

The Problem of Evil: A Critique of *William Golding's Fiction*

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Abstract: The twentieth century will be best remembered perhaps for its two world wars and the degree of social movements and moral dilemma which they brought in their wake. Increasing knowledge on various fronts- psychological, economical, philosophical, anthropological etc- led only to an increase in moral unease and strengthening of the notion that religion and ethical systems are relative rather than absolute. Thinking men started questioning the belief in the essential rightness of western ways of behaviour. It was in such an atmosphere of intellectual ferment that William Golding started writing. War experience gave him a chance of observing the melee of humanity at close quarters. The brutalities of war drove home to him the savagery, cruelty and lust inherent in man's nature. With this Golding firmly came to believe that man is tainted with evil. This very philosophical drift was to become the basis of his fiction.

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What is Evil? No single statement can ever really answer this apparently simple question. The ambiguous and ubiquitous nature of evil therefore makes every definition incomplete, if not suspect. Thinkers and theologians throughout human history have grappled with the subject, but the mystery of evil abides. A simplistic approach to this complex problem may enable us to regard it as an aspect of the eternal clash between illusion and reality. The real contrast is, between those who take evil and suffering as undeniable and those who view evil as a grotesque dream, ugly but unreal. The belief in an all-wise, all-loving, omnipotent and omniscient God seems to negate the existence of evil. If not a blade of grass could stir without His will, as the scriptures say, why hold man responsible for anything at all? The whole and related questions have been expressed powerfully by Persian poet Omar Khayyam in one of his great quatrains: "The moving finger writes and having writ moves on: nor all thy piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line, nor all the tears wash out a word of it" (Ranjit K. Kapoor, 1987).

All great writers have been, in the course of their confrontation with reality, obliged to acknowledge the problem of evil. Some of the world's greatest books – *Oedipus*, *King Lear*, *Moby Dick*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, etc were written as a result of such a long and terrible peep into the heart of reality. The word evil originated from the Anglosaxon term 'yfel', the opposite complement of good, the term is almost always defined negatively. Evil is defined as that which is opposed to the divine order of the universe, which is bad or morally wrong or that which causes harm, pain or misery. The important question to be asked is, do people choose

evil as such. Giving their arguments, Irish philosopher Francis Hutcheson and English philosopher Joseph Butler said that people don't choose evil as such but rather pursue their own interests at the expense of the interests of the other people and hence evil is a by product of these pursuits. Another viewpoint suggests that people can choose evil for its own sake and further it says that all human beings have fallen natures and inevitably choose evil, unless given powerful incentives not to do so and are controlled by State or religious sanctions. But the crucial question is how evil is compatible with the existence of omnipotent and loving God. Several metaphysical theories can be cited to account for this question. One of these says that, evil does not really exist, it is an illusion. Another says that evil is the necessary part of a good whole, just as a few dark patches in a painting may contribute to the perfection of the whole. But none of these justify the reality of the pain and suffering.

The problem of evil arises in connection with the alleged incompatibility of the following propositions: (a) God is omniscient (all knowing). (b) God is omnipotent (all powerful), (c) God is all good, (d) God exists; (e) There is evil in the world. According to most religionists the first three propositions are included in the definition of the concept God. That is, it is impossible that anything could properly be called God which is not all good, all powerful and all knowing. The fourth proposition is believed true by any conventional religionist. The fifth is usually felt to be obviously true. The incompatibility of the five propositions may be expressed in the form of a dilemma which casts doubt on the existence of any God defined with the first three attributes. Against the belief in a perfect God is pitted the belief in a godless universe. There is a theological view that evil is not a negative but a positive concept. It is regarded as a chastening and purifying agent, a detergent of the human soul; evil is the furnace that burns out the element of dross in us. In terms of the commonsensical philosophy, an eternal clash is seen between optimism and pessimism. The above discussion leads us to conclude that evil and good take on a relative hue that the world is neither good nor bad, but thinking makes it so.

According to Existentialists, man is condemned to be free and the problem of evil and of wrong doing is part and parcel of the problem of freedom or of moral choice. Without freedom, evil is inexplicable. For Karl Marx evil and sufferings were the most overbearing aspects of reality and not the kinds of things which could be explained away metaphysically. However, even the socialist Utopia finally gives no solution to the problems arising from within. Man's struggle is not with the outside world alone, but with his inner self also, where his creatureliness is subject to bafflement, pain and death, which are but different aspects of cosmic oppression. Even when man is at peace with the society in which he lives, he is never, without further struggle, at peace with himself. Where else could man find that courage, strength and peace with himself. So the Marxist view of evil is relevant to Joseph Conrad's world view in so far as Marxism talks about social inequalities. The Marxist view finally does not and cannot wholly account for the presence of evil in man's make up.

The most overriding forms that evil has taken are sin (evil that one does), and suffering, (evil that one experiences). There are four possible classes of beings, capable of doing sin (evil): human, superhuman, subhuman and nature as the organic world. Both the human and the superhuman can be aware of moral rules and can presumably make choices to act on these rules or not, but in case of subhuman and nature, choices are instinctive or conditioned. Thus all the moral rules, moral cunning and moral persuasion imaginable, won't prevent a squirrel from eating the forbidden fruit, nor prevent a wind from knocking it from its sacred, lofty perch. Consequently, while the subhuman creatures and nature are capable of causing suffering, they are incapable of doing evil (sin). Now, if sin is the transgression of a moral rule of some sort, it follows that only human and superhuman can commit sins or evils.

God, therefore, is not to be blamed for our misfortunes for there is nothing whimsical or arbitrary in his scheme. The prosperity of the wicked and the misery of the virtuous and the good are usual phenomena of our society. It is not that the reverse does not happen at all, but it seems undeniable that happiness and misery and prosperity and adversity are not proportionate to one's virtues and vices; instances of the suffering of the virtuous and of the prosperity of the depraved are not difficult to find and can easily be cited.

On the other hand the ubiquitous evil in the form of miseries and sins compels us to suspect the impartiality of God. To buttress the view, here is an example from *The Mahabharata*, *Vana Parva*, wherein, Draupadi, the wife of Yudhishthira, derides the idea of God as a good and just ruler of the Universe on the ground the Yudhishthira, who was well known to be an embodiment of virtue was subjected to untold sufferings, whereas, Duryodhana, the well known archfiend was enjoying prosperity. Unprecedented scale of wars and persecutions of the 20th century undermined the secular belief in inevitable progress and confronted philosophers and theologians with the problem of evil. The First World War not only shattered the psychic confidence of man, but also stripped the world of its intentionality. The whole of the world is thrust into an ominous awareness of men ridden by forces within themselves too destructive to be controlled. Expressing this very idea, W.B. Yeats says in his visionary poem *The Second Coming* "The blood – dimmed tide is loosed, and every where the ceremony of innocence is drowned; the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity". Man in the twentieth century, is fascinated by the problem of evil more than ever before, because Freud, Jung and other contemporary psychologists have delved deep into the hidden side of human personality, which, by nature is indeterminate. As a result, there has been a noticeable shift of emphasis from the outward physical nature of evil to the subtler and more intricate one which is intellectually damaging and spiritually demoralizing. Physical pain and moral – cum – spiritual anguish testify to the existence of evil in the world. Physical pain, thanks to advances in medicine and surgery can be located and often rooted out, but moral and spiritual pain is and will always be inexplicable, mysterious and

terrifying. In the whole range of English literature, poets and writers have shown in their representative works the problem of evil, though with varying degree of emphasis. Between 1952 and 1955 a number of new and articulate voices in British fiction began to claim public attention. Kingsley Amis, Iris Murdoch, John Wain, Doris Lessing, Angus Wilson, Thomas Hinde and Philip Larkin began to be regarded as representatives of a new post war generation.

One among such writers was British novelist William Golding (1911-1993) whose preoccupation with evil is so intense and extensive that no brief is needed to authenticate its presence. He has brought out the varied forms and facets of evil in man, in society, in nature and in universe, tracing at great length the moral repercussions of the discovery of evil in all these forms. For Golding man is an animal of savage impulses and dark powers which may overwhelm him at any confrontation with evil, which in its varied forms – moral, social, natural, physical etc. – wrings out of man. The experience of serving British Navy in Second World War became the turning point in Golding's career. It gave him a chance of observing the melee of humanity, at close quarters. War exposed him to the savagery, cruelty and lust inherent in man's nature. The atrocities of war, loss of traditional values and rootlessness of man in a society, constantly under flux are all reflected in Golding's novels. His firm belief that man is tainted with evil became the basis of Golding's novels.

The polarity between the rational and the imaginative or mysterious is always visible in Golding's works. The polarity reflects Golding's early consciousness of experience, and can be connected to both his desire to separate himself from the father he regarded as 'incarnate omniscience' and his switch over at Oxford University from sciences to literature. He does see the two sides of experience as identifiably separate, as pressures that pull the human being in different directions and is a constant source of human pain. According to Golding we live constantly in two worlds, one physical and the other spiritual, and that the experience of the two worlds is basically emblematic of our nature. For Golding, who most often uses the conventional religious terms; physical and spiritual to identify the polarity, the physical is equated with the rational. He sees the rational view of experience as denying the irrational, the mysterious, or the spiritual. Yet, for Golding the spiritual is always felt. According to him some sort of bridge between the two separate worlds exists.

William Golding has observed that modern man is appallingly ignorant of his own nature. His first novel, *Lord of the Flies* (1954) is the most famous and perhaps the most disturbing of his books; it reveals the depths of savagery which lie beneath civilization. Golding experienced two things which he counts the greatest influences on his writing-first the war and his service in the Navy, and secondly, his learning ancient Greek. The first confirmed for him the process, begun with the sinking of the Titanic, of shattering the liberal and optimistic image of man. The war and Greek literature together perhaps confirmed the dissociation from current and ephemeral affairs which makes Golding say that "if the

novelist has a serious, an Aeschylan, preoccupation with the human tragedy.....he is committed to looking for the root of the disease, instead of describing the symptoms" (Medcalf, 1975). His novels, therefore, move at the level of phenomena, of things happening in the physical or the spiritual worlds and develop their own forms for experience. One consequence of this is that perhaps more than with any other novelist, the process of reading a Golding novel is overwhelmingly important.

William Golding was essentially the product of two factors in 20th century English social history; firstly, the Second World War, which changed his view of man's nature and from which *Lord of the Flies* was born; and secondly the English State system Grammar school. His own home must have been a wonderful environment in which to grow up, and one wonders perhaps at the black pessimism of many of William Golding's characters. Perhaps it is that, when one has such a secure and happy, background, one can explore the darker sides of human nature with more objectivity than someone. When one recalls him the person who springs to mind is not the extrovert sailor or producer but an observant, reflective, thoughtful man apparently brooding on problems which he did not seem to share with anyone else. Golding could recognize that when he saw original sin: "the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness and the corruption of man's whole nature together with all the actual transgressions which proceed from it" (Monteith, 1986). In the desperate chase at the end in *Lord of the Flies* when Ralph is being hunted down by Jack and his group, his long, unshorn locks keep falling blindingly over his eyes, symbolizes effectively but perhaps too heavily the descent of irrationality and instinct, over reason and intelligence.

Golding's novels attempt to deal with the essential human condition, with 'man at an extremity, man tested like a building material, taken into the laboratory and used to destruction, man isolated, man obsessed, man drowning into a literal sea or in the sea of his own ignorance" (A Moving Target pp.198-199). Golding sees his statements about the human beings as fundamentally religious. Yet he follows no particular religious doctrine, is in fact skeptical of all doctrines and systems; in fact declares Marx, Darwin and Freud, 'the three most crashing bores of the western world' (A Moving Target pp.186-7). He believes in a God that is beyond the triviality of man, not a God as 'confident authority' or system but God as a principle of universal creation. Wayland Young called attention to Golding's frequent use of religious symbols and said in *Kenyon Review*, "though the specifically Christian element in Golding's work is always subordinate to a generalized sense of natural religion" (Young, 1963).

Golding's concern is with larger; more fundamental, abstract issues that may be called metaphysical or theological. Such works ask not, how does man, live? But what manner of creature is man? A few precedents of such fiction in English are Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Orwell's *Animal Farm*. But at least since the eighteenth century it has laid at a distance from the main stream of fictional tradition. Golding's

achievement has been to revalidate this alternative tradition for the modern world. In dealing with a deeper sense of Evil, and in also providing a character like Simon in *Lord of the Flies* who grasps the truth, Golding for Grande, really points towards a possible salvation that appealed to contemporary youth. Golding insisted on dark human depravity and offered hope for fallen man. Golding's novels assumed values of community and concern for others. Put another way, he is a reactionary in the most basic sense of the word. Reacting strongly to certain disagreeable aspects of life and literature as he sees them, he writes with a revolutionary heat that is contained rather than exploded within his compressed style. Restoration rather than preservation is his aim: he would restore concepts of belief, free will, individual responsibility, sin, forgiveness, vision and divine grace. He would restore principles in an unprincipled world; he would restore belief to a world of willful unbelievers.

Lord of the Flies is probably the most powerful English novel written since the war. Most of Golding's later novels show this same visionary intensity and show him also groping for a form that will contain this kind of tortured moral vision. Golding is a man haunted by his own sense of human inadequacy who, disregarding all novelistic traditions available to him is conducting a bold search for the kind of novel which will contain his own vision of man. Much of Golding's writing explores moral dilemmas at the centre of human existence and he frequently places his characters in extreme situations to suggest a 'mythological dimension' to their lives. Profoundly obsessed with the subject of evil and original sin, he treats these subjects in a way that transcends the boundaries of orthodox Christianity. Novels of William Golding disclose him as a writer obsessed with evil and original sin who created a mythology of his own, revealing new depths of both horror and exhilaration in the human condition.

Merging fast paced narrative into a streamlined, semi allegoric structure that moves with increasing impetus through scenes of savagery to a terminating pessimism about man, *Lord of the Flies* much resembles Golding's second novel, *The Inheritors* another myth-like story that can be glossed in both political and religious terms. These two novels, among Golding's most successful, deal with humanity and evil in a generalized, panoramic way, in each, human malevolence shows itself most fearsomely through mob atrocity and in the arena of power. The subsequent books focus on individuals and private relationships especially sexual ones. Golding's fiction makes broad use of allusions to classical literature, mythology and Christian symbolism. Although no distinct thread unites his novels and his technique varies, Golding deals principally with evil and emerges with what has been characterized as a kind of dark optimism. Golding has never tried to avert his eyes from such horrifying knowledge of incidents like Nazi extermination camps and of the dropping of the atomic bombs in Japan. All the novels of his first decade as a novelist, up to the superb *The Spire* (1964) are marked by a hard, unflinching view of human history and potential. His novels are

indeed so different from one another that it is hard to delineate connecting threads. The studied pastiche of *Rites of Passage* (1980) is remote from the visionary passion of *The Spire*. The ostensibly autobiographical *Free Fall* (1959) has next to nothing in common with *The Inheritors*. Although Golding calls himself an optimist – there is little evidence in his novels to support that claim. The Madness of violence, of lust and of fanaticism seems always just below the surface. Like Koestler, Golding sees man as a species which is irredeemably flawed, and which is only too likely to bring about its own destruction.

Golding has a pre-Freudian Vision of man in which the notion of repression plays little part. He thinks much more in terms of dissociation and even of possession. Actual loss of consciousness is surprisingly common in the novels. Simon, the Christ figure in *Lord of the Flies* is an epileptic. He loses consciousness, not only on his first appearance in the book, but also after the pig's head delivers its sermon to him. In *Darkness Visible*, Sophy suddenly loses consciousness at a party when presented with a Rorschach ink blot which everyone else sees as part of a game. She does so again after her terrifying fantasy of murdering the kidnapped boy. Earlier in the same book, Matty loses consciousness twice after his agonizing encounter with the aborigine. According to Golding, man has grown away both from nature and himself. He is protected from reality not only by city life, labor saving device, canned food, electric light, running water, daily paper, indifference to the seasons, but also by the spiritual blindness which such conditions breed. He is cushioned in smugness; he has become his own god. Nothing can touch him. Golding has made it his task to break down these false illusions. Writing about schoolboys, Neanderthals and dead sailors appears to him to be a simple means of turning a light on contemporary human nature. He believes the only hope for humanity is self knowledge. In an interview for *Books and Art* (March 1958) he also made it clear that the basic problem of modern humanity, was that of learning to live fearlessly, with the natural chaos of existence, without forcing artificial patterns on it. Golding, in fact, 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 ultimately to god. He searches for basic truths that have been obscured by material progress. He is a spiritual cosmologist. Golding says that man and man alone, introduce evil into the world; a view which is hardly separable from the doctrine of original sin. To a critic who suggested that good was equally an exclusive human concept, he replied: 'good can look after itself. Evil is the problem'. This attitude suggests both the emotional strength of his work and the intellectual paradox underlying it. In a lecture called *Fable* (included in *The Hot Gates*) he revealed how the war transformed him into a moralist. After the war he realized 'that man was sick- not exceptional man, but average man'. All of his works revolved around the theological truism that man's nature is sinful and his state perilous. Golding's strength lies in the metaphorical and imaginative power brought into play for detailed amplification of moral tension and elaboration of physical background.

Golding described himself as 'a citizen, a novelist and a schoolmaster'. The citizen is concerned with the defects of society, the schoolmaster is concerned to correct them by proper instruction; the novelist finds the appropriate forms in which man's own nature may be embodied, that he may learn to know it. One consequence of this will to instruct is that Golding is an unusually disciplined, schematic writer; another consequence is his desire to have his works read with the same kind of conscious intelligence, and his distrust of irrational and intuitive views of literary creation. He clearly thinks of his novels as the expressions of conscious intentions that existed before the writing began. Golding accepts certain traditional ideas about man and his place in the world; that mind, by meditation and speculation may arrive at truth; that it may find in the past, meanings which are relevant to the present, and available through memory; that it may concern itself with metaphysics and with morals. Not all of these ideas are current now, and consequently Golding's work may seem, in the context of his time, more didactic and moralizing. Though Golding is a moralist, he is not a moral maker, and his novels belong, not with Aesop's fables, but with the important symbolic novels of Camus's and Kafka's.

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