Ecocritical Reading of William Golding’s
*Lord of The Flies*

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William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, is a study of basic human nature and psyche. With the help of his young characters, he portrays the horrors of evil which reside nowhere but inside human beings. Though the young kids are in a place which is far from corruption, a place with no outside influence, still the evil, inherently present inside human, the insatiable thirst to conquer and to tame the external anyhow unleashes itself, which leads to the destruction of both nature and the order and harmony provided through it. This paper would be an attempt to study man’s anthropocentric nature in the context of Golding’s novel, and how the nature within becomes a threat to the nature surrounding. The characters of Ralph, Simon, Piggy, Samneric seem to signify the code of nature. These are the characters who are the carriers of order and harmony which are best seen in nature and can be learnt through it, as Ralph and his conch – nature and the order, Piggy – wisdom, Simon – the spiritual side, Samneric – sense of togetherness. These teachings of nature are hardly understood by man, and the beast residing within soon overpowers all order and wisdom. ‘Mankind’s essential illness’ at last comes into force. This ill-force is represented by Jack and his team which at the onset is referred as ‘something dark’. This force creates a system of anarchy where the only objective is to conquer and tame everything. In this quest to conquer, wisdom and spirituality are butchered and togetherness is subdued. Golding through all the events and characters presented in a way tries to offer the ‘anthropocentric’ attitude of man. He brilliantly portrays this destructive attitude of man to nature. He presents human as entropic, contrary to nature which is a system of symbiosis. This anthropocentric human leaves nature “shuddering in flame”. This approach makes man claim everything for him, forgetting that nature is a separate self-balancing entity.

Golding’s novel *Lord of the Flies* is the story of a group of young boys who accidentally reach on an isolated island. It is about how these young innocent boys try to manage their affairs and establish law and order. But soon all innocence is lost and the inner evil, which exists within humans, overpowers, and what we see is
destruction and anarchy. This may be the effect of the world war on the writer, which gave the idea that no law can hold the darkness within human. The novel also highlights how this evil in human tries to control everything, including nature. The lust for power destroys both the external order created by man and the internal order and harmony of nature.

Golding has brilliantly shown the ‘anthropocentric’ nature of man. Man in desire of power moves on to destroy everything, even the very source of his existence. With the help of this group of boys, Golding tries to picture the havoc which the inherent evil in man has brought down upon nature. In fact, the novel is all about the failure of man to establish order and harmony. The boys become the representatives of the culture and civilization from which they have come. Even while living away from the civilized world in the folds of nature, the boys run into conflicts and end up in destroying the harmony of nature. The desire for power finally leads to violence, which brings destruction and death. In this quest for power, they don’t care even for their life giving source, i.e., nature.

From the very beginning of the novel we can find traces of this dark side of human nature: “Within the diamond haze of the beach something dark was fumbling along [Italics are author’s]” (Golding, 1962, p. 26). The language used here itself defines the characteristics of nature—diamond-like haze, and human—as something dark. The young boys immediately think over the need of law to maintain order. They portray the picture of the civilization they have come from, where external law seems to be the only way to maintain order and harmony. The first thing the boys think about is to maintain order, to set up hierarchies, to have control of the power as they believe, “... we ought to have a chief to decide things” (p. 29). This need immediately takes up the democratic method for fulfillment: “Let’s have a vote... Vote for chief” (p. 30).

This inherent human desire for power to control and rule even those aspects which are beyond our realm creates tension. Man in his need to control has trespassed deep into the world of nature and has brought imbalance and destruction. This struggle for power is the basic phenomenon of the society from which the boys come. Power, as Foucault has found, is not only a physical force but a pervasive human dynamic which determines our relationship with others. It is the way in which one group dominates or exerts influence over others. This attribute of human can be seen in the character of Merridew who cannot withstand Ralph as chief and so they are seen always in conflicts. This trait is similar to Foucault’s view that: “… the intricately structured ‘power relations’ in a given culture at a given time demonstrate, how that society controls its members through constructing and defining ‘what appears to be universal’” (Murry, 1999, p. 69).

At the start, everything seems to be at peace. Ralph, who seems to symbolize nature, tries to provide internal balance by adopting a symbiotic kind of attitude and assigning importance even to his arch rival Jack. “The choir belongs to you, of course. They could be the army –” (p. 30). In course of time, Ralph works to organize things, maintain order, and create laws so that all of them can stay together for their common goal to survive. And so, as Derrida (1992) has observed that, “if I am to bend to this law and accept it, a certain number of conditions are necessary” (p. 5). Ralph lays down the conditions: to hold meetings, making conch as the symbol of order, distributing duties, keeping the fire
This sense of responsibility is similar to the Derridian notion of responsibility being inseparable from a whole network of related concepts (intentionality, will, freedom, conscience, consciousness, subject, self, person, community decision and so forth). Ralph in this way shows the attitude of nature where everything works to balance the whole system.

The law created now becomes an intrinsic element for survival. The conch becomes symbol of order (giving the right to speak). But the establishing of rules, from the very beginning, becomes a sort of obligation: “We’ll have rules! [. . .] Lot’s of rules! Then if anyone breaks’ em –”(p. 44). Thus the sense of breaking of law comes at the very outset. But soon, the evil within human (Jack), the desire for power to control starts unleashing itself. The mockery of the symbol of order is clearly seen when, “[t]he small boy held out his hands for the conch and the assembly shouted with laughter; at once he snatched back his hands and started to cry”(p. 46). The voice of Piggy—the carrier of wisdom—is never heard. He is the one who has intellect and works with Ralph to maintain order and harmony, “How can you expect to be rescued if you don’t put first things first and act proper?”(p. 50). But the ‘dark’ within human never cares about such things, and so, “[y]ou shut up”(p. 55), is the reply always given to wisdom. The conquest and lust for power is the only thing that matters to them, and this brings out the violent side of man into light. As C. Wright Mills has remarked, “. . . the ultimate kind of power is violence” (Arendt, 1999, p. 3), Jack, the human, uses this tool to fulfill his dream of being powerful and imposes his will over others. Sartre has also observed that a man finds “incomparable pleasure” and “. . . feels himself more a man when he is imposing himself and making others instruments of his will” (p. 3). The first act of this kind is seen in killing of the pig, “Kill the pig, Cut her throat, Spill the blood” (p. 86), which shows the violent and destructive attitude of man towards nature. This repeated phrase in the novel shows the degree of violence, evil and destructiveness present inside human. The satisfaction and pleasure Jack receives represents the basic human nature. He and his party derive pleasure from the “. . . knowledge that they had outwitted a living thing, imposed their will upon it, taken away its life like a long satisfying drink. . . .[y]ou should have seen the blood”(p. 88).

This open display of violence brings the existing tension into clear visibility; but Ralph and Piggy are the only ones to think over it. “Things are breaking up. I don’t understand why. We began well, we were happy. And then-” (p. 104). The incompleteness of the sentence, perhaps, shows the inability of nature and wisdom to understand the inclination of human towards chaos and anarchy, and this is the reason behind all these conflicts, tensions and destruction. But Piggy knows there is no fear “. . . unless [they] get frightened by people” (p. 105). This violent inclination of humans leads to the breaking up of things. Jack disassociates himself from the keepers of order and harmony, “Bollocks to your rules! We’re strong—we hunt!”(p. 114). The symbol of order, the conch, becomes merely a showcase figure, “we don’t need the conch anymore. We know who ought to say things” (Ibid.). His sense of being powerful gives him the right to impose his will, “It’s time some people knew they’ve got to keep quiet and leaving things to the rest of us—” (p. 126).

Jack in his desire for malignant power soon breaks away from the order of Ralph and becomes the chief of his own tribe, which completes the conversion into evil. The killing
of the sow symbolizes the terror human is going to bring to nature, it shows how evil
overpowers everything, and it resides nowhere but inside the human. The encounter of
Simon—the spiritual—with the Lord of the Flies (the evil within human) explains that in
this dominion of darkness there is no place left for spirituality, evil is present everywhere
and so no escape is possible. Simon, who understands what is inside man is told by the
Lord of the Flies: “[y]ou knew, didn’t you? I’m part of you. . . . I’m the reason why it’s
no go? Why things are what they are?” (177). He warns him, “[y]ou know perfectly well
you’ll only meet me down there – so don’t try to escape!. . .You’re not wanted.
Understand?” (178). At the end, Simon feels himself inside the beast’s mouth which
shows how evil has engulfed all that is good. When Simon tries to inform the savage
humans, that there is no beast, it proves fatal to him. As he stumbles into the group of
savages he is mistaken for the beast and is mercilessly killed and forgotten.

Extreme violence is seen when Ralph, Piggy and the twins, Samneric, visit the stronghold
of Jack. In a violent clash that follows Samneric are overpowered and forced to join the
evil. When Piggy (wisdom) holds out the conch to appeal for order, he is considered
nothing in front of the dark forces. Roger makes a huge rock fall which hits Piggy and
throws him to his death and the fragile representative of order, “. . . the conch exploded
into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist” (222).

Thus, we see a steady decline from order and harmony to chaos and anarchy. Simon
and Piggy are dead and Ralph finds himself completely alone, isolated and wounded. The
initial harmony between man and nature is lost. Man in his madness for power kills his
insight and awareness and even does not hesitate to destroy his source of existence.
Golding through his novel tries to portray the kind of culture mankind has developed. The
young boys in the novel are adhering to the culture developed by the grownups. The
children we witness are the products of a violent and evil world, which doesn’t care about
the destruction it brings to the surroundings. Even among the children living within the
folds of nature, we find violence becoming a right, a kind of right of law. The symbolic
order of law becomes a mockery of the law which the human culture and civilization
have produced. Order seems to be something alien to human nature. Golding’s work
presents Freud’s observation that if, on one hand, man has immensely progressed in the
conquest of nature, on the other hand, he has failed in achieving co-existence. Freud
(1961) observes: “The fateful question for the human species seems to me whether and
to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of
their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction” (104).

Golding’s novel stresses on this aspect of human nature, which went on to overpower
nature as though it was meant for him. He tries to reveal how man has overlooked the
lesson of co-existence through which nature maintains order and harmony. The order in
the human world is shown to be a failure. At the end what emerges is the dark and evil
side of man which no law can suppress. But in his hunger for power, man forgets that
power and violence are in contrast to each other. “Violence appears where power is in
jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance. . . . Violence can
destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it” (Arendt, p. 11).
In human history, the holocaust has been one such dreadful event of extreme human evil and violence in pursuit of power. Not all the people associated with it were born monsters or insane. It was carried on by the highly-skilled engineers and architects, supervised by intelligent administrators, and most of them belonged to decent upbringing. Golding also suggests this tendency of man where the ethical side is totally eclipsed by the evil turning him into a savage. In the novel the unrestrained power of Jack Merridew becomes an end in itself. Evil thus is an active constituent of human nature or as Kant would say, it is evidence of free will activity.

Nature, on the other hand, is a self-balanced entity, Golding’s island being an example of it. The island acts as home for the marooned children, a wonderful paradise. The children swim in its warm waters, eat fruits, hunt and are amused by its beauty. The ocean shows the healing power of great nature; the dead body of Simon received the respect which human could not, as described here:

The line of his cheek silvered and the turn of his shoulder became sculptured marble. . . . Softly surrounded by a fringe of inquisitive bright creatures, itself a silver shape beneath the steadfast constellations, Simon’s body moved out towards the open sea. (190)

And we come across another description that “the sea breathed again in a long, slow sigh, the water boiled white and pink over the rock; and when it went, sucking back again, the body of Piggy was gone” (223). Thus nature took into its folds what belonged to it, but was never understood by human intoxicated in evil. The island at the end is seen burning: it is “. . . scorched up like dead wood. . . .” (248). The ‘human instincts of aggression and self-destruction’ disturb the quiet rhythm of nature and turn it into a fiery hell. Even the adult in the novel is unable to understand the evil residing within as is evident in these utterances: “Fun and Games” (246) and “I know a jolly good show. Like the Coral Island” (248).

Golding’s novel, at the end, appears to be a failure—failure of the ethical concepts. The rescuer himself comes from a world struggling in war and destruction, and so this is no rescue at all. But the solution Golding suggests out of this failure is to take lessons of living from nature. Man needs to quit his entropic attitude and learn to achieve ‘co-existence’. The message conveyed by the novel Lord of the Flies, though published long ago, seems to be relevant even today. The problems for which the world appears to be seeking solutions, were hinted by Golding long ago. The capitalist-motivated attitude of the world has brought us to this situation of crisis. Man has forgotten that he cannot play with nature; Marx’s dialectic of nature seems to be correct, which says that, the homosapiens do not create nature, but only transpose it from one form to another, often with unforeseen consequences. This is what we are witnessing today. The constant abuse of nature has led the world from Kyoto to Copenhagen. It seems that Golding had foretold what we are facing today in the forms of pollution and global warming. Like Golding’s island our natural habitat is burning because of the human games. Man excelling in scientific and technological development, considers himself as outside of nature and feels free to use and abuse nature and even to create laws for it. We forget that nature is a ‘self-balancing’
entity, or as Marx quotes Pietro Verri and tries to remind: “[a]ll the phenomenon of the universe, whether produced by the hands of man or indeed by universal laws of physics are not to be conceived as acts of creation but solely as reordering of matter” (p. 40).

The leaders of the world first met at Kyoto, and then a decade later, at Copenhagen, to discuss the crisis we have reached, but, at the end, decide only to depart without any solution. What we witnessed at Copenhagen was similar to what Golding had portrayed: the western civilization dictating itself, promising for better but in terms of its interests, but there cannot be any solution for this havoc unless the homosapiens quit their entropic attitude and learn to achieve ‘co-existence’.

To achieve this Sam Keen suggests that you should, “...[d]iscover all the ways in which you are hateful, in which you make yourself superior to other people, or undercut them. By looking at that, there is a strange kind of transformation process that happens” (Marler, 1987, p. 43). It reminds one of Martin Luther King Jr.’s confession on the day of his assassination with the words: “…there is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us.” That’s “a strange mixture in human nature.” He says that, “we are at heart divided creatures, so the great burden and challenge of life is to keep our higher self, as it were, in control of the lower” (Garrow, 1981, p. 219).

References

5. Golding William (1962), Lord of the Flies, Faber and Faber, London.

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