

Contextualising the Egyptian Aesthetics of William Golding in *The Scorpion God*

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Abstract

The paper aims to examine Sir William Golding's *The Scorpion God: Three Short Novels* published in the year 1971 and view this particular short story in comparison with Golding's other novels, namely *The Inheritors* (1955) and *The Pyramid* (1967), where a similarity of few themes and motifs can be observed. The issues reflect a concealed colonial overtone which has been brought to light in the paper along with observations on the stylistic nuances of the Nobel laureate. The colonial narrative in *The Scorpion God* is deemed to have depicted the transfer of power from the Periphery to the Centre, thereby creating a new Centre. William Golding is regarded as a considerably sophisticated creator and known for his biblical allusions and allegories that hold a mirror to human nature. The paper seeks to reinterpret the Goldingian aesthetic qualia to view his writings in a new approach.

Key Words: *The Scorpion God*, Contextualising, William Golding, Egypt, Decolonise

The English Poet, Craig Raine has pointed out in his introduction to Golding's collection of three short novels titled *The Scorpion God: Three Short Novels* that

The Scorpion God is about a society predicated on a profound theological error, a meta-physical absurdity in which one outsider, The Liar, is endangered by his superior knowledge. The measure of the shared short-sightedness is that they take the Liar's truths- about icebergs, about snowflakes- as titillating, as poetry or as jocose fictions, as a kind of magic realism." (vii)

This knowledge that Raine terms as superior is in fact a truthful narrative that is expressed, or rather factually delivered repeatedly by the somewhat naive Liar not to 'titillate', but more so in an informative manner, as a part of his lived experiences. The 'real' as expressed from the perspective of the Liar's worldview and knowledge is seen as 'unreal' or 'magic

realism' by his 'supposed captors' and master.

Golding describes, through the character of the Liar, these realities. The Liar speaks of the whiteness of the northerner's skin like the colour of "peeled onions" and regales the Emperor and his court with a pun upon these beings. He says, "They don't wash---", "Because if they did, the paint won't come off!" Golding describes the great salty oceans as 'rivers' to illustrate the naivety and a lack of comprehensive knowledge about the surrounding world during the ancient times. The word play is such that death due to freezing is eloquently and elaborately described as "If he lies down in the white dust which is water, he stays where he is. Presently he becomes stone. He is his own statue---." (*The Scorpion God*, 27-28)

Golding's *The Scorpion God* can be regarded as a fictionalized version of our not so fully defined past heritage. As James R. Barker puts it, "*The Scorpion*

God takes us far from the modern world and familiar domestic scenes” (Golding’s Progress, 62). Parallels can be drawn with another work of the author *The Pyramid*, which was published in 1967 and also with his second novel *The Inheritors* published in 1955. These novels too have the oft-repeated Goldingian theme of pursuing an imaginative, anthropological and historical setting and then locating the human condition therein (Golding’s Progress, 62). Golding is able to carry off his readers to a different time and make them ‘suspend their disbelief’ while filling their “skull with liquid fragrance—” while fully immersing and drawing them out towards a real and phantasmagorical literary experience and journey (*The Scorpion God*, 71). Barker holds the view that Golding’s collection of short stories “... might be called anthropological fables and fantasies, for they unfold at different times in the remote past and in exotic settings” (Golding’s Progress, 62). He further observes that “Glancing even further back into Golding’s career to *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and *The Inheritors* (1955)--- we recall that he has long had the knack for manipulating the time machine in the Wellsian [reference to H.G. Wells] manner” (Golding’s Progress, 62). This shows that Golding has repeatedly circled back to what we may term as his ‘aesthetic roots’; he pines to create an universe where he can freely recreate historical space and time and hold a mirror to the moralistic and theological realities of mankind. This preceding inference is substantiated by the fact that Golding considered *The Inheritors* as his best written work and not, as many assume- due to its relevance, popularity and critical acclaim- to be the *Lord of the Flies*. John Carey, who is the author of Sir William Golding’s extraordinary biography, in his

introduction to *The Inheritors* points out that “Golding always thought the inheritors his best novel,...” (v).

Leighton Hodson in his “The Scorpion God: Clarity, Technique, and Communication” posits his views on the uniqueness of Golding’s gamut of work and points out that the focus of the written work for Golding is dichotomous, wherein lie two inherent challenges, one for the author himself and the other created for the reader by the author. Hodson summarises that

“The challenge implied here for the creator [referring to Golding] and the desired impact of his work as a stimulus to the reader’s thinking and aesthetic pleasure reflect attitudes fundamental to Golding and consistent with his approach in *The Scorpion God: Three Short Novels*” (189).

This conclusion is drawn from Golding’s own viewpoint as expressed to his good friend Frank Kermode in 1959 regarding the subject matter for his novels. (Hodson, 189-90)

Egyptian colonialism can be easily differentiated from British imperialism and colonialism as the Egyptians believed or practiced inclusivity in exchanges with the colonised people whereas the British Empire was based on exclusivity in matters of race and in stamping their dominion over the ruled. The former conducted itself by applying the praxis of shared responsibilities (based on archaeological evidence), whereas the latter is characterized by complete control over governance, driven by the greed of generating profit and the erosion and substitution of native culture, identity and heritage with its own (Buzon, 168). These variegated structures of governance

are symptomatic of the distinct hierarchical structures between the two ideologies. As a result, the two colonialisms are different from each other even if they share a common point of ideological inception and legacy. In *The Scorpion God: Three Short Novels*, Golding masterfully portrays the 'decolonization' of the present (read as Eurocentric worldview) through revisiting a different and divergent colonial past (colonial Egypt where the Pharaoh is a God and 'not human') and provides us with a satirical mockery of the colonial notion of being dismissive towards the governed that has unfortunately defined its existence throughout history. This is very easily observed during the scene depicting the celebratory feast at the banquet hall which occurs immediately after the events of the day. The scene between Great House and the Liar thus transpires.

The Liar in all his honesty describes events and facts that are 'real' to him, anecdotes that are dismissively termed as 'lies' by his masters. His 'lies' is what tickles and gives pleasure to the other characters in the novella who want to repeatedly hear the trippy and truthful narrative of the Liar's 'real'. As Great House replies to the Liar's objection when reminded that he has already heard a 'lie' many times before, "Well, I want to hear it again... and again and again!" (*The Scorpion God*, 27)

The Liar is stuck in a dangerous situation here with lesser avenues to save himself from being offered as a sacrifice to accompany his master and adhere to superstitious customs. He is well aware of his position in the scheme of things as is aptly clear, when after a particularly humorous interaction, Great House

professes his drunken admiration which he would normally be avoiding

He [Great House] flung his arm across the Liar's shoulder.

"Dear Liar, you are very precious to me!"

The Liar was dirty white round the lips.

"Oh no, Great House! You are just being kind and courteous—I am of no importance to anyone!" (*The Scorpion God*, 28)

Great House (The Pharaoh), on the other hand is immensely important as he is bestowed the power to govern over all his subjects. More importantly he is believed to keep the sky up or make the river *Nile* (my Italics) rise and keep the water at the 'Notch of Excellent Eating', for lower at the 'Notch of Sorrow', "...men would starve" and higher at "... the Notch of Utter Calamity. The whole world would be drowned and the waters would lap at the House of Life." (*The Scorpion God*, 9-10)

The emperor Great House fails to finish the royal Run, a ceremonial and ritualistic cultural marker symbolising strength and power, thereby legitimizing the 'God' status for Great House as well as solidifying his absolute authority over his dominions. The failure of the Pharaoh to meet public expectations shakes the foundations of the hegemonic power structure in circulation at that time. Great Houses is unable to complete the race (Royal Run) and falters towards the very end. This failure is the start of a deep existential crisis for the Egyptian subjects as this may very well be indicative of the beginning of the end for their ruler. And soon the Wazir (Head Man) and Great House agree among themselves during the feast "A beginning" (36). This inadvertently gives rise to an existential

crisis of sorts as it indicates to the people 'the Fall' of Great House and in return this 'fall' is symbolic of the destabilization of the hierarchical structure in place which will crumble and turn to ashes without due diligence. This divine run takes place every "seven years" and symbolises "Life! Health! Strength! ..." (*The Scorpion God*, 6-8).

"I could never understand what Great House sees in him" (*The Scorpion God*, 43). This statement by one among the people offered as a sacrifice to accompany Great House to ascend with him to his 'eternal Now' and ready to drink the same poison as him, shows that they view the Liar as separate from them. They share the same fate but they do not share a similar outlook. In essence, the Liar remains as the sole representative of the socially subordinate group.

It needs mention here that the word 'Liar' is actually the authors take on the official court jester and his jokes are what Golding terms as 'lies'. So in effect the Liars' jokes or 'lies' are actually facts seen and experienced by him which are considered as falsehoods or untruths by the Egyptians in the novella. In effect Golding shows to his readers what can be termed as an Egypt Centric worldview and thereby bringing into the reader's consciousness the fallacies of hardships, misrepresentation and also reconstructing the identity of the governed and the subjugated 'other'. Golding's short story is incapable of showing the complete narrative reconstruction of the 'other' in terms of literature, arts, law, political thought etc, but it still is able to subtly raise this issue.

Sir William Golding, when speaking with Jack Biles about his earliest written work, *Lord of the Flies*, talks about

the rationale behind depicting English Boys as his 'savages'. This rationale was put forward, if one needs a reminder, immediately in a post Second World War scenario, where he states that it made sense for him to pen *Lord of the Flies* in such an atmosphere where "... everybody was thanking God they weren't Nazis. And I'd seen enough and thought enough to realise that every single one of us could be Nazis" (*Talk*, 3). This astute observation of the Nobel Laureate may seem unexceptional in hindsight but it provides a peek into what Stefan Hawlin terms as an 'unconscious' reflection of "Golding's Empire-oriented view of the world, with England, America and a few other countries as places of light, and much of the rest of the world, particularly Africa, as below the level of civilization" (*The Savages*, 126). It can be argued here that Golding's Eurocentric view made him create a superstitious, foolish and a fanatical socio-religious-cultural setting and position it in a space that is irrefutably considered the cradle of a robust and ancient human civilisation, which itself is located in the 'peripheral' continent of Africa.

Meanwhile as the novel inches towards its climax, we find Pretty Flower taken over with guilt at her slip of composure in adhering to the laid out 'natural' customs. She vehemently chastises herself before the Head Man by acknowledging that the way she had let go of herself was "Wrong upon wrong. Vice so ingrained, wickedness so deep, so dirty—." She further describes her desires as "Monstrous thoughts and indescribable—" (*The Scorpion God*, 61). She seems to be filled with shame at this juncture but as the novel progresses and provides her with an opportunity to act on

her fantasy she succumbs to her wayward ways.

“I pretended to myself that he was my brother” (*The Scorpion God*, 62). This seems to be the only justification the young princess is able to produce for herself for breaking the established ‘incestuous’ natural laws and for being conjoined in union with the so-called outlander, the Liar. She confesses everything to the Head Man who listens intently but passes no judgments yet. What is palpable is that Pretty Flower is not inwardly remorseful or repentant of her actions. She is still favorably disposed towards the liar and his machismo and is torn between the disorienting flux of her illegitimate desire for the liar and her socially imposed and learned moral responsibility and duty. Her situation is further shaken because of the Prince, (her brother) young of age and of an unmanly and childish disposition, who is only eleven. The prince is equally unattached to his sister and finds his responsibilities cumbersome and confesses this to the old man at the beginning of the novella. The prince explains to the old man of his dire circumstances as

If I play with the Boys they want to play at hunting and I get out of breath. If I play with the girls they want to play at being married and I have to Bounce up and down on them till I get out of breath all over again and then they Bounce up and down until I get giddy.” (*The Scorpion God*, 11)

Raine writes that “*The Scorpion God*, the great masterpiece of these three novellas shows us that human nature is unchanging even under an imperious theological construct” (xii).

Pretty Flower’s admission of guilt, lapse in judgement and her blasphemous union with the Liar, makes her feel that she has wronged her father Great House and her ‘Royal’ brother and thus violated the ‘discourse of Incest’ that was prevalent at that point in time in Golding’s novella. Hodson here opines that “... the myth of incestuous procreation for the sake of the continuity and fertility of the valley dies with the god king” and it also marks the beginning of a new dynamic devoid of any violations of ‘natural laws’ (198). Thus, Pretty Flower feels guilty and assumes to have provoked the dead God king and brought upon his displeasure on her people. She reasons this displeasure to be the prime cause of the river water continuously rising even after Great House’s ‘Eternal Now’. This concern of Pretty Flower is readily dismissed by the Head Man whose motive is to lessen Pretty Flower's burden at her guilt. He consoles her by saying that “Your woman's heart must not struggle against the granite durability of rational demonstration” (*The Scorpion God*, 60).

The last line of the novel symbolises the transfer of absolute power from the ‘Centre’ to the ‘Periphery’ or to the oppressed and subjugated ‘other’. Here, we behold the transformation of the periphery into the new centre. This transfer of power is sealed when Pretty Flower finally comes round to realise the immense potential of the possibilities of the Liars' desire. She is also greatly impressed by his impassioned and forward outburst in front of the Head Man, moments before he jumps into the flooded Nile to save himself. Pretty Flower finally acquiesces to her deepest desire and says with a twinkle in her eyes “All the same - we’d better go and talk to Him” (76). Golding here uses the capitalised ‘H’

instead of the small case for the reflexive pronoun 'him' for the soon-to-be God Liar to confirm what the readers have long expected to occur. What we witness to here is the transposition of the Liar who is disregarded and sidelined to the so-called 'periphery' for his worldview but ultimately finds assertiveness; and through sheer bravery and a survivalist will, is poised to take his rightful place in the so-called 'center'. This can be substantiated readily with the help of the observation made by Leighton Hodson who states that "The final picture of the Liar-Outsider trying to escape gives the impression of bitter revelation—a new truth that means the end of an old order". The Liar is

revealing to us "New ways of conducting life...." (194)

Lastly, after reading *The Scorpion God: Three Short Novels*, James R. Barker eulogised that he considers Golding's views on the dual subject matter of evolution and history to be shrewd and mature and takes his own admission as a sign of the author's progress as a considerably sophisticated creator. Hodson too concludes that "the three short works of *The Scorpion God* confirm that Golding is concerned with diagnosis of the human condition" (201). This serves as an additional laurel in Golding's aesthetic qualia of being a meticulous and, at the same time, a polished novelist (62).

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