub and the rottenness that he represents. The lord of the flies then, as the pig's head claims one to be, may be read as a symbol of the innate evil lying within every human soul. The fact that it is a lord but of the flies undermines the connotation of the word 'lord' which otherwise means one of noble rank. Presumably, Golding has taken up the verb form of the word which means to act in a domineering or tyrannical manner, as do evil forces over the good.

The evil lurking beneath the facade of goodness surfaces when one is free from the rules and regulations of civil society. This is evident from the way the boys behave in the island they land upon and also from that of Mr. Kurtz once he is deified by the natives and colonial agents alike. The unnatural craze for power leads to megalomaniacal behaviour on the part of those who harbour it.

Jack Merridew enters into a power struggle with Ralph who embodies the positive side of human character. By virtue of a relatively older age, Ralph becomes the leader of the group. Unlike Jack who exhibits dictator-like behaviour, Ralph is more of a democratic leader. He provides everyone the opportunity to express their opinions through holding of the conch shell. He is not a self-centric leader who is concerned about all power being concentrated in his own hands. Harbours high hopes of bearing absolute power seems far beyond his goals. His sole objectives are for the group to survive, to have fun, and to maintain a smoke signal so that any passing ship may come to their rescue. This shows that there is a difference in the application of power which is relatively reflected in the actions of individuals, and also says quite much about their character.

Jack, by dint of shrewd tactics, manages to hold power and emerge as the new leader of the group. He plays upon the long-starving boys' desire to have pork and to have a leader who would provide them with a feast quite often, rather than one who expects them to send up smoke signals in the air. As the boys grow paranoid about a 'beast' which they believe to exist on the land, Jack gains power by promising them to kill it whereas Ralph tries to convince them that there is no such beast. The way Jack promises the boys to have meat and a feast is akin to the way Satan cajoles the fallen angels to stand up and fight. He feigns and seemingly appears to be a democratic leader unlike the undemocratic God who forbids his own Creation from attaining knowledge via the forbidden fruit, but we know the hidden motive behind his propaganda: that of becoming an absolute ruler himself.

Gradually, Jack's group becomes bigger in terms of strength as more and more boys leave Ralph and join him. This is in keeping with the idea that the evil is more tempting and seemingly, an easier path to follow than the good. The goodness is subdued and the evil gets the upper hand. Metaphorically, these boys are somewhat like the flies that surround the pig's decaying head.

It is interesting to note that for these boys who belong to 'civilised' European society originally, 'hunting' which is considered a primitive mode of sustenance, becomes the paradigm for their chief to be elected, as Jack reprimands Ralph: "Who are you, anyway? Sitting there— telling people what to do. You can't hunt..." (100) Although Ralph sticks to the democratic idea of being elected a leader through choice rather than by force or dirty politics and says: "I'm chief. I was chosen." (100), Jack uses the same corrupt logic to turn the tide against Ralph: "He's not a hunter. He'd never have got us meat. He isn't a prefect and we don't know anything about him. He just gives orders and expects people to obey for nothing..." (142)

The chapter "Painted Faces and Long Hair" is an illustration of their regression to a primitive state. The stereotypical idea we have in our minds about primitive human beings, from our reading of different civilisations as well as from popular culture, is that of half-naked, tattooed people who usually have their bodies pierced at various places and smear their faces with clay or paint. In keeping with this idea, Jack "smeared on the clay... For hunting. Like in the war. You know— dazzle paint. Like things trying to look like something else... he made one cheek and one eye-socket white, then rubbed red over the other half of his face and slashed a black bar of charcoal across from right ear to left jaw... he looked in astonishment, no longer at himself but an awesome stranger... laughed excitedly... he began to dance and his laughter became a bloodthirsty snarling..." (67-68)

The kind of description with which the boys follow after killing the pig reveals their descent into savagery. They claim: “We got in a circle...the pig squealed...” (74) And then Jack says proudly, “There was lashings of blood...you should have seen it!” (75). Thereafter, they dance and sing: “Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Bash her in.” (81). They sing the same song while killing Simon: “Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!” (172). This reminds one of Kurtz’s order in *Heart of Darkness*: “Exterminate all the brutes!”

“What are we? Humans? Or animals? Or savages? What’s grown-ups going to think? Going off— hunting pigs...” (99) says Piggy remonstratively. This sums up the degeneration of ‘ever-superior’ human beings into entities that are indefinable. The only closest associations one could think of are ‘animals’ or ‘savages’.

The kind of language Golding allots to the different characters is suggestive of their respective temperaments. The rational and resourceful Ralph opines: “We need an assembly. Not for fun. Not for laughing and falling off the log... not for making jokes, or for... for cleverness. Not for these things. But to put things straight” (85) and further: “The fire is the most important thing on the island. How can we ever be rescued except by luck, if we don’t keep a fire going? Is a fire too much for us to make? ... Don’t you understand? Can’t you see we ought to— ought to die before we let the fire out?” (87) But the kind of responses he receives reflects the degenerated mindset of the ‘hunters’: “There was a self-conscious giggling among the hunters.” (88) In fact there appears a common pattern in which the ‘hunters’ respond to the call of the leader: “The murmur swelled... Clamour rose at once” (p86); “There were sniggers here and there and swift glances... laughter rose again” (87), showing that they are all-in for fun only and lack all sense of responsibility absolutely.

Since childhood we grow up hearing proverbial sayings such as “Too Much of Anything is Good-for-Nothing” or “Excess of Anything is Bad.” Perhaps, these proverbs apply

rightly to the events presented in Golding's novel. The boys stranded upon the isolated island had access to far too much of absolute freedom— no rules, no regulations, no social pressures, no elderly guidance. Subsequently, all sense of order and discipline seems to be breaking down. All innocence is lost. It is then that they exhibit lack of restraint so much so that they resort to wanton killings of wild yet harmless pigs in the forest and fulfil their own greed.

As Cassandra Clare observes,

“Too much of anything could destroy you... Too much darkness could kill, but too much light could blind”,

the boys turn a blind eye to Ralph and Piggy who represent goodness. The following instance from the Chapter Castle Rock exemplifies this: Piggy says, “... ‘Which is better – to be a pack of painted niggers like you are, or to be sensible like Ralph is?’ A great clamour rose among the savages. Piggy shouted again. ‘Which is better- to have rules and agree, or to hunt and kill?’ Again the clamour and again- Zup! Ralph shouted against the noise. Which is better, law and rescue, or hunting and breaking things up?’ Now Jack was yelling too and Ralph could no longer make himself heard... Ralph heard the great rock long before he saw it... the rock struck Piggy a glancing blow from chin to knee; the conch exploded to a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist. Piggy fell forty feet...his head opened and stuff came out and turned red. Piggy's arms and legs twitched a bit, like a pig's after it has been killed...Piggy was gone.” (205-206)

So, we see that the regression to savagery is complete. Ultimate depravity has crept in. The boys are so blinded that have no moral scruples in murdering their own friend.

There are also implicit hints at cannibalistic instincts in certain instances in the novel. For example, the ‘fat boy’ who is nicknamed ‘Piggy’ supposedly for his plump and voluptuous

constitution, says, “Course, there isn’t a beast in the forest. How could there be? What would a beast eat?” to which he is replied: “Pig. We eat pig. Piggy!” (91) The beasts that the boys transform into, now wish to prey upon their fellow friend.

The cinematic adaptation of the novel makes certain deviations from the story such as, the boys in the novel are British but the ones in the movie are American, thus giving the viewers an impression that the boys may be stranded in some lonely island in Southern America. Also, in the movie, a US marine comes to the island at the end but Ralph does not say anything to the officer. In the novel, fires attract the attention of a British war ship. A British Naval officer talks to Ralph, who tells him about the murder of Simon and Piggy. So, there is some kind of justice being done through the revelation of the murders in the book. A number of other deviations may be spotted. Nevertheless, the essence remains the same. The visualised form has made an attempt to do justice to the novel by highlighting the grim aspects of their descent into savagery in a distinct manner: the way Piggy is persecuted for his glasses in a night raid, the way Simon is stabbed to death with spears, the way Piggy is murdered and finally, Ralph’s persecution.

Conclusion

“The same force of gravitation is called good when it attracts atoms and molecules of our bodies and keeps together the atoms of our clothes, gives shapes to our houses, bodies, and this earth where we are now living, but it is the producer of evil when it kills a man who falls from the roof of a house...Electricity is good when it gives light, moves a streetcar, cures a pain, and relieves a disease, but it is evil when it crushes a man under the shock of its tremendous currents. As electricity, it is neither good nor evil, but their expressions may be called good or evil according to the results they produce.... Good and evil exists in our minds. That which fulfils our interests is called

good, and that which brings to us misery or anything which we do not want, is called evil.”—Swami Abhedananda.

Certainly, both good and evil are inherent in human mind. But it is the degree of prominence of the same which determines a man’s character. If a man is essentially good, he will make good use of power and think for the benefit of the society at large, as is the case with Ralph in the novel. But if it is a Jack Merridew we may scant expect any good from him, keeping in mind his overwhelming inclination towards doing evil.

Moreover, it is ‘absolute’ power which brings about an enhancement of the evil aspect of human nature as Edmund Burke famously remarked, “The greater the power the more dangerous the abuse”. Power ‘concentrated’ in the hands of a megalomaniac is misused and leads to disastrous consequences as is seen in Golding’s novel. Jack is not only successful in implementing his evil designs but also gains more followers and their support which further strengthens his position.

In spite of the overwhelming presence of evil forces, there is no dearth of goodness in the world. Ralph’s survival amidst such trials and tribulations, wherein even friends turned foes, is suggestive of the triumph of good over evil or alternatively, of positive power over the negative. Similarly, Simon’s death in the novel and for that matter, Piggy’s too, may be read as a kind of sacrificial redemption, as Christ had once done to save mankind. We know that certain ancient cultures practised human sacrifice wherein the best of the men was chosen to be sacrificed in order to appease their gods. In the novel, the festive dance by the fire in which the boys were indulging before the murder of Simon is found analogous to the ceremonial dance rituals practised before human sacrifice in Aztec and Maya civilisations.

In the context of today’s world, we see that power is often linked with money and there is subsequent contestation and competition among men for outdoing one another in terms of

accumulating wealth. It is not easy to determine which is the cause and which the effect as we may wonder whether people want money because it gives them power or whether they want power because it gives them the ability to make money. Nevertheless, we may deduce that since making money is the primary motive of the agenda, it is the greed which is an outright evil, invariably both the cause and effect of holding power. Thus, we infer from this analysis that evil and power politics are seen to be interdependent abstractions when it comes to the study of human nature, of which Golding seems to have a brilliant and in-depth understanding.

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