



A Narrative analysis of The Goal as Corporate Fiction with a focus on the Nature of the Conflict



Dr. Aashita Grace Rajeev Bandelu

Dept of English, Ahmednagar College, Ahmednagar

Email: bandeluashita@gmail.com

Abstract :

Novels have represented all aspects of human life since the inception of its form although the popularity of the themes depended on the political thought of its contemporary society. The growth of the publishing industry led to the boom of various experiments with the subject and the forms of the genre in relation with the readers market. Wendy Griswold commented that the genre of Nigerian village novels was created by the British publishers by overrepresentation of the novels with village settings after Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, rather than the authors or the readers, creating a new sub-genre. While describing the genre, Hoorn in his article titled 'How is a genre created? Five combinatory hypotheses', brings out the

mythic structure of five stages in the Nigerian village novel as stated by Griswold: Traditional order; disturbance from the west; attempted restoration; climax; and disintegration and reorganization. Each of these stages bring in different associations from different paradigm sets to create multiple Nigerian village novels. This paper is an attempt to explore whether a similar mythic structure could be identified and the paradigmatic sets described in contemporary novels set in the corporate world with reference to the novel *The Goal* by Eliyahu Goldratt.

Keywords: *The Goal*, Corporate Fiction, Narrative analysis, Genre Studies, self-help books

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction:

Novels written on the sociological impact of industrialization or corporatization of human activities such as William Gaddis's novel *J R* (1975) and *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller to name a few develop perspectives for or against the corporatization. Joseph Tabbi in his article titled 'Introduction to focus: Corporate Fictions' has brought to note the verbal image of a truck displaying 'five dwarves who are house painters and the words, "None of Us Grew but the Business"'. This, he says could be seen as a corporate satire on American capitalism. The novel is a description of a conglomerate built by a solitary pre-adolescent from his school payphone. Tabbi comments on this story as representative of the possibility that "even as our handheld devices today allow us to continually update and reconstruct our own corporate identities, or to have them constructed for us by platforms and algorithms to which we freely subscribe". Similarly *Catch 22* portrays the invisibility of the living human in the face of the grand narrative that exists in the form of corporate fiction ('Corporate fiction' here is in the sense of corporate law in the jargon of commerce) in the form of war and flying missions and the like. Since corporatization of human activities, human existence has been maneuvered by the larger uncomprehensive network of the conglomerate spirit that rules the world. This phenomenon of expression about the corporate world from the perspective of a bystander has further developed into novels that express themselves from within or as a part of the corporate structures. These novels have been considered as a genre of corporate fiction in this paper ('Corporate fiction' here is with reference to the fictional narratives with the corporate world as its theme). In order to explore this phenomenon further, this paper attempts to analyze the nature of conflict represented in the plots of corporate fictions.

Conflict in the narrative analysis of plot

The novel's title 'The Goal' and its subtitle 'A Process of Ongoing Improvement' reads like a self-help book. A person engaged explicitly or consciously in the corporate world would be familiar with concepts such as 'Goal' or 'Goal setting'. There are numerous lectures and workshops arranged for those aspiring to 'be successful' in the corporate sense of the term on setting 'SMART' goals where 'SMART' is an acronym for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound. The subtitle also would appeal to a person who searches for self-help books on improving oneself. This desire of self-improvement also could be traced to the sense of improvement to fit in or be promoted or declared successful in the corporate sense of being. The book market can be seen flooded with titles such as 'Never Split the Difference' by Chris Voss, that is advertised as '...provides a practical guide and set of principles to improve your effectiveness in getting what you want..' and 'Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success' by Adam Grant. These titles, by themselves, gives one a sense of the concept of success as perpetrated by the corporate world. Mirroring these ideas of corporate goals and corporate success the subtitle of the novel *The Goal* precisely defines human existence in the corporate spirit.

It can be stated then that all the themes of corporate fiction could be summarized as the process of improvement that can help you achieve your goal. These themes can be seen crystallizing in the form of plots that take up the stages in which the protagonist is an underachiever in the corporate sense of existence, identifies his/her goals, meets a mentor, learns methods by which s/he improves on the skills required to achieve the goal, solves tasks to practice the skills learnt, becomes a transformed individual by achieving the goal. This is the same archetypal pattern found in the quest archetype as given by Northrop Frye in 'Anatomy of Criticism'.

Conflicts play an important part in the structure of plots as they prepare the background for the mentor to appear and the instructions to follow (with reference to the fictional narratives of self help books). Conflicts could be personal as in the story of *Alice in Corporateland* by Tulika Tripathi where the protagonist Alice has to join her first job after a few rejections and the conflict is her naivety regarding being successful in a corporate job. Another example of a personal conflict in the corporate world is presented in the novel *The Monk who sold his Ferrari* by Robin Sharma where the protagonist Julian is already an extremely successful lawyer but loses out on his health and relationships in the bargain. The conflict is between the methods of achieving success by being a rigorous workaholic or sinking into mediocrity. These conflicts could be seen as internal conflicts as in the case of Santiago in *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho where the belief in his dreams are in conflict with his emotional attachments.

The Goal on the other hand presents a conflict at two levels. The external conflict and the internal conflict. The external conflict is presented in the form of a threat to close down the plant owned by Alex Rogo. The problems leading to the conflict are related to the situations in the manufacturing processes at the plant. The plant is losing money. The conflict seems to rise from faulty management and administration. The inventory is high, deliveries are late, efficiencies are low...etc. These problems stem from processes inherent in the industrial manufacturing processes. The goal to be achieved here is defined by Bill Peach as "The future of our business is our ability to increase productivity"(The Goal Pg 25). This conflict and the goal creates the environment for Jonah to come in as the archetype of the guide or mentor. Jonah is a scientist in the field of the science of organizations. Jonah identifies the problem in the words "...you've accepted so many things without questions that you're not really thinking at all" (Pg 31).

The instructions that Jonah begins to give Alex to help him save his plant are not prescriptive. They are deductive where he asks questions so that Alex is made to think. His first skill is to learn to think for himself and identify what the goal is. "Your problem is you don't know what the goal is. And by the way, there is only one goal, no matter what the company."

The reader is given the perspective from inside Alex's mind. The narrative follows Alex's thoughts putting the reader into a relationship with Alex as he tries to arrive at the answers. This is similar to the narrative perspective in *Alice in Corporateland* where the reader is made to search for the answer to the riddles put to her. Along with Alex the reader is put through the narrative to consider the possible goals that a company may exist for. Alex rummages through goals such as economical purchasing, employing people, producing a quality product efficiently, sales and making money. This leads him to wondering whether working and making money really correlate

and further, whether the measurements used by accounting are in really in line with reality. He is able to finalize the statement of the goal of any company as “To make money by increasing the profits, while simultaneously increasing return on investment, and simultaneously increasing cash flow” (Pg 49).

After Alex is successful at his first task, Jonah leads him on to the next lesson and that is to learn the skill of defining the goal. He says that the goal has to be defined in terms with its measurements. This is similar to the SMART goal setting acronym stated earlier. However, in the narrative it is presented as a skill to resolve the main conflict. Jonah the mentor tells Alex that he would be giving him some basic rules to apply and if they are followed intelligently he can solve his problems himself because if he simply told him what to do, ultimately he would fail. The core of the novel thus is learning the three critical thinking processes. The first thinking process is ‘What to change?’, the second is ‘What to change to?’ and the third is ‘How to cause the change?’. The second important learning point is Eliyahu Goldratt’s Theory of Constraints that comprise of the five stages of common sense that are lost in assumptions : Identify the system’s bottlenecks; decide how to exploit the bottlenecks; Subordinate everything else to the above decision; Elevate the system’s bottlenecks and ; if , in a previous step , a bottleneck has been broken go back to STEP 1.

As Alex tries to learn the skill he is presented events in the form of problems in the sections of the manufacturing units. He tries to look up the advantages of obtaining robots for the plant. He is informed that the robots were producing more parts than were needed because they were being made to produce to keep up their efficiency and on the other hand the orders to be completed in the present needed other parts that were not available.

This leads into a discussion with Jonah where Jonah makes him consider dependant events and statistical fluctuations. This brings in an episode of hiking similar to an anecdote in self help books. However, this episode is a part of Alex’s story and the event helps him to associate dependant events and statistics. The ability to walk faster is dependent on all the others in line and speeds are the fluctuating elements. Thus, he associates the troop of boys on the hike to a manufacturing system, the first in line is the line of raw materials followed by the processing unit and so on ending with sales last in line. The amount of trial between the first and the last is inventory. He also derives a game using matchsticks in a bowl to represent dependent events and the roll of the dice to represent statistical fluctuations and the goal to transfer matchsticks from one bowl to another in a line as the accumulation of fluctuations to understand how the statistics runs itself. This is presented with a plotted graph of deviations from the average. The hike trail analogy continues with the boys changing their positions in the line and he discovers that the slowest in the troop is governing the final outcome that is the throughput in the manufacturing analogy. He then places the slowest boy at the lead of the trail and then there are no gaps in the line, everyone stays together as a team. This then leads to discussions at the plant and they understand that they need to identify the bottlenecks in the line. He defines the bottleneck as the resource whose capacity is equal to or less than the demand placed upon it. Through question-answer sessions Alex helps the team at the plant understand that the bottleneck defines the effective

capacity of the plant. Jonah then gives them the statement of the skill that they have learnt that the objective would be to make the flow through the bottleneck almost equal to the demand from the market and to increase the capacity of the plant is to increase the capacity of only the bottlenecks.

Jonah then sets the next task to identify the bottlenecks in the plant. They realize that some of the top-notch all-in-one machines that they had bought were the bottlenecks instead of the multiple smaller machines they had earlier. The task for Alex and his team was then to apply the hike analogy and try to reorganize the line by decreasing capacity at the head of production and increasing it each stage on and trying to reduce the load on the bottlenecks by using other resources or by outsourcing some parts of the process to other vendors. He demonstrates by actual calculations that the capacity of the plant is equal to the capacity of the bottlenecks and that the actual cost of a bottleneck is the total expense of the system divided by the number of hours the bottleneck produces.

He identifies three ways in which time of a bottleneck is wasted. One by giving it idle time; two by processing parts that are already defective and three to make it work on parts that you don't need in the present. He points out the problem in sacrificing present money for the future. Using this example he brings about an understanding how they need to change the way the traditional assembly line is sequenced.

Jonah explains on the site how the accounting measurements are wrong because they determine costs as if the work centers existed in isolation. Although Alex and his team were able to get more orders shipped in time and the plant had begun to make money yet, the accounting sheets showed that they were deeper down in loss. This was an example of how the costing system that is used globally was actually a different form of measurement. The narrative of *The Goal* is used to contest the general costing principles as flawed methods that do not tell the true story of the condition of the plant.

Bill Peach the Director of the company had given Alex Rogo three months' time to turn things around at his plant otherwise he would close down the plant. Alex, with Jonah's advice had brought about major changes in the working of the plant and was shipping a lot more orders than before but the plant was still in danger of being shut down owing to certain relational distortions in the measurements used by standard cost accounting. Alex needs to confront and convince the Board members to save the plant.

Conclusion:

The Goal by Eliyahu Goldratt has utilized the literary form to educate and prove the differences in cost accounting principles and actual productivity. He presents the difference between traditional untested assumptions about efficiency. These differences make up the external conflict in the plot of the novel. The denouement is brought about through question and answer sessions between the archetypal guide and mentor Joshua, and Alex Rogo's team at the plant. In the process Joshua introduces Eliyahu Goldratt's 'Theory of Constraints'. They are made to realize

that the traditional methods and concerns of increasing the productivity of the plant and other concerns have been built on wrong assumptions. The external conflict also involves convincing the Board of Directors about the validity of the efficiency of their plant.

On a second level the external conflict has its seed in an internal conflict that is the way of thinking or solving problems. As Alex is learning to handle the external conflict, he has to do so by correcting the way he thought. He is taught by Joshua to identify his goal correctly and use the proper words that define the goal in specific terms. The next step is to identify the constraints or the bottlenecks in the system and then try to figure out how the load on the constraints or the reasons for the constraints could be reduced. Alex learns to think critically to solve his problems.

On a third level there is a demonstration of the use of the critical thinking method to solve a different kind of issue such as a marital problem as demonstrated by the rift between Alex and his wife. The same principle of critical thinking that were used to resolve the plant's problem were used to solve Alex's family problem such as first of all finalizing what the goal of a marriage or a family meant to both Alex and Julie and coming to a consensus on the goal.

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