

Article

GRAHAM GREENE : A STUDY OF HIS ART AND IDEAS

ASHA SHARMA

Law and legislative affairs depart ,
Bhopal (M.P.)

Whether Graham Greene Is a 'Catholic Writer' or 'a writer who is Catholic' has been the cause of much comment by various critics. His conversion from Anglicanism to the Roman Catholic Church encouraged the view that his novels should be studied as paradigms of Catholic theology. Though Greene himself

Our interests on the dangerous edge of things. The honest thief, The tender murderer, The superstitious atheist, demi-rep. That loves and saves her soul in new French books- we watch while these in equilibrium keep the giddy line of midway.

This passage catalogues what is more characteristic in Greene's work -- the precarious moral equilibrium, of the characters between tenderness and murder, honesty and thievery, between sanctity and sin. These characters who stay on the giddy line of midway are important because through them Greene tries to evaluate the moral meaning and importance of human act. Therefore, the importance of characters like the honest thief and the tender murderer is that they define the world discarded from the presence of God. In the epigraph to *The Lawless Roads*, Greene says, "What shall be said to this reason - bewildering fact? I can only answer that either there is no Creator, or the living society of men is in a true sense discarded from His presence." Therefore, the situations in which his characters are entangled become the metaphors of the human condition and suffering, which has been summed up by Marie - Beatrice Mesnet:

Lost in a strange world, unhappy, suffering from his destiny, and in doing so becomes conscious of an interior division. He is existence and essence, a thinking and an empiric self. The working of his consciousness in felt as a dissociation of his being.

This explains the position of the protagonist of almost Greene's every novel. When he is not actually a fugitive the protagonist feels that he is a misfit, an outsider, who does not really belong. Graham Greene bares the very soul of his characters and tells us of an experience and a situation which are rather common. His protagonist knows what is right, he wants to do what is right, and yet somehow, he can never do it. He knows what is wrong, and yet, somehow, he does it. He feels himself to be a split personality. He feels himself pulled in two directions. He is haunted by this feeling of frustration- his ability to see what is good and his inability to do it, his ability to recognise what is wrong and his inability to do it, his ability to recognise what is wrong and his inability to refrain from doing it. This human situation is exactly what Seneca talked to as "our helplessness in necessary things." This chasm between the inner and the outer man which was explored by Greene in his seminal novel *The Man Within*, is depicted with greater insight and subtlety in the later novels from *The Power and the Glory* to **The Comedians**.

This enduring value lies in Greene's awareness of sin, in his recognition of evil a necessary creative principle and in his acceptance of the brutal, the unsavoury side to a meaningful existence. Is Greene pessimistic? A mystified quester, a Sisyphean seeker cannot be accused of pessimism. His "pessimism", if at all, is the recognition of our reality that is truth, of truth that is our reality. Greene imparts to his readers a sense of unease, uncertainty and limitedness. His vision admits of no facile satisfactory resolution of human travail - with the crucial question of how a God who is supposed to have created the world out of love, can condone suffering and expect to be loved in return. Greene, with unfaltering vision, has postulated an intolerable

God who does expect it and does not allow us to pervert ourselves without damnation. Hence the confusion, the obscurity, the paradoxes in Greene's works. The ordinary man will have to take - Him on trust: the Catholic will have a greater intimacy with the twists of the lamp and will be less inhibited by its cruelty if he absorbs orthodoxy. Greene is of two species: he is neither here nor there. He cannot but remind Us of Dante. But Greene knows that a virtuous man can almost cease to believe in Hell though he carried Hell about with him. Virtue or piety Paves the path to the hocus-pocus of perfectibility, to an eyeless metaphysical delusion. That way, Greene suggests his damnation not redemption. He relentlessly, even ruthlessly explored a private world of corrosion and decay, invested with evil, apparently God-forsaken, but finally redeemed by God.

We are made to face and come to terms with pessimism and frustrations of Greene's men and women: one of his deepest intuitions is the predicament which invariably enforces upon man the necessity or some conclusive action. A Greene hero responds and reacts partly to collective forces of society and partly to his own moral intuitions. The conjunction of the forces within and without produces the sense of an invisible necessity which seems to govern the actions of the protagonist at crucial moments. He is impelled by his childhood experiences, by a religious moral code or by obsessive fears and desires. What is to be noted is that he acts and feels morally responsible for the consequences of his actions. J.P. Kulshrestha aptly remarks:

The freedom of Greene's protagonist is severely limited by their own compulsive actions and reactions and also by chance encounters and happenings. They have a curious "stillness" in that they are haunted like ancient heroes by a sense of fatality. Greene conveys through his protagonists his own sense of inexorability, his ironic awareness of pendulum about to swing. This does not, however, mean that Greene swallows determinism whole. There is at any rate no 'stark casualty' in his novels, howsoever marred the lines of his characters may be. Even Pinkie, whose every move seems predetermined, is not ultimately denied the freedom

to choose God instead of the devil. Others too, like the Whisky Priest, Scobie and Sarah, Querry and Plarr are at some time or the other allowed an act of free will (not with-standing an implacable pattern unfolding in their lives) to reject past commitments and to transcend the confinements of human condition.

Relevant to the above view, Martin Turnell makes a perceptive observation:

These, then, are factors which determine the quality of the religion in the work of Graham Greene. It would be wrong to close our eyes to its shortcomings and unfair not to try to understand the reasons for them, or to withhold our gratitude for what he and other contemporary Christian writers have done for us. For whatever his shortcomings or his limitations in this world of the Christian novelist has one lesson of immense importance to teach us all. He does remind us on every page that human beings, however vilely they behave, have immortal souls, that the alternatives salvation-damnation are the greatest reality, indeed the only reality, in the world.

By the exploration of the absurd and the irrational, Greene arrives at a positive meaning of life. As Dr. Plarr puts it in *The Honorary consul*, "Life is absurd. Because it's absurd, there is always hope."

Undoubtedly Greene presents the constant reevaluation of the self undergone by the protagonist. By focussing on his failures the protagonist becomes aware of his weaknesses. He may be remorseful, but his remorse is at the acceptance of things which are contrary to the values and laws imposed by society and religion. Thus the awareness of failures and weaknesses lead to suffering, conflict, soul-searching tension, in short, to the recognition of the self, which can only help him by making him dissatisfied with the devil. And Greene suggests that his awareness of guilt is the hero's path to redemption. No man, howsoever vile, is lost for ever. Redemption is possible. Even the fallen man can redeem himself and the sinner (the hunted man) can still relate himself to others. He can belong.