

William Golding's Novels – Thematic Review

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The post war British literary arena witnessed some of the best writers and one among them is Sir William Golding (1911-1993). Born in September 1911, he earned the distinction of being one of the finest novelists and he also produced stories, plays and poems. His father Alec Golding was a school teacher and his mother Mildred left an indelible impression on him through her impeccable story telling technique. Golding after schooling took a BA degree and started teaching, before he enlisted himself for the Navy service during 1940s and worked there till 1945. Golding continued to teach after his short service in the Navy and was married to Ann Brookfield with whom he had two children.

After much rejection and crisis, Golding's first novel **Lord of the Flies** was published in September 1954 and Golding went on to publish twelve novels in his literary career, though **The Double Tongue** was published posthumously in 1995. Golding won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1979 and the Booker Prize for **Rites of Passage** in 1980. Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded on him in 1983 for his contribution to literature. He was Knighted in 1988.

Sir William Golding is a complex writer particularly in the treatment of his subject matter. He tries to predict that both mind and instinct will have devastating results if not restrained by conscience. Attracting enormous attention and criticism by his first novel **Lord of the Flies** (1954), Golding went on to produce many works with mixed success. His novels are replete with complex symbols and he was called 'a writer of fables' by Kermode. Golding's power for myth making, exploiting popular ideas wedded with storytelling technique with gripping interest make him a writer at once complex and interesting. Golding trying to disregard all the available novelistic traditions, started a bold search for the kind of novels which will contain his own vision of man. A contemporary critic, Walter Allen writes that Golding :

“...is showing us stripped man, man naked of all the sanctions of custom and civilisation, man as he is alone and in his essence, or at any rate as he can be conceived to be in such a condition”.

Golding, however points out that his aim was creative activity and especially story telling. Though, his works earned him the distinction of being called a philosopher, a historian and a psychologist, Golding himself preferred to be called a story teller.

His first novel **Lord of the Flies** gave him an opportunity to show life in all its gross manifestations. It is about a group of boys who reach an Eden-like Island and find the island 'shuddering with flame' because of the evil in them. A group of young boys wrecked on a desert island are shown 'degenerating in to a society based on fear, violence and tyranny'. Ralph, Jack, Simon and Piggy degenerate into beasts before they are rescued. Ralph takes the lead as he is bold and intelligent and his only aim is rescue. Piggy, is philosophical and spiritual in his approach to life. Simon is endowed with intellectual and philosophic powers. Jack is aggressive and authoritarian. Jack and his band metamorphose into savages. The supposedly pig hunt ends with 'man hunt'. Piggy and Simon are killed and Ralph is chased to death. But a naval officer, in the meanwhile rescues the boys and carries them in a warship which again is going to hunt its enemies. The symbolic meaning cannot be missed by a reader in the end. Golding intends to ask a serious question as to what would be the fate of the cruiser and its victims. Golding, through his works tries to illuminate the dark and innermost recesses of the human soul.

Golding's second novel **The Inheritors** (1955) enacts the murderous encroachment of the new man over the habitat of the Neanderthal man. With the loss of the Neanderthal life, innocence and humanity is lost. Golding believed that human beings have inherited not just the habitat of Adam and Eve but have also inherited the Original Sin. It seems for him "the rise from the world of sub-sapiens to that of the Homosapiens is actually a fall". The innocent Neanderthal man is helpless in the face of the dangers presented by the modern man and as Boyd observes: "it is the story of the inheritors who slaughter and exterminate the meek and the hapless". The new man invades the peaceful habitat of the Neanderthals and plays havoc with their life. Lok is the Christ-like figure in the novel, who wears the crown of thorns for his people.

The style of compression and the picture images give a poetic effect to the prose style of Golding. **The Inheritors** can be considered a wonderful imaginative feat of Golding as he, through his deft masterly touch shows the Neanderthal man, in his own terms, in a language that is an approximation to his own thoughts, which are almost entirely non-verbal. Walter Allen, discussing the mastery of Golding's craft says that Golding has succeeded

"...well enough at least to give us a notion of Neanderthal Man that is at once plausible and moving. And through his innocent anthropoids he shows us man as cruel, as evil, as he is inventive. It is as though evil is equated with knowledge, indeed with being human"

Thus Golding has achieved something impossible, of showing a pre-historic man to the modern man of science and sophistication through his symbols and language.

In **Pincher Martin** (1956), Golding attempts to dramatise the hubris in man. The futility of *human will*- over the pattern that emerges at the end, is the story line of **Pincher Martin**. The lieutenant of a wrecked ship, Martin is a proud, self-conceited Narcist who challenges the forces of nature. He rejects mercy and the help offered by the apparition and the noble forces but prefers to hold on to this earth, ultimately perishing in a storm. Golding emphasises the importance of life filled with love, affection leading to mercy and sacrifice. According to him man “is a freak, an ejected foetus robbed of his natural development. Golding shows his protagonist as, ‘incapable of love and sacrifice.

Free Fall (1959) is a remarkable novel of William Golding in the sense that it has biblical connotations. His protagonist Sammy Mountjoy goes on to probe his past. It reveals the inability of man to comprehend the heart of darkness. The conflict between the world of science and conscience is the root cause of Sammy’s loss of freedom. He prefers the world of science in the world of spirit and the divine. Pincher Martin in the novel of same title of Golding, rejects the apparition whereas, Sammy defiles the altar. He has mistaken lust for love and for him love is just ‘Salt Sex’ and a pleasure almost “like handing over a bag of toffees”.

Sammy in the name of love exploits Beatrice sexually and deserts her, in pursuit of another sexual animal, Toffy. In the camp of war of prisoners, he realises his mistakes but it is too late when he returns. He finds Beatrice bearing the yoke of his mistakes in an asylum degenerated to the status of an animal. Golding shows Sammy as a wastelander capable of sex but incapable of love. Because of his misdeeds he finds himself “suspended in the void” – Sammy is only capable of free fall into the deep depths of degradation and doom for all his sins.

The Spire (1964) is a symbolic representation of the growing pride in man and the crumbling spire that mocks at the hubris and ego of man. Golding heckles at the institution of religion which attaches importance to the seeming side. Jocelin, the Dean of the Cathedral Church constructs a spire, which he wants to be “a stone bible, be the apocalypse in stone” but finds it as an emblem of his sin, his dichotomy, his ego and the futility of his attempts over the forces of nature and the pattern that should emerge. It is neither the religious fervour, nor the deep faith that prompts him to construct the spire, but it is his pride and obsession that makes the construction an overriding necessity. In trying to attach too much importance to religion, he becomes irreligious, inhuman and sinful. Golding lays bare the soul of Jocelin, and the conflict within. He dramatise the sexual encounters and the futility of human will over the will of God.

The Pyramid (1967) is a geographical symbol like the spire to show the social pyramid and the structure of human pride and the conflict between the world of love and the world of instinct. Oliver’s narration of his life’s events in three tiers; forms the structure of the novel. He shows people ascending the pyramid of success at the cost of others. The misunderstanding between love and sex and the realisation is the texture of the novel. Evie is sexually exploited by Oliver who deserts her later. Miss Dawlish, Oliver’s music teacher is also in need of love and is exploited in a different way by Henry, an automobile expert who fails to be an expert in human relationships. Golding shows the utter depravity of human beings in the absence of love,

affection and a successful human relationship; when the deserted Miss Dawlish says “If I could save a child or a budgie from a burning, I’d save the budgie”. Golding stresses upon the emotional needs of a woman for security, love and for fulfilment.

Golding being preoccupied with the evil in man showed in all his earlier novels the dark conscience of man, the depravity and the degradation that man is capable of. He believed that “man produces evil as a bee produces honey” and was overridden with the idea that man is a fallen being and that he cannot escape the results of original sin. But in his next novel **Darkness Visible** (1979), one can see the contrasting change that the writer has brought in the treatment of his subject matter mainly the final conception that he intended- of noble virtue. Matty, in **Darkness Visible** is the first character in the whole range of Golding’s novels, who not only realises his sins but seriously plans his own salvation. Matty, with a ring of mystery around his birth, emerges from a fire in London Blitz during the Second World War, and ends his life in a fire saving a child from being burnt alive. Through his death, he regenerates depraved souls and like a true Christian he prefers self-mortification, penance and sacrifice. Golding presents a world completely different for the sake of contrast. The world of Sophy, is altogether different from that of Matty. Sophy haunted by a potential power of doing evil, sense of loneliness and vacuity of life; decides to choose the world of darkness and degradation. Matty is a suffering soul, capable of regeneration and through diligence, penance and self-mortification achieves spiritual regeneration and salvation. **Darkness Visible**, brought a remarkable change in the direction of Golding’s novels. Golding, for the first time tried to show the virtue dominating over the evil. Golding gave enough space and time for Matty, to plan his salvation unlike other heroes of his novels. Golding, without restricting his narrative, only to show the heart of darkness, showed the way to illuminate the heart of darkness.

Rites of Passage (1980) deals with social conflicts and futility of class and rank along with his usual conceptions of human life. Later thematically it was included along with his last two novels **Close Quarters** and **Fire Down Below** and published under the title *To the Ends of the Earth – A Sea Trilogy* (1992). In **Rites of Passage**, his main attention is shifted towards the evil in the society. The meaninglessness of class and rank, their devastating results, in their bare nudity are enacted on board the ship of Captain Anderson. The story unfolds in the form of a journal of Talbot, bound for Australia to seek his career. He suffers from class consciousness and is utterly snobbish and negligent of other’s suffering. Colley, a country Parson unarmed with real faith, faces the dangerously irreligious and careless world and is looked down upon by everyone. He wills himself to death and through Colley’s death rites, Talbot suffers his own rites of passage. An ordinary journal of Edmund Talbot, assumes serious proportions, when Colley’s manuscript is transcribed into Talbot’s journal. Trying to make an entertaining sea-story, Talbot ends up with a gruesome account of nightmarish experience of Colley because of human will and evil. Golding intended to show the evils of aristocracy, moral degradation due to egotism, capricious perceptions due to self-centredness and condemns irrational faith.

The Paper Men (1984) is the story of a dissatisfied writer, an alcoholic and a person who suffers from the incurable itches of middle aged lust. Barclay, a successful writer leaves his wife and daughter in pursuit of his pleasures. Tucker, an academician who wants to be an official biographer of Barclay offers his own wife to Barclay. Barclay undergoes a spiritual trauma in a Silician Church and returns home. But his wife dies and he is left alone suffering the guilt of his deeds. He keeps on running away from Tucker as he is not ready to reveal his past which is obscene and absurd. When Tucker offers his wife to Barclay, he is surprised that he is “accepted, endured not even in honest whoredom, for money, but for paper. (sic). But at the end he is killed by Tucker before Barclay gives him a ‘digest’ of his life’s happenings.

Golding exposes the depravity of the so called successful life devoid of love, moral values and intends to say that these ‘Papermen” are in a state of “Liking Sex but incapable of love”. They kill each other for the sake of paper. The mean levels to which they can stoop down for the worldly success is heavily criticised by Golding.

Almost after a gap of seven years after the publication of **Rites of Passage** (1980), Golding published **Close Quarters** (1987) and **Fire Down Below** (1989). Golding never intended his subsequent two novels but, later thought of giving a direction and dry land to Talbot’s ship left in the Atlantic. He published **To the Ends of the Earth** in the year 1992 comprising the above three novels, as an after thought. About this Sea Trilogy, he said that the “ the present volume began as three separate books and I have made tentative gestures towards turning them into a trilogy”. Talbot’s first journal written for the entertainment of his God-father, as the journey proceeds, becomes “deadly as a loaded gun”. In **Close Quarters**, Golding continues the journal of Edmund Talbot. Talbot’s changed perceptions, attitudes are portrayed vividly as he starts looking at people from close quarters. The protagonist realises his mistakes and the futility of loneliness and meaninglessness of class and rank. The necessity of love and companionship in human life are emphasised in this work. Talbot, snobbish and narrow minded in the first journal is changed, at least to identify the real personalities of people as he develops a sympathetic attitude towards his fellow passengers. Lieutenant Summers offers him a realistic picture of life and provides the real meaning of companionship. He meets Ms. Chumley, and his love for she makes him sensitive and sensible. In this novel, Talbot’s attempts to break open the cocoon of class and rank, to come clean out of the edifice of pride, are dramatised.

Fire Down Below (1989) is in continuation with Golding’s first and second novels of the Sea Trilogy. Talbot’s flowering friendship reaching fruition and mutual assurances and sacrifices forms the basis of the novel. The serious ideology and philosophy of the comic philosopher Mr. Prettiman are made clear to Talbot in this novel. Talbot understands his incapacity to love and be loved. The ebb and flow in the life of Talbot gives him an opportunity to understand his own ‘self’ in relation to others. He realises the noble concept of Mr. Prettiman of human beings, as ‘fire down below’. He too decides to dedicate himself to that fire of love. He is elected to the parliament and decides to cleanse the unfair and meaningless system. His journey to the ends of the earth is actually a journey into his own self- to be aware of his meanness and the low levels of degradation. Golding, through the story of Talbot, comes down heavily on the system of

representation, the foul and the unfair system. He lays stress on moral values, love, sacrifice and penance in human life to attain salvation. Thus Talbot's passage from the world of selfishness, aristocracy, pride; to the world of love, sacrifice and salvation is complete.

This paper tries to evaluate Golding's conception of the universal values critically in his novels, especially his Sea Trilogy. It is an attempt to show the change in Golding's conception of human life and Golding's treatment of his subject matter. This article also makes an attempt to interpret the meaning of the symbols in the novels of Golding. Golding, who can be aptly be termed as the novelist of symbols, exploits symbols to convey his ideas. Perhaps the poetic zeal in Golding made him exploit symbols to achieve lucidity and complexity. Almost all the titles of his novels are symbolic and carry the intended meaning of Golding's perceptions. For him, the symbols stand for ideas. However, without prejudice to the argument, it is endeavoured to interpret the meaning of the symbols to the extent that is need for the argument and to the barest minimum possible.

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