



THE TRAGIC FALL OF GREENEAN HEROES AS PICTURED IN THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF GRAHAM GREENE

DR.S.Chelliah

Professor, Head & Chairperson, School of English & Foreign Languages, Department of English & Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai (T.N) India.

Abstract

This paper is a humble attempt not only to project Graham Greene as the leading exponent in English of the existentialist psychological fiction which dominated European literature during the forties and afterwards but also to show to the reading public that the modern novel has lost religious sense and that with the loss of the religious faith was also lost the loss of human value and dimension. What matters most in Graham Greene's novels is not the action but the moral meaning of the human act, that is through the portrayal of almost all his characters who think continually about the importance of human acts, about God, soul, love and damnation for which Greene was considered a 'Catholic novelist'. It clearly describes how the modern man has lost his subjectivity and is found groping like a blind man in the dark world making a search for his own identity and how his heroes, like the novelist himself, appear to be sick with the disease of the modern civilization being in search of the meaning of life in this meaningless world.

Graham Greene is considered as the leading exponent in English of the existentialist – psychological fiction which dominated European literature during the forties and afterwards. He is of the view that the modern novel has lost the religious sense and that with the loss of the religious sense was also lost the sense of the importance of the human act. He has therefore, been concerned to restore that importance and thus to justify the novel not only in aesthetic vein but also in moral terms. This object is at the centre of his artistic intentions. What matters in his novels is not the action but the moral meaning of the human act. Almost all his characters think continually about the importance of human acts, about God and the soul, love and damnation, for which Greene has often been described as a “Catholic novelist”.

Greene remains a novelist in whom the changes are minor and the unity overwhelming. He is said to have done what he aimed at doing; he has expressed a religious sense and created a fictional world in which human acts are important. His development as a novelist reveals above all an attempt to restore to the English novel two qualities which it had lost; one, the religious sense; and the other being the sense of the importance of the human act. Thus, Greene gave back to the English novel that extra dimension which places characters against the background of a world in which they are seen through the eyes of God. However unimportant they may seem in the world of the senses, they have an overwhelming importance in another world. Greene often chooses to portray the weak, the failures; and through their very weakness and sense of failure, they have a special love for God which makes them the “heroes” of his novels.

The first half of the twentieth century has witnessed the loss of traditional, moral and spiritual values due to which there was a wide-spread anarchy, anxiety, hollowness and chaos in every facet of life leading to the feeling of disbelief among the whole mankind as is said by W.B. Yeats in his poem “The Second Coming”:

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
Here anarchy is loosed upon the world” (P19)

Graham Greene was the product of a restless, turbulent and exploratory period when there was total loss of values all around. No writer can remain unaffected from the prevalent social scenario and Greene was not an exception in this regard. While writing, he did keep in his mind all that he had seen and experienced since his childhood. Therefore, to understand Greene's heroes and Greene as a man is to study Greene's childhood. He himself subscribes to the theory that childhood and adolescence form a blue-print of the man's personality and temperament to the extent that later on, the life is built faithfully on his design. Greene's vision of reality may be compared to that of his contemporaries like George Orwell, D.H. Lawrence, Rudyard Kipling who suffered in their childhood for various reasons like domestic conflicts, economic problems and nightmarish experiences. His early sufferings made him sympathetic and compassionate to the outcaste and downtrodden in society. As P.N.Pandit puts it,

“Greene's sense of utter futility regarding life, the stifling puritanical environment of his school of Berkhamstead, his alienation from his school mates, his tortures at the hands of bullies, his truanancies to the Commons and his desire to end his life by playing Russian roulette and taking poison all these form a background to understand his characters” (P34).



These experiences form a symbiosis in Greene's childhood experiences and the characters of his novels recreate the same whatever they faced in their childhood. Greene seems to always hear the child speaking to him and his works are his answers to the child's eternal questions. They explain his miseries and sorrows. It is noted down by Carolyn D. Scott as;

"No critic can escape the childhood theme in Greene, for it is the one obsession out of which his tragedies grow" (P9)

He is greatly concerned with the human predicament and his central characters are his mouth pieces who represent his own ideas and conflicts as well as explorations of his experiences. He looks at his heroes in relation to his own intensely felt reactions and consequently they may be used as signposts to his own sensibility.

Graham Greene's heroes are to be judged not only by the traditional values of society but also from God's point of view. He has successfully understood the predicament in which man finds himself today. His heroes who are trapped in an existential web are shown to have discovered, even in their disillusionment some positive values of life like love, nobility, dignity and authenticity. Through his heroes, Greene emphasizes the miserable plight of the contemporary man and stresses the importance of quest for a virtuous life. His artistic technique lies in placing a person in some distress caused by a particular contemporary environment to bring home the essential belief of his that distress turns an individual towards God. All the heroes of Greene's world in general and the heroes of the trilogy in particular remain busy in search of their own identity, self and God with an earnest desire to survive on their own ideals. During this quest, they revolt against the ongoing prevalent traditional, cultural and orthodox-religious values. In the garb of such a deplorable social scenario, the passionate writer of the time like Greene could not help being committed to project his own views on the sufferings of the individuals. As a catholic writer, Greene is found presenting Catholicism in **Brighton Rock** (1938), **The Power and the Glory** (1940) and **The Heart of the Matter** (1948) as an obsessional neurosis. Though his Catholic heroes know rather thoroughly that the sins they commit would lead them to the path of damnation, they are helpless and ultimately sinners both in the eyes of orthodox people and in their own eyes. They realize so intensely that:

"What stands between the sinner and the love of God is institutionalism, piety and dogma" (Wilshire 137).

The predicament in the life of Greene's heroes arises partly from his own moral conditioning and partly from the collective forces of society, as for example; in the case of Pinkie-the central character in **Brighton Rock**. It was the terrible slum of his childhood that had filled Pinkie with anger and hatred against the world and with a furious loathing of the game of sex. At seventeen, the Roman Catholic as he is, the committed mortal sin and accepted damnation with a proud, soured egotism. Pinkie is a soul driven to choose damnation.

The modern man has lost his subjectivity and he gropes like a blind man in the dark world in quest for his own identity. Greene himself suffered from boredom and anxiety in his teenage and came to terms with his life by his own effort and that is why his heroes too are angst-ridden because he facts himself incapable of being at once with his deeper self. He is one of those:

"men and women who lead lives at the worst so painful, at the best so monotonous poor and limited that the urge to escape, the longing to transcend themselves, if any for a few moments is and has always been one of the principal appetites of the soul" (Huxley 157).

Like Greene himself, his heroes, like Scobie and Pinkie, seem to be sick with the disease of modern civilization and are in search of the meaning of life in this meaningless world. Fully bored and frustrated from the materialistic world, Greene's heroes try to find solace in religion but here too, they are unable to get any satisfaction. Conventional and religious values appear insufficient to help them find out the core and purpose of their existence and hence they suffer due to their tragic dilemma. The personality and character of Pinkie, the hero of the novel, **Brighton Rock** is a fine product and superb execution of Greene's attempt in making his heroes hostile to the rigid calculating rules of life and rational outlook. Pinkie stands first in the list of those heroes who are 'saintly sinners'. The boy, Pinkie, is the most powerful embodiment of evil in Greene's fictional world. He is the evil in propria persona that seems to have haunted Greene's mind from his very childhood. He is a poor, shabby, fierce-souled creature, born and brought amidst poverty, corruption and violence of the slums. In fact, his psychological conditioning in his childhood has predisposed him to evil. Pinkie is dehumanized, vicious and sadistic. This gangster who is "the most driven and damned of all Greene's characters" (Lewis) is at odds against the world he exists in. He is unapproachable, remote and almost devilishly cunning. However, in his relentless pursuit for power, Pinkie has made himself an agent of the devil and he is completely untouched by human feelings. This makes him



disregard every kind of human contact. Pinkie's voluntary separation from the rest of the people of Brighton is because of various reasons: his harrowing experience of a warped childhood, his initiation into a world of corruption and violence, his exaggerated egotism, his inability to know his faults and his distorted ambition to wield power to become the grandmaster in the game of bloodshed and violence. He, like Macbeth, commits one murder and then, in order to cover one killing by another, he covers a long journey of murders and sins. He is totally engrossed in evil-betrayal, violence, murder but with a full awareness of the consequences and external meaning of his acts. Pinkie suffers from tragic dilemma and he eventually suffers as evil force has entered in him since his childhood.

Pinkie is synonymous of Brighton itself. Brighton becomes a highly personalized landscape, an inescapable territory that works upon him and projects the hostile and isolated world he is bound to. His pride and sin impel him to do crimes which in turn sustain ego. Pinkie thinks himself a super criminal and his morbid thinking from normal impulses has made him a criminal. He cannot conceive to goodness as he had lived in a state of hell throughout his life. His crimes like the murder of Hale and Spicer, the fake suicide pact to get rid of Rose and his acts of sadistic cruelty, pulling off the legs and wings of a leather jacket or crushing a moth out of existence under his shoe or pushing a blind man out of the way, display not merely the criminality and violence in him but a conscious dedication to his creed-the path of evil. Pinkie's tragic experiences of life make him the most powerful vehicle of evil powers:

"Greene endows this brutal, undersized, seventeen-year-old criminal with the capacity to choose evil, to parody his creed *credo in unam satanum*' and to take a bitter pride in the prospect of his own damnation" (Kenneth Allott 148)

The horrors of childhood have conditioned Pinkie to a future of helplessness and instability. He feels completely abandoned like a soul in purgatory watching the shameless act of a beloved person. Such an exposure of marital life had an adverse and disastrous effect on Pinkie's emotional life. Since Pinkie has been abandoned so brutally in childhood, he abandons everyone and trespasses the norms of social and personal life. He becomes emotionally maladjusted and cannot concede to a way of life that spells horror and repulsion. Estranged from his parents, he seeks refuge in this all – pervasive world of evil. There ensues tragic dilemma. Pinkie knows that his tragic experience has alienated him from God and that it is too late for him to believe in any other God except the Devil. However, Pinkie is isolated by his evil scheme, Yet he is not corrupt. His evil is a "pure pristine integrity, a priestly asceticism" (Exiles 131). In short, tragic dilemma runs through Pinkie's head as Hell lays around him since his childhood during which the seeds of corruption, hatred and his love for all the deadly sins were sown. In all this life, he could not love any woman and particularly his sexual attitude towards Rose was formed only because of the compulsion. For him, childhood was not a period of innocence but of horror. In brief, the tragic dilemma of Pinkie lies in the thematic perspective of the book which is a combat between good and evil, social and economical, physical and metaphysical, temporal and spiritual forces of life.

The Greenean protagonist is not a man at peace with himself; he is afflicted, unbalanced, disillusioned and has to fight a relentless battle in a world where hypocrisy and pretensions are present. His sufferings originate not so much in the chaos of the world but in the chaos within the self. The tragic dilemma that is the center of action in the novels of Greene is not the external world of man but the inner world of man and it is the dilemma of man against his own self. In the words of Leslie Paul,

"Man is divided in himself, division and disharmony are the signs of man's spiritual nature for he is not only divided. He is aware of being divided".

An interesting thing about Greene's heroes is that even though they lead a busy life living in the heart of civilization, his protagonists are isolated. The reason is that Greene creates, like T.S.Eliot in his early poems, a wasteland – a world of material poverty, and spiritual emptiness. All Greenean protagonists have 'split personalities' or as K. Allot and M.Farris put it, 'a divided mind'. This is what one finds Scobie in **The Heart of the Matter** is embarrassingly of two persons; the sentimental, passionate and full of love towards Helen Rolt on the one side and the inquisitive and responsible to his wife Lousie on the other. The same kind of dilemma or dual personality we face in Whisky-Priest in **The Power and the Glory** where he runs between two opposite poles. On one side, he is a priest offering the grace of God to people, helping him in Confession and absolution, and on the other, he is a fallen man who indulges in adultery and wine-addiction as a result of which he flouts the rules laid own by Christianity.

Running through his other works, the idea of isolation is fully developed in **The Power and the Glory** in which the priest, like other Greene's heroes, is an alienated being:



“Nowhere, in all the wide, flat marshy land was there a single person he could consult” (PG 65)

The process of the priest’s self-discovery in the course of his flight becomes all the more significant and intense through Greene’s method of contrast, paradox, caricature, parody, interior monologue and introspection. The unnamed hero of the novel who is a priest with unflinching faith in God and undeterred devotion to his Roman Catholic church is addicted to excessive drinking and has sexual relationship, with a woman by name Maria who gives birth to a daughter, Brigitta. The tension between the love of the worldly pleasures and divine love marks all the activities of Whisky Priest. He suffers throughout his life the tragic dilemma upto his death. Throughout his journey to self-discovery, the priest’s failures are ironically portrayed against the past notions of success and as he moves forward into the future of further suffering, his realization becomes all the more acute. What apparently appears to be the decline of the priest is actually the painful ascent to the summit of complete and undisguised truth of his basic self. He is like the bitch guarding the bone of belief from the debris of priesthood. The dilemma in the mind of the priest makes him a stranger wherever he goes forcing him to conclude that there is an unbridgeable gap between him and the people surrounding him as he says:

“Nobody came forward to bliss his hand and ask his blessing. It was as if he had descended by means of his sins into the human struggle to learn other things besides despair and love, that a man can be unwelcome ever in his own house” (PG 62)

It is this belief in his vocation that makes the priest acutely aware of the conflict of two different persons he is made up of that the dominating, pompous, corrupt person of the past and the weak, suffering, more compassionate person of the present. The Whisky priest like Pinkie, is an angst-ridden character.

The Heart of the Matter is a powerful study of the theme of sin through adultery, suffering through absolution as it is without doing confession and salvation so called after death. The chief interest of Greene centres around the exploration, exposition and exhibition of the deep recesses of Scobie’s mind with their respective suffering, psyche and agonized temperament. Scobie suffers and faces failures due to the evil force he has inside him taking Scobie unsuccessful at the individual level, at the family level, at the social level and at the spiritual level, whose inevitable conclusion is that evil is all – pervasive, powerful and everlasting. At the family level, the tragic dilemma of Scobie bursts out through his human passions of pity and responsibility in tandem with evil leads to discard and disharmony which is illustrated with the appearance of Helen Rolt as a shipwrecked victim to a critical condition. The tragic downfall of Scobie is an artistic illustration of the underserved and unnatural demise of the innate goodness at the behest of evil rampant in a sick and corrupt society of West Africa. Scobie’s tragedy is that he thinks himself responsible for causing miseries not only for himself but also for others. His overwrought imagination makes him believe that he has not just killed Ali but God too. Kenneth Allott and Miriam Farris say that it is the doubleness of his attitude to his own behavior that precipitates an intolerable situation and brings out the catastrophe.

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