Ars Artium: An International Peer Reviewed-cum-Refereed
Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
ISSN (Online) : 2395-2423 • ISSN (Print) : 2319-7889
Vol. 3, January 2015
Pp. 30-33

A Study of Scobie's Psyche in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*

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Abstract

This paper is a study of Scobie's Psyche in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter.* Graham Green is a widely acclaimed British novelist (1904-1991). Greene is among a number of twentieth century novelists, emerging out of two world wars, questioning the source of evil and the existence of God in a barbaric age. His fiction, spanning seven decades and fifty novels, is characterized by its outward political intrigue and its internal theological, psychological and personal struggles. The character selected for the observation, invites the attention of the readers into the depth of his constant mental agony before reaching the end. Graham Greene has depicted the mental agony of Scobie with utmost care and Scobie's character-sketch in the paper gives a real account of the same.

Keywords: Graham Greene, Psychological, Psyche, Mental agony, Religious conflict, Catholic novel, Paradox.

The Heart of the Matter is the story of a gentle character, named Major Henry Scobie – the protagonist of the novel, who is depicted as a sympathetic character in his relationship with his wife Louise, with his mistress Helen, and in his relationship with God. Scobie's mental agony is seen from Greene's own spiritual conflicts and religious attitudes. The novel, *The Heart of the Matter* reveals occupies a unique place in the fiction of Graham Greene. Like Greene himself, who was a Catholic convert, in this novel, the protagonist Major Scobie gets converted to Roman Catholicism in order to marry Louise. Scobie promises to find a way to get the money on loan to secure her passage.

Scobie is an exceptional personality, who has been presented to us as extraordinary, in his relationship with his wife Louise, with his mistress Helen, with a Syrian trader and merchant, named Yusef, and above all, in his relationship with God. The novel mainly deals with Scobie's attitude to his wife, to his mistress, and his attitude to God. Scobie is split within, between the forces of good and evil and no one can miss the

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mental agony in the character of Scobie. John Atkins describes Scobie as "a distorted reflection of his creator, a man who cannot disguise or hide his feelings". (159)

The Heart of the Matter is concerned with various themes like Catholicism, guilt, suffering, death and salvation. The novel focuses on the internal and external struggle of man for liberation. Scobie is found weak in his personal life; but he was sincere and dedicated to his duty and at the end of his life, he may be said to have attained martyrdom. Scobie dies for the happiness and safety of others.

Greene reflects his concept of suffering through Scobie: "He had been in Africa when his own child died. He had always thanked God that he had missed that" (HM 125). According to John Atkins, "It became clear that Scobie is riddled with pity and a desire to help the victims of in justice. His pity is his weakness, for there is no place for it in the official routine" (159). This proves the real human predicament in the character of Scobie. Through him, Greene portrays the individual's realization of moral responsibility as a Christian. Though he is a responsible man, his responsibility as a policeman, goes even beyond the law. Henry Donaghy, in his study on Greene suggests: "Major Scobie, is a virtuous man whose *hamartia* or tragic flaw, lies in the excess of pity he possesses" (55). Greene tries to show more psychological insight in the character of Scobie, throughout the novel. Scobie realizes that his sense of responsibility, the desire to carry the burden of others' suffering, involves despair. It is as though he is aware of his own fate:

> 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 (HM 60).

There is severe pain and unbearable conflict in Scobie's mind between his love for Louise and Helen, and his love for God. The only solution that he finds is to commit suicide in order to remain faithful to all the three - his wife, his mistress and God. Crowning all, he also has another intention of keeping himself away from anymore sins. Here, Greene portrays him as a hunted man, who actually dies in a state of mortal sin. Moreover, Scobie knows well what he is doing, and does it deliberately, with the full consent of his will. He commits the unpardonable sin of despair and thus, he is damned for sure. At the end of the novel, Greene insists through Father Rank, upon the 'appalling strangeness' of the mercy of God. Louise thinks that her husband is damned, but Father Rank holds out hope for Scobie: "For goodness sake, Mrs. Scobie, don't imagine you - or I - know a thing about God's mercy . . . The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart" (HM272). Scobie's love is a pendulum swinging between pity and responsibility. Scobie is a good man, but his main weakness is that he cannot hurt those whom he loves. Scobie seeks escape from a world that has become soiled and from the intolerable complications and demands of love that is hurting his wife and his mistress.

In this novel, while giving a psychological analysis of Scobie's pity, Greene tries to point out how far Scobie's actions based on pity can be justified by the Christian

doctrine. O'Brien supports this observation in his study of the novel that *The Heart of the Matter* is a novel about the progress of pity. As Greene explains both evil and suffering in theological terms, Scobie is openly concerned with realities of salvation and damnation. Being a Catholic, he knows that he is a sinner, who is tormented by his constant awareness of sin. Greene seems to be interested in the interaction of the private and public lives of his characters and this dual tendency is depicted through Scobie in this novel.

Scobie's relationship with his wife Louise seems an unhappy one, ultimately disastrous. In a way, Scobie is an honest man who is corrupted by his sense of responsibility for the happiness of others and as a result he becomes himself an instrument that causes the pain.

Scobie's human relationships are all based on pity. "He couldn't shut his eyes or his ears to any human need of him" (HM 187). His sense of responsibility moves away from "the beautiful and the graceful and the intelligent. They could find their own way. It was the face for which nobody would go out of his way, the face that would never catch the covert look, the face which would soon be used to rebuffs and indifference that demanded his allegiance" (HM159). His discontented wife and his pathetic mistress are the chief victims demanding fidelity. After swearing to preserve his wife Louise's happiness, he accepts another and contradictory responsibility, his mistress Helen's happiness. Scobie begins by pitying one woman and ends by pitying God. Meanwhile, this feeling of responsibility and pity troubles him and he wonders "if one knew . . . the facts, would one have to feel pity even for the planets? If one reached what they called the heart of the matter?" (HM 124). If Scobie pities someone, it may be for the sake of a woman or for the sake of a child. It is found that Scobie is abnormally sensitive to the whims of women, giving too much respect for them, and is emotionally submissive to them.

Greene exploits one of the great paradoxes of Catholicism. On the one hand, it specifies mortal by years of suffering in purgatory. It is an abode of purification, in which souls sins; on the other hand, it offers to such mortal sinners various means of avoiding entry to Hell. Purgatory, according to Catholic belief, is a preparation for Heaven, and many sinners atone themselves experience both the pain of loss and extreme pain of sense. Scobie sacrifices his life for the sake of those whom he loves. Yet he makes a last attempt at prayer: "O God, I offer up my damnation to you. Take it. Use it for them" (HM 225). Suicide is not always and necessarily a defeat. Scobie identifies himself with Christ as he kills himself so as not to cause others further pain. It is not merely a means of escape; it is also the consequence of their opening themselves to suffering because they have known what it is to love.

Although Scobie has a Catholic wife, out of pity he falls in love with a nineteen-year-old girl, a pathetic young widow, who is brought to the colony as a survivor from a torpedoed ship. As a result, one finds that love is confused with pity in Scobie's heart. Scobie's second moment of happiness leads him to his own damnation. As he leaves the Nissen hut, having found and fallen in love with Helen Rolt, he feels happy:

> They both had an immense sense of security: they were friends who could never be anything else than friends - they were safely divided by a dead husband, a living wife, a father who was a clergyman, a games mistress called Helen, and years and years of experience. He said, 'Goodnight . . . He walked away, feeling an extraordinary happiness, but this he would not remember as happiness, as he would remember setting out in the darkness, in the rain alone (HM 140).

According to Roman Catholic faith and its teachings, regular receiving of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and attending the Holy Mass and Communion with God are very important. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, if a sinner goes to Communion in a state of sin, it leads to his damnation.

According to the Church's command, after having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year. Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion, even if he experiences deep contrition, without having first received sacramental absolution, unless he has a grave reason for receiving Communion and there is no possibility of going to confession.

The major conflict in *The Heart of the Matter* becomes that of the individual against the orthodox religious concept. K.S. Subramaniam in *Graham Greene*, says that it is in the blending of religion and modern psychology that Greene's achievement lies. Greene thus portrays the mental agony and the sense of guilt of Scobie in the light of the modern human psychology and the doctrine of the Catholic Church. Scobie's suffering is pictured to be more of the mind than of the body. Thus the suffering is the result of the evil lust which is an off-shoot of his pity. Scobie, the hero of *The Heart of the Matter*, is crushed between the age of religion and the modern age and is caught between duty and desire. *The Heart of the Matter* challenges Scobie's commitment to his job and his efficiency and policing power. Scobie is quite aware of what his duty requires, and he believes that it is a vocation demanding discernment and a strong sense of justice. While responding to Helen Rolt's doubt about her stamp album, he replies, "That's my job. I'm a policeman" (HM 140).

Scobie wants happiness for others and solitude and peace for himself. He prays to God for his own death before causing and giving unhappiness to others. Perhaps people do not struggle too much for the happiness of others. From this novel one draws a sense of love and pity for the hero's predicament that is augmented lyrapported by the simplicity and clarity in the writing.

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