

Sin and Salvation in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*

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Abstract. Graham Greene in almost all his novels raises the issue of religion and spirituality. He is a staunch believer in baptism and realization of one's guilt that can restore redemption, to the fullest without telling any scope of evil or sin at all. The spiritual qualities of a human being depend on the adherence to morality and innocence and a man may get redemption by penance and acceptance of the sinfulness and also by seeking forgiveness. This is the gist of Catholicism and Christianity. Greene achieves artistic greatness by fusing fiction with spirituality. The prominent character of the novel, Major Scobie commits the sin of adultery and for redemption of his sin, he commits suicide. And at last he is saved by God's mercy.

Keywords : Baptism; religion and spirituality; morality; catholicism and christianity; sin and salvation.

Graham Greene is a novelist of great repute for his spiritual philosophy believing strongly in the unseen spiritual power of God, who always reciprocates in kindness. It is Greene's staunch faith in God that he treats the Christian and yet the universal theme is of sin and salvation in his novel *The Heart of the Matter*. Even the worst of the sinners may have salvation through good deeds and religious faith. Continuing with his catholic commitments, the novelist creates a memorable character Major Scobie who is led to commit the sins of adultery and suicide. However, the succession of events show how Scobie tries to avoid sinful acts and thereby deserves God's mercy through his good intentions.

The philosophical foundation that man is imperfect is the forte of Greene. Man's body is prone to evil, and the radiant way to redeem man from the net of sins is to have unflinching faith in God and his mercy. In *The Heart of the Matter*, Greene himself says, "Point me out the happy man and I will point you out either extreme egotism, evil or else an absolute ignorance". (*The Heart of the Matter*, 139) The wholeness of being in fact combines God, nature, the self and the cosmic forces into one and the irony of human existence is nothing but a conflict between the evil desires and a desire to obtain divine as well.

The Heart of the Matter is one of the most important novels written by Graham Greene. It was written and published after the Second World War and it deals with the religious or theological ideas of sin, suffering, damnation, salvation, God's mercy, guilt consciousness and above all the catholic sentiments. Greene has an observing eye for evil which is omnipresent and like Dickens, he too appears to be more convinced of the predominance of evil elements in life than of good elements.

Hence, the present novel *The Heart of the Matter* may be studied from the point of view of a crucial conflict between good and evil.

The central theme of the novel revolves around Major Scobie, his wife Louise and a nineteen year old widow, Helan Rolt. Major Scobie lives in a colony in the west coast of Africa during the Second World War. He has taken the responsibility for local security during wartime. Her wife was leading an unhappy life with her husband. She likes to read literature and poetry. Scobie feels pity for her but he does not love her. Louise was a devout catholic and her husband was a converted catholic. His love for Louise has been replaced by a sense of pity and responsibility. He sometimes tells himself :

Kindness and pity has no power with her, she would never have pretended an emotion. She didn't feel and like an animal she gave way completely to the momentary sickness and recovered as suddenly. (130)

Louise is sensitive by temperament. She is fed up with colony life and wants to go to South Africa where she can spend some moments peacefully. But he fails in arranging money. Then he tries to secure a loan from a Bank. A Syrian trader, Yusef offers to lend Scobie the money. But he does not accept his proposal. Meanwhile both of them met a person named Wilson at Cape Station Club. They soon become friends. Wilson gets attracted towards Louise slowly. But she does not accept his love. She always feels love for her husband, not for anyone else.

The next morning we see Scobie and others waiting for the arrival of the boats bringing the survivors of the torpedoed boat. The boats are full of wounded passengers. There is a six year old girl who is almost dead and a nineteen year old recently married woman Helen Rolt, whose husband was dead. Scobie feels pity and is drawn to her. He soon starts a passionate affair with her. His adulterous affairs with her causes downfall and dilemma in his life. Because of this relationship he betrays his wife, Louise as well as his Catholic ideals.

In the next chapter we see that Scobie is fully entrapped in Helan's love. One day he writes a letter to Helan which falls into Yusef's hand. He blackmails him. The love-affair between them is born out of his feeling of pity for her. He feels pity for both i.e., his wife Louise and beloved Helan. He feels pity and responsible for those who are close to him or whom he loves. He himself says :

It has always been his responsibility to maintain happiness in those he loved. (41)

His love for Helan puts him in a difficult situation. One of the famous critics Marcel More says about Scobie, "he is too weak, physically speaking to endure the sight of another's suffering". (102)

When Louise returns from the journey Scobie did not tell about his affairs with Helan. He attends mass with his wife and receives communion in his state of mortal sin. It is a sacrilege according to Catholic teaching. Louise took him to communion to make him confess his affair with Helan. But he did not make the confession for the fear of hurting her. By doing so he hurt God by his sacrilegious act of not confessing. He has a deep faith in God and does not want to offend Him. But when it comes to choose between hurting his wife or beloved and God, he chooses God. But his pity and love for his fellow human beings is an indication of his love of God. One of the famous critics Frank Kermode puts his opinion in his article:

The main issue of the book is that Scobie's intolerable positions is plotted by God; he demands more love and pity than anybody else and ought not to get them. Even specialists in Him know far more about His demands than His benefactions; it is His mercy, not His justice, that is unfamiliar, 'appallingly strange'. A goodman should not be treated as Scobie is.

(Kermode, 185-186)

In the beginning chapter of the novel, the novelist has portrayed the character of Scobie as an honest, dutiful, hardworking and pious man. He commits the first sin when he destroys a letter found concealed in the captain's cabin on a Portuguese ship. The letter written by the captain reminds him of his own daughter. He feels pity for the captain and this generosity leads him to the list of the corrupt police officers. While others got corrupted by money he was corrupted by sentiments. He says :

...Sentiment was more dangerous because you could not name price. A man open to bribes was to be relied upon below a certain figure, but sentiment might uncoil in the heart at a name, a photograph, even a small remembered... (*The Heart of the Matter*; 45)

Due to this sentimental pity Scobie leads himself from dishonesty to adultery and from adultery to sacrilegious communions and finally to suicide. Graham Greene has tried to show how the morality or pity leads modern man into good as well as evil. It is out of pity and sentiments for his wife Louise that he borrows money from Yusef to send to South Africa. The borrowing of money is also a guilt and it binds him ever to Yusef. The smuggler becomes his companion and advisor. He did all those things what Yusef wanted. He also helped Yusef in the smuggling of diamonds. When his most trusted servant, Ali come to know about the diamond episode and his relationships with Helan, he discusses about it to Yusef. He assures him not to worry about it and the very next day he discovers that Ali has been murdered. He realizes that his servant is murdered only because of him. If he would not have discussed with Yusef he would not have been murdered by him. He says :

Oh God! he thought, y've killed you; you've served

me all these years and I've killed you at the end of them... you were faithful to me and I would not trust you. (231)

In the last chapter we see the tragic end of the central character of the novel. He is no less than Shakespearean tragic heroes as he exhibits several noble qualities and enjoys a high position and he is guided by his flaw to act in manner so as to bring about his downfall because of complicated situations arising out of his acts. He is ultimately led to commit suicide and meet a tragic end. Enumerating upon the ideology of Hinduism and specially about achieving salvation - Moksha/Mukti, Swami Vivekanand opines :

... When we would be seized with a passionate longing to break all bonds and fly unto the highest, he would say that his works and activities as a religious teacher and Preacher were all vanity and supreme positions upon his true nature. Viewed from the highest standpoint, all work, even that of doing good to others is no doubt Maya, a hindrance to personal mukti. But illumined souls like Vivekananda, who belongs, in the words of his master, to the class of a Charyakos or world teachers, are born to take upon their shoulders the burden of a whole world. (165-166)

However, Graham Greene's narration of the concept of Christianity and specially of redemption from sin takes him to the view that suffering is the only process of attaining redemption. Salvation is nothing but ennobling a human being relieving him from the burden of his sins. Scobie's character is very close to the Priest in *The Power and The Glory* as David Pryce Jones notices :

Both men (Scobie and the Priest) are driven to their death by self...enfeebling motives in which they appear to connive and both men are obsessed with the guilt of their sins, which is sapping all foundations of morality. They feel these sins are doing direct injury to God which they are powerless to prevent. Both are essentially good men seduced by the weakness of the flesh. (93)

Scobie thinks that by committing suicide he can ensure the peace and happiness for those whom he loves. Scobie is seen suffering from unbearable conflict between his love for Louise and Helan as for God. He believes that by killing himself he will stop inflicting pain on those he loves. He says :

... O God, I am the only guilty one because I have known all the time. I've preferred to give you pain rather than give pain to Helan or my wife because I

can't obsessive your suffering....I can't desert either
of them while, I'm alive but I can die and remove
myself from their blood stream... (*The Heart of the
Matter*, 241)

The text and the context show that how Scobie vacillates in between God and Satan though God is a prominent actor in Greene's Catholic novels. Further man suffers due to his own weaknesses and sinful devices out of unceasing temptations. But "where sin abounded grace did much more abound i.e. the greater the failure of man the greater the mercy of God". (78) Hence Major Scobie seeks forgiveness for shifting his love from God to a woman. He confides to God :

Oh God, If you love me as I know you do, help me to
leave you. Dear God, forget me. (254)

Scobie's communication with God has lots of human shades. His hatred for God is shown just because of the prevalence of sin, evil and suffering in the world created by Him (God). Scobie shows his inability to understand God's ways and also because of his parallel love for Helan and Louise. The guilty self of Scobie brings him to torn-pieces. Killing Ali through Yusef makes him understand as if he has killed God with his devilish mindset. A parallel study of the conflicting and suffering souls of Major Scobie and Dr. Faustus is quite possible over here. This complexity of inner conflict has been going on in the very heart of Major Scobie who witnesses a voice within the voice in himself. What we find at last is the benevolent Scobie who can't see others suffering not even God, he shoulders the entire responsibility of suffering on himself by deliberately losing sense of trust in God. As Lodge rightly opines in his *About Catholic Authors*, Scobie shows, "a kind of emotional egoism, a compulsion to take the load of cosmic suffering on his shoulder". (107)

At last we can conclude that no man is perfect in this world, Greene wanted to give the message that all human beings can be good or evil. One should not suspend one's judgment of others. No one has perfect knowledge except God. we commit sin because of our limited knowledge. We see the same in Scobie's case also. The novel is truly an exposition of christian, ethical philosophy and the ultimate outcome is uttered by Father Rank who consoles Scobie's wife Louise that no one "knows a thing about God's mercy"... "Church knows all the the rules"... "it does not know what goes on in a single human heart" (333) Somewhere there appears to be unique complexity about judging a human heart. Even the church has its limits and hence it is only upto God to judge whether to forgive or not. Though Scobie loved God but he failed to have trust in God and the same lead him to commit suicide. *The Heart of the Matter* as a novel stands unparalleled for a literary and psychological analysis of Christianity and the inscrutable ways of a human heart.

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