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# Beliefs that blind: A Study based on the short stories "The Lottery" and "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas"

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**Abstract :**  
An analysis, more sociological and psychological than being literary, is carried out in this article based on two short stories "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson (1948) and "The Ones who walk away from Omelas" (1973) by Ursula Le Guin. Though these two stories have been reviewed by many in recent times, there isn't any dearth of different perspectives for good literature. So is the one presented here?

**Keywords:** blind beliefs, human sacrifice, utopian, dystopian, crucification

## INTRODUCTION

Doing away with blind beliefs and customs existing in the name of traditions is the emphasis of this article. Hence this article is designed to deviate from the conventional style set for a research article, though only in the beginning. This may not be warranted in literary circles where conventions are least meant to be blind beliefs. It's only an excuse for breaking the convention here, in order to effectively indicate, as a natural course, a spark that ignited a brief analysis carried out in this article. Moreover this is planned more as a critical analysis grazing the surface than as a research article with a deep insight. My morning tea, though generally is spiced up literally with cardamom, is in spirit (!) spiced up by the early morning newspaper of which my home happens to be the first hit in the locality. Sometimes some news or other catches the eye so much that I may have to contend myself that day with my tea going cold enough. Mine is not an isolated case in this early hour routine.

It was a cold, winter morning when I was at first sight amused by a news item that a State Chief minister of my India gleefully received whippings from a pujari (a temple priest) as part of a ritual. The receiver is believed to be absolved of his sins and be blessed by his God as a

result of the whippings. As I proudly acknowledge all virtues of my land, can I take such vices without a bit of a shame? If so, I am blessed without any whip. However as a matter of self-consolation, I wish to append my late realisation that such characters are abound around the globe in a smaller or a larger scale that no one on planet Earth can hold his head high up in the air in front of me. All beliefs without any rationale get implanted in a child's mind and generally find their way out only at the cemetery. These keep a person blind for some colours all through his life. Edifications apart, all these kindle in me the reminiscences of two American short stories I had read sometime back, both with their story lines almost on similar lines. One is "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson and the other is "The Ones who walk away from Omelas" by Ursula Le Guin. In both the stories, the fictional world is first described as a utopian society and then its underlying dystopian nature is unfurled to the reader.

## THE DISCUSSION

"The Lottery" happens in the background of a ghastly tradition or custom followed for many years in a village of population slightly more than three hundred. In June before harvest every year they conduct a lottery in which the "winner" meets his fateful end by getting stoned to death by the villagers, even by his own family members. This is done with their age long belief that a "human sacrifice" will yield a good harvest and all prosperity to the living. This blind belief is endorsed by their popular saying "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon" (Jackson). This is the story of a barbaric society. However the narration presents the populace of the village as a civilized society so much that initially the reader gets into a natural illusion that the winner of the lottery would bag a prize. As the narrative progresses, the curtain unveils and a pall of gloom and suspicion set in on the reader and finally the climax leaves him in a state of bewilderment. Such blind beliefs were there in all primitive societies and continue

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

here and there notwithstanding rational and scientific advancements.

So far we have strayed only into the perceptible part of the story that comes to light at the outset. There are also subliminal perspectives, when the events and the characters are taken in a metaphorical sense that varies from reader to reader. For instance, the "human sacrifice" portrayed in the story could be any vice in vogue in the society for long. In that case, the character Mr. Warner, the elderly of the village, who resents any idea of doing away with the lottery, represents the conservatives or the orthodoxies of a society. Mrs. Hutchinson who is the "winner" of the lottery that year represents an ordinary citizen who enjoys an evil perpetrated on others until it arrives at her doorstep. Mr. Summers who conducts the lottery every year is a representative of a dutiful servant of the state who performs unmindful of the consequences of the work assigned to him.

Like "The Lottery", the other story "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" has similar perspectives of which we focus on the perceptible, namely the conditioning of the human brain to blind beliefs, to augur well with the title of this article. The story is narrated in the backdrop of the Festival of Summer in the city of Omelas. This story too starts in an innocent note with a description of the city buzzing around with people gathered around in a festive mood. Then all of a sudden the savagery of the city around which the story line winds is brought to light unlike "The Lottery" in which the unveiling is a slow process. Here the cruelty is meted out to a child of six years which is kept in solitary confinement in the most unhygienic and scarcely fed condition. Here again the human suffering of one, be it a child, is believed to bring prosperity to all others. The title of the story is with reference to people who couldn't stand living in the vicinity of the brutality and hence leave Omelas for good.

The above two may be just stories. But stories of any period reflect to a great extent the customs, traditions, beliefs and lives of people of the time. The blind belief, a matter of shame, indicated in the two stories seems to have prevailed throughout the ages. Turning the pages of history through inscriptions here and there and through literature we come to know of all these. Even in our times, sometimes we come across criminal acts of human 'sacrifice'.

To speak of the past, in Homer's Iliad, Agamemnon,

the king of Mycenae, who led the Greeks against Troy in the Trojan war killed his own daughter Iphigenia as a human sacrifice to appease the Goddess Artemis and the whole episode leaves the reader in a state of shock. One cannot casually pass through the scene as a usual custom of around eighth century BC or before. The Trojan war hero Achilles himself finds it hard to get over the gory incident for some time. The cunningness with which the murder (the so called sacrifice) was executed shows it clearly as an atrocity even of that time. Iphigenia and her mother Clytemnestra are tricked by Agamemnon into believing that Iphigenia was being brought to Aulis to be married to Achilles in a wartime alliance.

The second human sacrifice in Homer's Iliad is of twelve glorious children of the Trojans by Achilles as his murdering fury at the death of his boyhood friend Patroclus.

The third one in Greek mythology, though not described in Iliad, is of Polyxena, the youngest daughter of King Priam of Troy by Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles. She was sacrificed at the tomb of Achilles at the end of the Trojan war.

Such beliefs transcend the barriers of civilizations, religions, and ethnicity and so on. The prophet Ibrahim Nabi's willingness to offer his son Ismail's life to the God Almighty as per the Almighty's wish and the subsequent stopping of it by the Almighty by substituting a lamb for Ismail is meant not only to illustrate the unflinching faith on God but also a heavenly message to stop the practice of sacrificing human lives in the society. However the whole episode points to the fact that the practice of human sacrifice for the God was in vogue at the time. A remark by the way is that Ismail being substituted by a lamb by the Almighty at the time of sacrifice is comparable with the substitution of a deer for Iphigenia by the Goddess Artemis in Greek mythology. The message conveyed is that ultimately the sacrifice of human life is not acceptable to the Gods themselves.

As a final illustration we have an episode from the Tamil saivite devotional literature *Periya Puranam* in which a devotee by name Siruthondar and his wife offer their son's meat to Lord Shiva who comes to test their faith, in the guise of a Saivite saint. As a reward for their dedication and devotion, the Lord brings to life their son and blesses them. Here it is to be noted that *Periya*

### RESEARCH ARTICLE

*Puranam* belongs to around twelfth century AD and no such practices are found in the ancient Tamil Sangam literature.

All these point to the fact that human sacrifice to appease one or other has been a tradition out of blind beliefs from time immemorial, particularly in all primitive societies.

### CONCLUSION

Most of these stories are based on the blind belief of suffering of one for the well-being of so many. In a lighter vein, "The Lottery" is 'crucifixion' of someone and "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" is 'bearing the cross' by someone for the salvation of others, though there is not any perceivable difference between the two. All these make us have a rethink even on the good old concept "Suffer today for a better tomorrow" which hinges on self-improvement. It promotes suffering as a virtue even for no reason and takes the next step of advocating suffering for others, followed by making someone suffer for all. Psychologically perhaps this is the chain along which the human brain is conditioned to traverse. When a story leads to such a train of thoughts and paves the way

for further analysis, what better could a storyteller achieve of his piece of work ?

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