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Religious Vision in the Works of Graham Greene

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Abstract: A work of fiction is an aesthetic representation of the society and the author's personality. The inner life of an author is reflected in his works. The author's imagination embodies in his characters the fundamental conflicts of his own nature. That every writer is a product of his times and his outlook on life is conditioned by the mood of his age and Greene is no exception. The social, political and economic developments of the century, far from resolving the split, the schizophrenia in man's personality have further aggravated it. The experience of two world wars, have accentuated the individuals feelings of loneliness, disillusionment and sterility. Greene emphasizes the seediness, sterility and despair of modern civilization. He however is not content to give merely the picture of frustration and rootlessness but emphasizes that religion alone can give us relief. Man he warns will lose all his human qualities unless he holds on to faith in religion. The spiritual void has to be filled in order to feel at home in challenging universe and face the brute forces of evil.

Key words: Graham Greene, Religious Vision, Catholicism.

Introduction: Graham Greene is one of those great contemporary writers who represent a significant phenomenon in the twentieth century mind and the present day world, noticeable from its rejection of worn out ideals and its attempts at building up a new morality. From Darwin's theory of evolution through Freud to Max Plank and Einstein, the nature of universe has undergone a number of different interpretations. Man has been the subject of all philosophical and religious speculation. In the Middle Ages in Europe, Christian theology identified man's situation in the universe. The Renaissance and Reformation glorified the individual, almost placed him at par with the Almighty. But the growth in man's awareness of the social mechanism disrupted the sanctity of institutions that had survived the Renaissance. Despite the so-called Victorian reticence and quietude, there were in nineteenth century England highly pronounced undertones of rebellion.

Darwin visualized the human predicament in terms of a tooth and nail struggle in which only the fittest could survive. While Marx worked out science and system of the dialectics of society, Freud saw the nature of man as torn between the contending pulls of the 'id' and 'the super-ego'. The social political and economic developments, of our century, far from resolving the split, the schizophrenia in man's personality have further aggravated it. The experience of two world-wars, have accentuated the individuals feeling of loneliness, disillusionment and sterility.

Man had to acquire self-knowledge through an awareness of the conditions around him. But man is not yet a self, says Kierkegaard unless he has achieved a Synthesis with God, with "the Power which constituted him" 1. This lack of synthesis is what is called alienation which causes sickness and despair in man. Man suffers from despair for want of faith in God and this despair is "The Sickness unto Death".

A theological dimension in Greene's works is certainly a significant contribution to the

English fiction. According to Ray North, "Greene has brought to the English Novel a metaphysical dimension that is integrated into the themes of his books in a positive way and not just a conventional background". By incorporating the concepts of the Catholic faith in the English novel Greene as Sister Mariella Gable says, "has expanded the boundaries of the English novel."

The conflict between good and evil is a common thread running through all the great literature of the world. The very growth in spiritual intelligence has emphasized the radical problem of evil. And this problem is imposed by an experienced frustration of values, by the clash between what ought to be and what actually is. The essential evil sin lies in man's straying from the straight path of righteousness and into the erring ways of the flesh. The sinful life is worldly and carnal, but sin is essentially man's perverse scorn of God's will. The Christian devotion, the fundamental Christian idea, was not a reduction of the evil to the carnal, whether manifested in sexuality or vain pride, or ambition; the basic evil, sin, is always in the depraved straying of man's will from the higher to the lower. Man falls into errors when he fails to make God the centre of his life. If man is a creature of almost unlimited possibilities for good he has infinite potential for evil also. Right since the growth of modern novel, evil has fascinated the writers. Samuel Richardson marks the transcendental struggle of good and evil. It was taken over by Jane Austen, Henry James, Evelyn Waugh, George Eliot, Later, E.M. Forster look on the power of making right and wrong very near to evil and good. In Forster and Virginia Woolf one suddenly gets the sense of real evil of violence coming in from outside which they simply cannot guard against. Bronte, Dickens, Conrad, and Kipling in a lesser degree, shared a strong sense of evil. The works of Yeats, Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and G.B. Shaw depict this reality clearly.

Graham Greene takes pains to explain the inevitability of evil in this world from the point of view of Christian religion, and certainly makes a significant contribution to the English novel. It is in the introduction of this religious conception of evil into his novels that Greene differs from most of the modern English writers. He allows his characters to descend and move away from the benevolence of God because it is only when one is away from Him that one can realise the necessity of His mercy. Greene, being an investigative type of writer, examines life by placing a person in some distress caused by a particular contemporary environment. He is of the belief that distress turns an individual towards God.

At a metaphysical level, good and evil cannot be isolated from each other. Human life comprises both good and evil and it is this life that is the incarnation of mystery. Greene is obsessed with good and evil as human problems, not as Catholic problems. His characters are less of good and true Catholics and more of human beings. His sense of evil cannot be attributed to his adopted religion. His sense of evil, already obsessive, and caught up in his conversion is certainly religious because it is based on the recognition of supernatural forces which are responsible for the horrors as for the glory of man's life. Thus Greene's fiction is built on the juxtaposition of despair and belief, evil and faith. The existence of the one, in fact, implies the existence of the other. So he says "One began to believe in heaven because one believed in hell."

Graham Greene's novels are evidence of Obsessional motifs established in his early years. His unhappy childhood has had a seminal influence on all his fiction. Greene himself has mentioned in *The Lost Childhood* that the creative writer perceives his world once and for all in childhood and adolescence, and that his whole career is an effort to illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world we all share." According to Freud, creative activity has its roots in the earliest experiences of the individual, traces of which are to be found in even the most polished work of art. In February 1926, Greene converted into the Catholic religion. Greene himself states that he is a catholic with an intellectual if not an emotional belief in catholic dogma.

Greene found it increasingly difficult to harmonize his experience with Catholic myth, reality with the orthodoxy of belief. Catholicism may have given him emotional anchorage, a sense of belonging but it has not affected his creative pursuit. The new faith might have given him some spiritual assurance but he has not sacrificed experience to the tailor-made dogma of the Church.

In 1929 with the publication of *The Man Within* Greene became an independent writer. He has always been a highly topical writer and his early novels are an interesting reflection of the nineteen thirties, says Graham Martin. The novel in the thirties reflects the mood of the decade. The struggle against evil, against the forces of alienation is the hallmark of the novels of the thirties. Greene belongs to this milieu and his attitude like his contemporaries is shaped by the ethos of the age. His novels of the thirties have an immediate topical reference; they have a contemporary atmosphere. They could not have been written at any other time. These novels, superficially at least deal with the great thirties themes: "Strikes and political murder in *It's a Battlefield*, the irresponsible power of international finance in *England Made Me*, the machinations of armament manufacturers in *A Gun for Sale*, the Spanish Civil War in *The Confidential Agent*, culminating in *The Power and the Glory* with the confrontation of Marxism and religion."

The "uprooted man adrift in urban society" may be taken as a symbol of man's essential situation on earth. Greene deals with the phenomenon of the displaced person in many of his novels. In *England Made Me* (1935), Greene shows a protest against the dehumanising capitalist world but his first explicitly religious novel *Brighton Rock* did not appear until 1938. He points out how human society is based on injustice and vested interests. By that time Greene had come to the conclusion that sin and suffering are inevitable in this world and that every human soul should have the freedom to develop in its own way. In 1938, he visited Mexico to report on the position of Church there. The outcome was *The Lawless Roads* and *The Power and the Glory* in 1939 and 1940, respectively. During his Mexico travels Greene discovered; "The world is all of a piece, of course; it is engaged everywhere in the same subterranean struggle, lying ... between the two eternities of pain and God knows the opposite of pain, not we ... ". *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*, together form the Catholic trilogy. While *Brighton Rock* has the theme of salvation and damnation, the world of *The Power and the Glory* (1940) and *The Heart of the Matter* and also *The Ministry of Fear*, is built on the sentiment of pity. Greene is among the very few English novelists of modern times who have dealt with the theme of sin, grace and salvation. The magnitude of his achievement as a writer, as seen in his development from *The Man Within* (1929) to *The Captain* and *The Enemy* (1988), is a progress from melodrama to the study of evil in its various manifestations. It is also the progress of a vision touching both the social and the sacramental, showing his intrinsic humanistic and religious concerns.

Graham Greene deals with the themes of good and evil, of immortality and God, and the profound problems of human life and destiny. He finds that the growing feeling of mental anguish experienced in modern times is, to a great extent, due to the decay of religious sense. Accordingly the religious sense is of central importance to Greene and to his art of fiction. In an essay on Francois Mauriac he says: "For with the death of James, the religious sense was lost to the English novel, and with the religious sense went the sense of the importance of the human act". Greene has brought back to the English novel this lost dimension, the religious sense. For him the importance of the human act is linked with the importance of the religious sense, and the visible world is inseparable from the spiritual.

Graham Greene is an English Catholic with a Protestant past. He has always been reluctant to discuss the spiritual conflict that caused him to turn to the Catholic Church. The Catholic faith offered him some anchorage from the sense of drift and dissatisfaction with the age.

Catholicism may have given him emotional anchorage and a sense of belonging but it did not affect his creative pursuit. Greene did not sacrifice experience to the tailor-made dogma of the Church. For others Catholicism may have been a panacea but for Greene it has only come to mean 'a refuge, a retreat' from the violent anarchical world which he cannot abandon". The conversion is more formal than profound. He never reconciled to its authoritarian monolithic structure. It is noteworthy that if he is a Catholic, he is a Catholic-convert too. Above all, he is an English Catholic with a Protestant past. Marie - Beatrice Mesnet's idea "only through violence and hell are we brought to faith and heaven" is shared by Greene. But Greene's conversion to Roman Catholicism created many problems. Religion was called upon to do what psychoanalysis had failed to do. And it created a highly problematic situation. It unleashed a war between experience and dogma, a conflict between reality and the religious beliefs. Catholicism, of course, gave him a sense of belonging to an institution which has stood the test of time, providing the ultimate consolation.

Greene's active creative life has spanned the important inter-war decades when there were serious controversies regarding social reorganization on scientific basis and the choice of a system of beliefs. In the field of religion, various practices were based on the vitality of beliefs in the past. But during the Inter-war decades, these beliefs were subjected to psychological analysis. Religious thought, and the question of faith, have been more or less axiomatic without need for any logical or psychological analysis. Such a faith was built round conceptions like God, Soul, Immortality, Virtue, Salvation and so on. The most important of these is God and faith in Him as an omnipotent, omniscient being. But according to the modernist approach, religious experience is sought to be interpreted in close contact with both social and psycical reality instead of the earlier 'personalism' i.e. purely individual's inviolable faith.

Greene has a humanitarian approach towards religion. All human beings, particularly the common and the seedy character often experience a non- rational awareness of the presence of a Supreme Being. Therefore, religion and the experience of God, depend on the state of mind or 'numinous' in essence.

In fact Graham Greene is one of the few writers who looked, at religion from a contemporary perspective. Religion is a source of guidance and consolation. He also considers evil as a natural part of the human heart as much as virtue is. In his approach to religion and questions concerning ethics that Greene differs greatly from T. S. Eliot, a contemporary Catholic-convert. Eliot laid great stress on the ritualistic aspect of traditionalist Catholicism. Ritual is necessary for Eliot, he insisted even on idealizing rituals but Greene's approach to religion is different. He does not emphasize the liturgical basis of religion instead he emphasizes that religion alone can give us relief from the increasing dissatisfactions and despair and help us defend ourselves against the dehumanising collectives, and restore our true personality. It is doubtful if our society can last much longer without religion. Only religious faith can help us to feel at home in the universe and challenge the whole dehumanizing, de-personalising process of the modern age.

Greene's religious outlook cannot be ignored in any estimate of his achievement but the critical emphasis on his Roman Catholicism, often leads to tendentious interpretations. After the Catholic 'trilogy' the *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*, his reputation as a Catholic novelist was firmly established. But Greene does not want to be regarded as a "Catholic novelist" He prefers to pass for a novelist who is a Catholic. "I would claim not to be a writer of Catholic novels, but a writer who in four or five books took characters with Catholic ideas for his material". Nearly all his novels carry a stamp of his religious consciousness; he is a Catholic writer with a difference. Though religious sense plays an important role in his novels it would be a mistake to confuse it with the sectarian vested interest. Catholicism is important to Greene as a frame of reference in

some of his novels. The doctrines and symbols of the Catholic religion feed his creative imagination by giving important hints about the mystery of the human condition. Greene's fictional transfiguration of Catholicism is remarkable.

Keshava Prasad says "Religion has not blunted Greene's inbred radicalism; rather it has sharpened his sense of modern malaise. He did not join the Communist party, but championed people fighting against injustice and exploitation. Struggle is the main plank in the superstructure of his human ideology. His mind is untainted by religious considerations. It requires a human being to realize the predicament of man undergoing the trials of life." And Greene shows he has it, as he admits: "I do not consider myself a Catholic writer, of course, I am a Catholic". Greene has genuinely linked together religion and the sense of life. As R.W.B. Lewis observes: "No writer of his generation has more effectively portrayed the suffocation, the sheer hatred of the visible human world that results from certain kind of religiosity." Greene is concerned with sin and sanctity but not sanctification.

The rigidity of rituals has not been recognised by those who have converted themselves to Catholicism during the inter-war period, for example, Greene himself. Greene's Catholicism could be easily mistaken to be something like 'natural religion', based on man's intrinsic desire to repent misdeeds. Many know nothing of the confession but they may be reduced to a state of mind, when they resort to true Confession.

In Greene's approach to Catholic Christianity, the emphasis is on the change of heart and not so much on the observation of rituals. In this sense, even a forlorn character with no resources can be a true Catholic if he feels the urge to think of the superior discipline of Confession, gathering enough courage to remove fear and misgivings. It is this spiritual courage which is the essence of true religion.

In Greene's view, religion is not so much of the observance of traditional orthodox practices, but a source of solace in moments of crisis, a psychological experience. All cannot be martyrs, but every individual, however lowly placed, should once face the moment of truth, and confess the burden of guilt. Religion need not be always associated with the institution of the Church for basically it is a matter of man's consciousness. Greene himself felt a sense of inadequacy in the Church which is explicit in *The Heart of the Matter*, Father Rank seems to be Greene's mouthpiece when he says: "The Church knows all the rules. But it does not know what goes on in a single human heart."

Conclusion:

Greene feels that all the things in this external world and the whole of nature and of human life would appear to be unintelligible, senseless and void unless it could be interpreted in some transcendental sense, and unless it were informed by some deeper meaning than the bodily senses revealed. In other words, only faith in religion can answer the riddle of life. Greene points out that man cannot get along without faith. It is better to keep hold of the comfort provided by religion than be disillusioned by the hypothetical happiness based on materialism. He points out that man will be left with nothing in the absence of belief in God. Life without belief is meaningless. Man is a unique and special creation of God and that separation from God leads to misery. He stresses the fact that even a sordid life under the shadow of religion is infinitely better than an atheistic and purely materialistic life in the "chromium world". Greene has thus reintroduced religion as a relevant theme into English fiction G. W. Allport rightly states that it is up to the modern man to take up the strands of science and bind them with the values and traditions taught by religion.

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