

A Critical Reading of Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*

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Abstract

Graham Greene emerged out of the two world wars as a remarkable twentieth century writer interrogating the root of evil and the existence of God in a cruel world. There is a great impact of theology on the writings of Graham Greene. His novel *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) is a Roman Catholic novel. This is the third novel in the series of his well known trilogy, the other two being *Brighton Rock* (1938) and *The Power and the Glory* (1940). He wrote with a chameleon skill maintaining the rules of the genre and assuming the colouring of the place even though the place has never been a good place. His *The Heart of the Matter* is an important post-war novel with its setting in West Africa which is likely to be a British colony. It is an unnamed British colony during the Second World War probably based on his own experiences during 1942 to 1943 in Sierra Leone. Scobie is the protagonist of this novel who is the Deputy Commissioner of Police. He is torn and split between his overdeveloped sense of responsibility and pity towards his wife, Louise and Helen Rolt, a young girl. His religious faith makes his situation very murky in the sense that it does not allow him to commit adultery which is a sin. He still commits it a number of times with Helen Rolt. He feels completely broken down as far as his religious adherence is concerned. And finally he feels compelled to commit suicide. *The Heart of the Matter* depicts psychological and personal struggles of the characters. Greene has portrayed Catholicism as an obsession neurosis.

Key Words: Theology, Roman Catholic, trilogy, chameleon, post-war, West Africa, protagonist, responsibility, adultery, suicide etc.

Scobie, a police officer in British administration in West Africa is the protagonist of *The Heart of the Matter*. A sense of decadence is conveyed in the place of his posting where he lives. Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* is concerned with Scobie's married life, of his love affair with Helen and of his religious faith. Scobie's strong feeling for Helen and Louise arises not from love but from pity. It gives us an account of Scobie's mental agony. And in fulfilling all these, he feels torn and divided. Here we can quote James Wood who in his

'Introduction' to *The Heart of the Matter* remarks:

"*The Heart of the Matter* tells the story, principally, of Scobie, a colonial policeman trapped in a loveless marriage. Scobie has an overdeveloped sense of pity and responsibility; he is never so moved by his wan, cheerless, and complaining wife than when she looks ugly and vulnerable. At those moments, his 'pity and responsibility reached the intensity of a passion'. He feels 'bound by the pathos of her

unattractiveness'. Scobie cherishes the meanness of life in the colony, for here 'you could love human beings nearly as God loved them, knowing the worst'. Scobie and his wife lost their daughter when she was a little girl, and it is perhaps this wound that has made him so helplessly drawn to the wounds of others".(P-viii)

We can agree with Henry Donaghy who in his study named "George Bernard Shaw": *Critical Survey of Drama*. Ed. by Frank N. Magill Vol. 5 remarks about Greene:" Major Scobie is a virtuous man whose Hamartia or tragic flaw lies in the excess of pity he possesses"(P.55). In fact pity is the basis of his human relationship. He (Scobie) gives his own perception of pity:

"Pity smouldered like decay at his heart. He would never rid himself of it. He knew from experience how passion died away and how love went, but pity always stayed. Nothing ever diminished pity. The conditions of life nurtured it. There was only a single person in the world who was unpitiable, oneself" (P. 163).

Scobie has been working in this British colony for the last fifteen years with a sense of devotion to his profession. The period is Second World War when the colony is afflicted with some of the problems arising from it. This colony is marked by its seediness, the spiritual emptiness and a sense of failure among human beings which constitute an important feature of Greene's novels. In the early part of the novel, we are introduced to the atmosphere of seediness and squalor prevalent in the unnamed

colony. The reason behind its seediness is indicated by the presence of abundant vultures, mosquitoes, lizards etc.

Scobie has been married to Louise for the last fourteen years. He is no longer in love with her. Scobie's petition for promotion is not taken into consideration. This makes Louise disappointed and she remarks:

"I was so upset I came out of Mass before the end. It's so mean of them, Ticki. You can't take it lying down. You've got to think of me" (P. 15).

She wanted to go to South Africa for some time for a change. She says:

"If only we could go to South Africa. I can't bear the people here" (P. 15).

But Scobie does not have money to arrange for her passport and send her and he really feels helpless. His mental suffering can be viewed from Greene's own spiritual conflict and religious attitude. Like Greene, Scobie also got converted to Roman Catholicism in order to marry Louise. Here we can quote John Atkins who in his work *Graham Greene* views Scobie as "a distorted reflection of his Creator, a man who cannot disguise or hide his feelings" (P. 159). In order to please his wife, he borrows two hundred pounds from Yusef, a Syrian merchant and trader who has an ill reputation of running illegal activities like the smuggling of diamonds from this colony. After Louise is gone to South Africa, Scobie happens to meet Helen Rolt and falls in love with her to which she fully reciprocates. His Catholicism does not allow him to have an adulterous relationship with Helen. A sense of guilt overcomes him and begins to feel lonely. Here we can aptly quote from

Bibhash Choudhury's book *English Social And Cultural History* where he remarks:

“The plight of the personal occupied a very important place in Greene's fiction which was portrayed in *The Power and the Glory* (1940) and *The Heart of the Matter* (1948)” (P. 265).

His sense of pity for Helen is mixed with love in such a way that it is difficult for him to discontinue his relationship with her. His sense of guilt is increased especially when Louise comes back to him from South Africa.

Greene observed the loss of religious sense in the modern novel. And with the loss of the religious sense, the sense of the importance of the human act was lost. He, therefore, in his own way tried to restore that importance, thereby justifying the novel not only in aesthetic but also in moral sense. This is what constitutes his artistic purpose. What is more important in his novels is not the human action, but the moral implication of the human act. This preoccupation has made Greene sound didactic. Greene's Scobie is in no way a devout Catholic and still at the end the priest envisions some hope for him on the ground that he loved God and tells his wife:

“It may seem an odd thing to say—when a man's as wrong as he was—but I think, from what I saw of him, that he really loved God” (P. 255).

The essence of the novel is embodied in Scobie. His life has become a total mess. And in order to come out of this mess, he commits suicide. He knows quite well that committing suicide is a mortal sin. And still he commits it in order to secure happiness to the two women in his life and

also so that he would stop hurting God by putting an end to his committing adultery with Helen Rolt. He tried to be faithful to all three of them by committing suicide (Louise, Helen and God). He has a sense of pride in him when he compares himself to Christ which is evident from his utterance:

“Christ had not been murdered- you couldn't murder God. Christ had killed himself: he had hung himself on the Cross as surely as Pemberton from the picture-rail” (P. 174).

The novel wants us to probe in the relationship between man and God. Scobie draws on Christ. As Christ died on Cross without saving himself so also Scobie dies. But this is misunderstanding. Here we see that he has a limited understanding of God's knowledge and love for him on the one hand and on the other hand he has a sense of pride in him. Otherwise why should he think of securing happiness to others as if he were God. Who is he to decide for others' happiness? Why did he not have trust in God's mercy? He thinks that his sin is too great and grave for God to forgive him. This novel is not only an exploration of the heart of the matter but also a kind of interrogation of what is there in the church. The priest tells Louise after Scobie has committed suicide:

“I know the Church says. The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart” (P. 254).

Greene later on in his life accepted Roman Catholicism but did not subscribe to its dogmatism. Here he is raising a human question in the above statement of Fr. Rank. It is not a theological question. This novel deals with issues like guilt, sin,

suffering, Catholicism, death and salvation. Scobie is seen as weak in his personal life, but he is strong and dedicated in his professional life. He dies for securing happiness to others. Greene tries to probe into the philosophical and psychological aspects of Scobie's character. Cedric Watt's observation in his *A Preface to Greene* is appropriate here who maintains:

"Like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, *The Heart of the Matter* is a philosophical, psychological and spiritual enquiry into the heart of man, with the pains arising from the ills and malaise of the modern world"(P. 94).

The Heart of the Matter was widely discussed for its Catholicism after its publication. We can quote George Orwell's review from the introduction to *The Heart of the Matter* by James Wood which remarks:

"Scobie is incredible because the two halves of him do not fit together. If he were capable of getting into the kind of mess that is described, he would have got into it years earlier. If he really felt that adultery is mortal sin, he would stop committing it; if he persisted in it, his sense of sin would weaken. If he believed in hell, he would not risk going there merely to spare the feelings of a couple of neurotic women. And one might add that if he were the kind of man we are told he is- that is, a man whose chief characteristic is a horror of causing pain-he would not be an officer in a colonial police force" (P.x).

The above review sounds convincing. It appears to us that perhaps knowingly Scobie created a mess for himself. Scobie feels that his willingness to shoulder the burden of others' suffering involves despair:

"Despair is the price one pays for setting oneself an impossible aim. It is, one is told, the unforgivable sin, but it is a sin the corrupt or evil man never practises. He always has hope. He never reaches the freezing-point of knowing absolute failure. Only the man of goodwill carries always in his heart this capacity for damnation"(P.50).

We get a feel of Greene as a pessimistic and critical writer. His novel in hand presents to us a world which is seedy, depressing, full of disappointment and despair. One way of looking at Scobie's character is that may be it is due to the effect of seediness on him that he becomes corrupt devoid of his adherence to Catholic practices. In him we find some kind of moral dilemma and escapism. He is wanting in understanding God's love and mercy for human beings. Even though he is called Scobie the Just, he is not matured to understand God's love and mercy for man. He is his own adversary. He brings up his own ruination. As a critical reader one can feel whether the theological content invalidate the reading of this novel. The narrative in this novel is a work of art. And Greene was not interested in the question of salvation and redemption. He was basically depicting the predicament of man. Scobie has innate goodness. His innate goodness has been prompting him to do good to others. When we place this novel in the Second World War period then we see that he is doing

good to others in misery. But he could have left this task to God. The novel is replete with layers of themes like loneliness, alienation, suffering, pity, responsibility etc. At one point in the novel, Scobie even goes to the extent of

doubting the existence of God. What Greene is perhaps trying to inform the readers is that this is how a man following Roman Catholicism is likely to behave to the need of real life.

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