



PREDICAMENT OF THE PROTAGONIST IN WILLIAM GOLDING'S *PINCHER MARTIN*

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ABSTRACT

Published in the year 1956, the novel *Pincher Martin* depicts the struggle for survival of a shipwrecked sailor. It is the story of an egotistical man who is already dead. Golding takes for his protagonist Christopher Hadley Martin who becomes Pincher Martin later. He is a naval lieutenant whose wartime destroyer is torpedoed by the enemy in mid-Atlantic as a result of which he is blown off the bridge of the ship. He is the sole survivor in the tragic mishap and manages to stay afloat by inflating his lifebelt.

But actually, he has failed to make a satisfying choice and what he has finally chosen in a state of confusion is nothing but an eternity of total emptiness. His egotism prevents him from knowing the reality that what he is being offered is actually a chance of redemption. In his ignorance and pride, he ignores and refuses it, and blurts:

" I will not consider! I have created you and I can create my own heaven" (*PM* 196).

It would be appropriate to conclude the discussion with Golding's own comments when he says that the predicament of Martin is like the lot of people who,

"Go into church and say, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which ought not to have done, and so on. They find that perfectly credible, perfectly understandable and that is more or less what *Pincher Martin* is about."

Pincher Martin, first published in 1956, is perhaps the most complex of all Golding's works. Generally described as a modern classic, the novel is the assertion of the self at all costs. It deals with the predicament of a modern godless man who finds himself entangled between his supreme pride, his reason, his intelligence, his confidence, and his desire for domination and power.

When Golding started writing, there was an atmosphere of disillusion and disenchantment, and

it was this that spurred him into writing and inspired most of his novels. The horrid experiences of the war shook his faith in humanity and left a deep scar on his psyche. The war had broken out when he was still struggling to establish himself. A sense of estrangement and meaninglessness prevailed everywhere. That is why Golding's fiction is essentially concerned with the predicament of the modern man, and in his novels, he has rendered, in detail, an analysis of the human conflicts which

emanate from man's inability to understand himself, his environment, and his spiritual roots.

His works have multi-dimensional aspects which have been explored by different critics in terms of thematic, existential, and psychological stances. He creates characters and situations in his novels which show his deep sense of agony about what has gone wrong with the world we live in. Through his protagonists, he describes the various kinds of conflicts that the human beings have to face in this wasteland of doubt and despair. The significance of his fiction lies in the fact that he emphasizes the reality of 'will' in human existence. According to him, man is not readymade at the beginning. He has to make himself and choose the conditions under which he has to live. As he is free to choose, he is always in danger of making a wrong choice. In the words of Sartre,

"... man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards.... Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself".¹

So, there is a perennial conflict within him, and Golding has tried to depict this conflict or predicament through the protagonist of his novel *Pincher Martin*

Published under the heading of '*The Two Deaths of Christopher Martin*' in U.S.A. in the year 1957, the novel depicts the struggle for survival of a shipwrecked sailor. It is the story of an egotistical man who is already dead. Golding takes for his protagonist Christopher Hadley Martin who becomes Pincher Martin later. The title of the novel evokes Pincher's devilish ego, his pride, and greed with which he pinches men, women and boys. Pincher is also a common name for the sailors. So we see the protagonist Pincher Martin as a shipwrecked sailor who is blown off the bridge of a torpedoed destroyer into the swirling waters of the Atlantic during the World War II. He is a naval lieutenant whose wartime destroyer is torpedoed by the enemy in mid-Atlantic as a result of which he is blown off the bridge of the ship. He is the sole survivor in the tragic mishap and manages to stay afloat by inflating his lifebelt. He kicks off his sea

boots and eventually reaches a large barren rock called Rockall.

So the greater part of the novel deals with the experience of a living man struggling for survival first in the sea and then on a bare rock in the Atlantic. As Martin has nothing left over beyond the sheer will to live and his belief that he will be rescued, we can say the novel is a survival novel in which the protagonist Pincher Martin climbs on to what appears to be Rockall, to put up an apparently courageous, almost super-human fight for survival. In the course of his struggle, he denounces God. In the words of S.K.Wali,

"The fable is concerned with modern godless man in particular with his supreme pride and confidence in his education, his reason, his intelligence, and above all, in his will to surmount all odds. The various dimensions of the fierce struggle to exist --- that of natural man for physical survival, of social man for the survival of his ego, and of religious man for that of his soul are sensitively explored."²

Being intelligent and educated, he maintains his loyalty to his ravenous ego even in exchange for the compassion and mercy of God. Although an eminent critic, Peter Green, sounds an optimistic note when he considers the hero as "a mythic symbol of man's steadfast endurance,"³ what Golding himself says about this intellectual atheist is:

"Christopher Hadley Martin had no belief in anything but the importance of his own life, no God. Because he was created in the image of God he had a freedom of choice which he used to centre the world on himself."⁴

Christopher Hadley Martin has no belief in purgatory; he has rather created his own purgatory. The novel presents his past life record of guilt and greed, and as such is a serious warning to contemporary man, who in the mad pursuit for material comforts, forsakes his soul and spirituality in exchange for doom and damnation.

In the course of the novel, we see that Pincher Martin, the shipwrecked sailor, keeps himself alive for six dreary days and struggles to

survive and endure the forces of nature and the attacks of the conscience. He struggles to tame the barren rock with grit and determination to survive against the fury of cosmic nature. We see him struggling heroically to maintain his sanity till the final dissolution of mind and body, and in doing so, he arouses our admiration, pity and fear. It is only when the events of the past float through his mind that we come to learn that his strong will to live has its basis in a fundamentally shallow self-dramatization on the part of a man who has cheated and bullied and exploited others in making his way.

As Martin summons up his physical resources, he begins to realize that in the past, he had used them in order to lie, cheat and exploit his fellows. In fact, Martin has scant respect for any value in this world except his own personality. He takes the best part, the best seat, the most money, the best notice, the best woman. He is a robber and a thief who eats everything he can lay his hands on. To quote from the text,

"He was born with his mouth and his flies open and both hands out to grab" (*PM* 120).

The entire novel, Golding suggests, occurs in the split seconds it takes Martin to drown. His predicament is due to his adamant adherence to his rational self and will. When he is offered redemption in the form of hallucination and black lightning, he refuses. At one point in the novel, he himself mutters:

"I prefer it. You gave me the power to choose and all my life you led me carefully to this suffering because my choice was my own" (*PM* 197).

But actually he has failed to make a satisfying choice and what he has finally chosen in a state of confusion is nothing but an eternity of total emptiness. His egotism prevents him from knowing the reality that what he is being offered is actually a chance of redemption. In his ignorance and pride, he ignores and refuses it, and blurts:

"I will not consider! I have created you and I can create my own heaven" (*PM* 196).

He also says :

"I spit on your compassion" (*PM* 199). and

"I shit on your heaven" (*PM* 200).

William Golding himself, while commenting on the hero, writes that Pincher is simply in hell :

Pincher Martin is Pincher's post-mortem experience of himself ('Nothing burns in hell but the self').⁵

And in this post-mortem, Golding exposes all the hidden reality of Pincher Martin---a conversion from Christopher Hadley Martin to Pincher Martin, and his greed, and lust for sexual impulses. We see that Pincher Martin's life, as delineated by Golding in the novel, is full of terrors and decadence. V.S. Pritchett, the well known critic, emphasizes the pain and suffering of the protagonist in the novel as he says :

"In *Pincher Martin*, the tale of a modern sailor, whose broken body is washed about the Atlantic rock, who eats limpets, is poisoned by his store of food, and who eventually goes mad and dies, the pain is in the fight against physical hurt and loss of consciousness, in the struggle to put his educated will against his terrors. It is also in the Job-like protest against a defeat which wrongs everything he had believed in."⁶

Struggling hard to rescue himself from the present situation, he is at once seized with a kind of panic. The waters of the sea treat him gently, sometimes swaying him up and down, as the waves go on. Again, the very next moment, the water retreating, comes slowly and licks the face of Martin, leaving him all alone on the rock. Martin then kicks off his sea boots and inflates his lifebelt with the help of which he crawls up on a barren rock where, for what seems like seven days, he tries to keep himself alive in the hope of rescue. But unfortunately, no rescue comes and the desperate castaway is finally swept from the rock by a raging storm.

The various stages of Pincher's struggle and states of mind are presented by the novelist in such a way that while reading the story, one feels like undergoing the experience oneself with the protagonist.

So, Martin undoubtedly wins our admiration as we unsuspectingly follow his titanic struggle on the rock. During the first two days of his existence on the rock, he displays great powers of endurance, and his strong instinct for self-

preservation and his will to live are the striking features of his character. In the words of B.Gopal Rao,

"He is in more than one respect, a mythic symbol of human endurance. He is like Ajax defying the lightning in moments of adverse situations and with tremendous dignity he undergoes punishment like Prometheus."⁷

So, Martin is a complex human being subject to the schismatic experience of the twentieth century man. The whole experience of Martin on the rock deals with his life in purgatory and his refusal to accept his destiny. Golding, through his protagonist, tests the strong will and intelligence of man amidst hostile universe. Pincher's determination to survive against all odds--- his building of a shelter and his use of knife to get his food and drink---all represent an indomitable will of the human species. In the words of V.V.Subbarao:

"It is his strong instinct for self-preservation and his will to-live that sustain him as he is bullied, buffeted, bruised, and battered by the brutal winds, explosive waters, and "the unavoidable fists of rock" (PM 42). As he battles along with the elements, ...he imagines himself an Ajax, an Atlas, a Prometheus ...Once an actor himself, Martin plays Lear raging against the elements, or Hamlet seeking refuge in madness. Indeed, in view of his exposure on the rock, his unremitting suffering, and the heroic and unyielding nature of his struggle to the end, Martin's tale assumes a Promethean dimension."⁸

Fully confident and full of pride, Martin himself says in the novel,

"I am Atlas. I am Prometheus" (PM 164).

Struggling for survival on the barren rock, Martin recalls events from his past life, and the picture of his heroic resistance in the present undergoes a radical change as it is juxtaposed with Martin's "memory pictures" (PM 41). There gradually emerges an anti-heroic image of man's guilt, greed, and egotism.

His memory pictures reveal that Martin very clearly remembers his close friend Nathaniel

Walterson. He also remembers the beautiful and strong willed Mary who for him, is "nothing but another step on which one must place the advancing foot" (PM 149). He remembers her becoming a sexual attraction for him, and his friend Nathaniel's marrying her. He also thinks of Jane whom he considers as being "good for a tumble" (PM 133). He remembers Peter also, the producer of plays and his childhood friend. He remembers his crippling this friend of his in a bid to win a motor-cycle race. Not only this, Martin also remembers Helen, the wife of the producer, as being fat and white, and her becoming the victim of his lust. He remembers his courting the producer's wife so as to get the best role in the plays. Moreover, he also remembers his trying to murder his best friend Nathaniel by allowing the boat to swerve and throwing him overboard. So, Pincher Martin's past is woven with the threads of these various characters, and through these characters we can have an idea of Pincher's personality that he would mercilessly crawl over people's faces to get where he wants to go. It would be appropriate here to quote John Peter, to whom Martin is:

"...a vain poseur obsessively selfish, a thief, a cheat in examinations and in personal relationships an adulterer, a rapist, and (in intention at least) a murderer too."⁹

But egocentric Martin is not willing to shed his ego and pride, which prove, a great predicament for him. As a 'Pincher', he has always taken what belongs to others, justifying his actions in terms of his desire to survive as well as he could. In his past life, he has used others for his glory and greatness. Through his memory pictures, we come to know that he has slept with the producer's wife to advance his career, has raped Nathaniel's wife after serving as 'best man' at their wedding ceremony, and has even tried to kill his saintly friend Nathaniel out of jealousy for the latter has succeeded where Martin has failed, namely in winning Mary's hand. So, he is like an octopus who squeezes each and everything that comes within his purview.

According to Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, this excessive greed is Pincher Martin's main fault. In the words of B. Gopal Rao,

"He cannot help his selfishness and his appetite for lust and avarice. They are basically driving forces in the life of a man who has a desire to attain material comfort and social power. They affirm his existence and importance primarily due to his excessive cosmic greed."¹⁰

So, although he loves his close friend Nathaniel very much, yet when the question regarding Mary comes to his mind, he becomes selfish and says:

"Good-bye, Nat, I loved you and it is not in my nature to love much. But what can the last maggot but one do? Lose his identity?" (PM 184).

He himself admits that "I am a good hater" (PM 103). Nathaniel is Pincher's conscience which is always warning him, but Pincher pays no heed to his warnings. The scenes from his past life serve to underline the unwavering consistency of Pincher's behaviour and his attitude to himself and other people. The principal impression these scenes give to his character is that of self assertion, whether in the tenacity of purpose behind his struggle for survival on the rock, or in the imposition of his will on the people he knew and moved among in life. While dying, he clings savagely to the idea of survival, inventing a rocky outcrop on which he can exist, always denying the fact of death:

"I wont' die.

I can't die.

Not me---

Precious" (PM 14).

His dazed, fevered mind is incapable of fine discrimination and is conscious only of those sensations and broad features of phenomena which are essential for or inimical to his survival. Although Golding has presented Martin as a fallen man, yet he deserves our praise and sympathy as he possesses great powers of endurance. He is consciously aware of his uniqueness and superiority of his individuality which prompt him to assert his selfhood throughout. He is an individual who makes his own most appropriate purgatory, and this makes his suffering more characteristic. His boast is that he controls and imposes his will on the world, and tries to achieve salvation through his own rational efforts.

When Nat exhorts him to employ his powers of endurance for attaining heaven, Martin tells him:

" I am not really interested in heaven" (PM 70).

He is determined to

"...have a damned long life and get what I'm after" (PM 71).

This is his pattern of life. To keep his pride and ego intact, he builds a three feet in height pyramid of stones. He makes an image of man--- a dwarf.

His narcissistic obsession is revealed when he says that he had many photographs of himself, mirrors, triple mirrors in which he could see himself and

"... assess the impact of Christopher Hadley Martin on the world" (PM 132).

Nothing, he believes, is beyond his intelligence and will. Even when the dwarf's head comes down toppling as if to mock at his efforts, Martin does not give in. He rebuilds the dwarf "on the stone that after all was not too heavy for education and intelligence and will" (PM 80).

Proudly exerting his will, he says:

"If this rock tries to adapt me to its ways, I will refuse and adapt it to mine. I will impose my routine on it, my geography" (PM 86-87).

The cellar metaphor in the novel illustrates his choice between purgatory and hell meaningfully.

Remembering the cellar of his childhood days, Pincher remarks:

"It's like those nights when I was a kid, lying awake thinking the darkness would go on for ever. And I couldn't go back to sleep because of the dream of the whatever it was in the cellar coming out of the corner" (PM138).

Martin is haunted all the while by the primal fear, the fear of the dark, the fear that springs from a consciousness that suffers fragmentation and alienation. He is always trying to convince himself that he is mad because he thinks that madness is an escape from the acceptance of God who will absorb him into nothingness. Golding confesses,

"The cellar in Pincher Martin represents more than childhood terrors, a whole philosophy-in-fact suggesting that God is the thing we turn away from into life and therefore we hate and fear Him and make darkness there."¹¹

But his illusory world is torn asunder by black lightning, and it is only at the end of the novel, when Martin's body is picked up by another ship, that a radically different perception of all that has preceded, is presented. Finally, it is revealed that all has taken place in man's mind in the few moments before he had got drowned. It also transpires that he had never reached the rock we have come to know in such painful detail. Thus, the rock may be said to constitute a kind of purgatory in which Martin's courage and endurance are merely an obstinate refusal to accept God's existence and his offer of redemption. Rejecting the purgatory offered by God, Martin has created his own purgatory. In the words of Peter Green,

"*Pincher Martin*, as the last chapter proves, explicitly concerns the sufferings of a dead man who has created his own purgatory."¹²

In the last chapter of the novel, we move from Rockall to an island in the Hebrides. A naval party arrives to pick up the dead body of a drowned officer, and from the disc worn round the neck, they come to learn that it is Christopher Martin. So, he is dead soon after he is thrown into the sea. In the words of V.V. Subbarao,

"That Martin's breath had stopped as he was struggling in the water could be inferred from his incomplete exclamation "Moth---" (Mother)." (PM 8).¹³

The novel comes to a starting and powerful resolution in the penultimate chapter. We find that Pincher Martin's putrefying body has been washed ashore and is being reclaimed by the Naval authorities. Mr. Campbell, the crafter on the little island, finds Martin's body washed ashore, and Davidson, as an officer, comes to take the possession of the dead body of the protagonist. Davidson and Mr. Campbell discuss and come to the conclusion that Martin had not even had the time to kick-off his sea-boots:

"If you're worried about Martin---whether he suffered or not---"

Mr. Campbell sighed.

"Aye," he said, "I meant just that."

"Then don't worry about him. You saw the body. He didn't even have time to kick off his seaboots." (PM 208).

So, the question of suffering does not arise. It reveals to us that Pincher Martin is having consciousness or semi-consciousness for a few seconds during which his past life flashes before him. His recollections reveal to us his struggle---a moral struggle, a purgatorial struggle for salvation.

His arrogant pride, which takes its origin from ruthless intellect is a powerful hindrance upon his path to spiritual bliss. It fosters in his mind a false notion about his own identity which prevents him from making humble obeisance before the ultimate power called God. When the Dwarf created by Pincher is blown off by the storm, in that place he sees an Old Woman which again transforms itself in the image of God. That image speaks to him:

"And last of all, hallucination, vision, dream, delusion will haunt you. What else can a madman expect?

They will appear to you on the solid rock, the real rock, they will fetter your attention to them and you will be nothing worse than mad" (PM194).

So on the sixth day, when his strength is nearly gone, Pincher achieves the final stroke : he creates God in his own image. The hallucination appears, dressed in an oilskin and significantly in seaboots, and the beleaguered ego of the protagonist tries to dismiss it as a projection only.

So, although Martin comes to a point of self-awareness, yet he will not capitulate. Having a final encounter with God dressed as a sailor, God asks him :

"What do you believe in?"

"The threads of my life" (PM 196).

replies Pincher. Not willing to accept realities, he says to that image of God:

"I have a right to life if I can ! " (PM 196).

Still possessed with the idea of the self, he says:

"I will not consider ! I have created you and I can create my own heaven" (PM 196).

Upon this, God says:

"You have created it" (PM 196).

All this conversation shows that Pincher, rejecting God's offer of salvation, has created his own hell. He prefers torture on the rock to God's grace offered to him. His suffering, as he himself admits, is of his own choice:

"I prefer it. You gave me the power to choose and all my life you led me carefully to this suffering because my choice was my own." (PM 197).

So there is always a conflict in his mind. He is offered God's grace, but it will mean a loss of his self, and this he will not accept. Though he eventually realizes that his clever inventions are illusory and that he can no longer avoid facing the truth that living for the self has led to the evil of his using people as things, yet he refuses to admit it.

Even in his moment of destruction he yells his satanic dismissal of divine pattern:

"I spit on your compassion" (PM 199).

And it is this compassion of God's love which finally destroys him. Lightning, the force of God, strikes the rock and brings about the total elimination of the protagonist. The passage from the text is worth quoting:

"The lightning came forward, some of the lines pointed to the centre, waiting for the moment when they could pierce it. Others lay against the claws, playing over them, prying for a weakness, wearing them away in a compassion that was timeless and without mercy" (PM 201).

God is willing to embrace Pincher, but that would nullify his free will. Before his annihilation, the dialogue between the image of God and the protagonist is important:

"Have you had enough, Christopher?"

"Enough of what?"

"Surviving : Hanging on " (PM 194-195).

The God created by him lives in black lightning, and Pincher's sinful pride meets a tragic end at the hands of this God. By his own choice, he passes from the purgatorial state to one of perpetual damnation. His whole body is fragmented

except the grabbing hands. He fails to recognize God (the black lightning) which otherwise would have allowed his soul to enter heaven.

Thus, the protagonist, like Dr. Faustus, has preferred his own hell to God's heaven. A Satanic type, Martin prefers to reign in his own hellish world rather than acknowledge a power beyond and above the limits of his own nature. All his suffering is self-imposed and his understanding of his own spiritual development is necessarily hazy and incomplete. He is so addicted to the sin of pride that he is incapable of seeing himself as the hideous creature he has become.

It would be appropriate to conclude the discussion with Golding's own comments when he says that the predicament of Martin is like the lot of people who,

"Go into church and say, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which ought not to have done, and so on. They find that perfectly credible, perfectly understandable and that is more or less what *Pincher Martin* is about."¹⁴

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Note: All textual references in this paper pertain to : William Golding, *Pincher Martin* (London : Faber and Faber, 1956).