The Role of Pity in Graham Greene’s: The Heart of the Matter

Mahender Singh
Research Scholar
Department of English, K.U.K.

Abstract
Set in a small British colonial outpost in West-Africa, The Heart of the Matter (1948) comments on the ambitious subjects of war, espionage, love, adultery, treachery, and betrayal. The world Greene creates in this novel is vicious and brutal, and the characters he delineates are insignificant, ordinary people—helpless puppets in the chill grip of circumstances. The protagonist of the novel, who also faces the harsh, wretched and squalid living conditions, is doomed by the emotion of pity. The novel, which has won the 1948 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction by Graham Greene, is considered to be one of the most significant works of serious fiction, distinguished from his other works called entertainments. It describes the tragic story of Major Henry Scobie who is a long-serving policeman, and is responsible for the local and wartime security in a British colony, situated on the West Coast of Africa. The novel is furnished with minute details about the environment and conditions which, in turn, play a very significant role. Therefore, the present research article shows the role of pity in the novel.

Keywords: Heart of the Matter, Role of Pity, Major Henry Scobie, Human Life, Situations

1 Introduction

“The vultures and rats of The Power and the Glory seem to have migrated to the colonial scene in The Heart of the Matter” (Sharma 100). Their presence is more insistently felt in this novel when they are intimately connected with the consciousness of the central characters of the novel. Here, in the heat and dampness of the colony, moths and mosquitoes, lizards and rats, and pye-dogs and vultures create a perfect climate for human meanness and misery. Therefore, “Greene sees squalor and violence as the essence of the human condition and from time to time he has sought them in the primitive sources of man’s existence” (Kulshrestha 10). Now with the background of unrest, loneliness and corruption, Scobie, the central character appears on the scene. He is an honest man but in these corrupted conditions nobody is supposed to be uncorrupted. This is not a climate
meant for truth and justice. That is perhaps the reason that Scobie is unjustly passed over for promotion. The commissioner rightly tells him: “You are a wonderful man for picking up enemies” (HM 9). However, Scobie is not unduly perturbed over his failure to get promotion because fifteen years of service have taught him to be a good loser. However, for his wife Louise, his failure means “the loss of face at the club” (HM 11). Therefore, unable to face the humiliation, she makes up her mind to go away to South Africa, leaving behind not only the place but also her husband. And Scobie, as he is a man of his type, holds himself responsible for all her misery: “I’ve landed her here he thought, with the odd premonitory sense of guilt he always felt as though he were responsible for something in the future he couldn’t even foresee” (HM 9). His love for Louise is not for a wife; rather it is more of pity for a victim of situations of life. It is only when he sees her most clearly as a victim of life, which he imagines he has been responsible for, he comes closest to loving her:

He watched her through the muslin net. . . . These were the times of ugliness when he loved her, when pity and responsibility reached the intensity of a passion. It was pity that told him to go. (HM 16) This is, perhaps, the real cause of his tragedy as he is tempted into making a rash promise of sending Louise to South Africa even though he has no idea how to collect enough money for such a trip. Greene hammers this point by emphasizing on Scobie’s feeling of pity for others which is responsible for his own sufferings. The decision of borrowing money from Yusef for Louise’s journey, for instance, is proved to be fateful, and his first step towards the dark world of misery. If she had not compelled him to send her to South Africa, he would never have borrowed money from Yusef, and thus remained uncorrupted. However, the fact remains the same that Scobie is compelled to commit the professional indiscretion of borrowing money from Yusef—an unscrupulous Syrean trader—a man who passes false diamonds, smuggles real ones, sells liquor, seduces the nursing sisters from military hospital, and who knows how to blackmail a good man like Scobie. In the words of Father Rank: “He is a dirty dog” (HM 57).

2 Scobie feels pity

Scobie feels pity for a ship-captain also, who tries to communicate with his daughter through a letter in the moments of despair. But Scobie, who leads the inspection of local passenger ships, particularly for smuggled diamonds, finds the letter, which is addressed to someone in Germany. According to the rules, he must confiscate the letter in case it might contain secret codes or other clandestine information since it is a wartime situation. But the captain says that it is a letter to his daughter, and offers him a bribe of one hundred pounds in order to forget the incident. However, Scobie, who is badly in need of money, declines the bribe, and takes the letter. Later, when he opens the letter, and finds it innocuous, and out of pity for the captain he burns it instead of submitting it to the authority. Therefore, he becomes more wise than required, and begins to perform the role of providence by saving the captain from perilous consequences by breaking the rules. His failure to report the letter to the authority is the beginning of his disintegration and the seed of his downfall lay in this little dialogue:
Frazer said cheerfully, “Burning the evidence?” and looked down into the tin. The name had blackened: there was nothing surely that Frazer could see—except a brown triangle of envelope that seemed to Scobie obviously foreign. . . . Only his own heart-beats told him he was guilty—that he had joined the ranks of the corrupt police-officers. (HM 45)

Although, Scobie’s departure from duty may seem a minor one, yet it is the beginning of a descent into a deep sea of despair. Destroying the letter and borrowing money from Yusef is the point of his initiation into corruption from which he is unable to extricate himself. However, he has until now refused gifts from Yusef, but even with the proper arrangement of interest agreement on the surface, he himself deeply feels that his moral status has been altered, and his descent continues. He is definitely a good but weak man, who is corrupted not by power or wealth but by pity, sentiment and a sense of responsibility for the happiness of others. Greene while comparing Scobie with some other characters, rightly remarks:

They have been corrupted by money, and he had been corrupted by sentiments. Sentiment was more dangerous, because you couldn’t name its 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 smell remembered. (HM 45)

3 Scobie’s concern for everyone

Scobie is very much concerned for everyone around him. Examining his view of duty and responsibility, the novelist reveals the fact that how seriously he takes himself in relation to all the people around him. He views himself as a caretaker for those individuals who are in need of assistance. In a conversation with Wilson, he asks how Wilson came to West Africa. When Wilson replies, “One drifts into things,” he responds, “I don’t . . . I’ve always been a planner. You see, I even plan for other people” (HM 62). Later, he describes his job: “I am the Deputy Commissioner of Police. . . . I am the responsible man. It is my job to look after the others” (HM 224). During the entire novel, Scobie spends his time planning for others and assuming that it is his responsibility to take care of their happiness, no matter what the price may be. One particular emotion that produces this almost unnatural obsession with responsibility is pity. He repeatedly feels responsible for any person who arouses pity in him and particularly for the women in his life. The novel is full of details where Scobie feels pity and mercy for the suffering souls, and imagines that he can bring happiness to certain individuals. He feels pity for Pemberton, a young inspector of a small inland town called Bamba who has committed suicide because of the inability to repay the loan. Scobie has to go to handle the case of his suicide, and Louise being a Roman Catholic renounces Pemberton’s action: “I’ll never forgive Pemberton for this” (HM 71). But Scobie before holding someone guilty of anything, views the things on the wider perspective of the general hopelessness of man, and answers: “Don’t talk nonsense, dear. We’d forgive most things if we knew the fact. . . . A policeman should be the most forgiving person in the world if he gets the facts right” (HM 71).
4 Central idea about human life and its situations

This is Greene’s central idea about human life and its situations. Even when Father Clay expresses his horror that Pemberton would be damned because of his act of suicide, Scobie comes out with the statement that Pemberton was not a Roman Catholic and even “the Church can’t teach that God doesn’t pity the young. . . .” (HM 78). He does not even acknowledge the teaching of the Church in this matter as his individual integrity overrides the collective wisdom of the Church. He begins to doubt the existence of God: “And yet he could believe in no God who was not human enough to love what he had created” (HM 108). His sympathy is noticeable with the survivors of a shipwreck, who begin to arrive after forty days at sea in life-boats. Scobie tries to comfort a young girl by pretending to be her father, who was killed in the wreck. When he finds the little girl on the brink of death, he is so pained that he comes out with the prayer: “Father, give her peace. Take away my peace forever. . . .” (HM 112). Among the other survivors, there is a young widow named Helen Rolt whose husband has died in the wreck. Scobie naturally feels drawn towards her, even though she is not beautiful, but “is completely a human wreck,” (Richardson 265) the perfect mixture for his sympathy and care. They are eager to merely befriend each other, as they seem to have important qualities in common. But it is the image of her child-like weakness and ugliness that lures and then traps Scobie into a fateful kiss that shatters his illusion of safety from involvement. The fact is that he has only shed one responsibility after sending Louise to South Africa to assume another. But in this relationship also, Scobie is increasingly controlled by the feeling that it is his responsibility to save Helen from the various disappointments of life. His concern for Helen is of that kind which is felt for a victim of time; moreover he is drawn towards her because of the sentiment of pity. As she is brought ashore on a stretcher, having endured dreadful suffering after her ship was torpedoed by a submarine; his heart goes out to her for he cannot resist such a picture of human wreckage:

But it was not a question of whether she wanted it—she had it. Pity smouldered like decay at his heart. He would never rid himself of it. . . . There was only a single person in the world who was unpitiable, oneself. (HM 163).

5 End of ordeals

Scobie’s affair with Helen and the indiscretion involves him further with Yusef, and the incorruptible man sees himself caught up in corruption. Unexpectedly Louise, after hearing about the affair which Scobie imagines to have concealed so well, returns. She asks him to go to Holy Communion, well knowing that he cannot do so in a state of mortal sin, which according to Roman Catholic faith leads to eternal damnation. Now Scobie cannot hurt her by refusing, but at the same time he cannot hurt Helen by giving her up, and he is too honest to promise in confession to do something that he knows he cannot do. Without delay, he assumes responsibility for both of them: But human beings were condemned to consequences. The responsibility as well as the guilt was his. . . . He had sworn to preserve Louise’s happiness, and now he had accepted another and contradictory responsibility. He felt tired by all the lies he would some time have to tell. (HM 149). As Scobie plunges ever more deeply into his problems, he feels himself entering “the territory of lies without a
passport to return,” (HM 199) which results in the sensation of his whole personality crumbling “with the slow disintegration of lies” (HM 209). Towards the end of his ordeals Scobie begins to sink into a quandary of moral and spiritual complexity. “There were so many lies nowadays he couldn’t keep track of the small, the unimportant ones” (HM 231). But above all he is a man “who desperately desires to be good but who, through character and circumstances, find himself enmeshed in evil” (Gurung 218). In this matter the priest fails to help him, and with the knowledge of damnation in his heart he receives Communion, but only “despair is the price one pays for setting an impossible aim,” however, it is acknowledged by Greene that “it is a sin the corrupt or evil man never practices…. Only the man of good will carries in his heart this capacity for damnation” (HM 60).

Therefore, Greene prepares the ground for Scobie’s suicide. As Scobie prepares for his death, he is convinced that he is ensuring his doom. And clearly according to the doctrine of Roman Catholicism, he dies in the state of mortal sin, but Greene always seems to be standing with his protagonist. He never presents Scobie with dark color, rather he always shows him in brightness. Scobie’s act is not one of theological defiance but of deeply felt human self-sacrifice and compassion. Consequently, there remains the clear possibility of salvation, because, as the novel argues, God’s love is profoundly receptive, especially when love is invoked, and moreover, Scobie’s motive behind his act of hopelessness is what ultimately counts. Therefore, one of the most outstanding traits of Scobie’s character is pity. He has a compassionate nature, and he experiences a genuine sympathy for everybody who is in trouble. He feels pity for the local black population, for the Portuguese ship-captain, for Pemberton, and for the wounded and sick survivors of the torpedoed ship, particularly for the little girl and Helen. In fact, there is an excess of pity in his nature, which throws him in hopeless situations as Greene himself declares:

I had meant the story of Scobie to enlarge a theme which I have already touched on in The Ministry of Fear, the disastrous effect on human beings of pity as distinct from compassion. I had written in The Ministry of Fear: “pity is cruel. Pity destroys. Love isn’t safe when pity’s prowling round.” (Ways of Escape 120)

Conclusion

It appears that pity is really Greene’s basic preoccupation in the novel. For instance, at one point in the novel, it occurs to Scobie: “If one knew the facts, one would have to feel pity even for the planets? If one reached what they called the heart of the matter?” (HM 111). Pity is an important element in Scobie’s emotional make-up: “He knew from experience how passion died away and how love went, but pity always stays. Nothing ever diminished pity. The condition of life nurtured pity” (HM 163).The stress here is on Greene’s concern for downtrodden, weak and hateful people of society, and the character of Scobie perfectly serves his purpose as, he had no sense of responsibility towards the beautiful and the graceful and the intelligent. They could find their own way, the face that would never catch the covert look, the face which would soon be used to rebuffs and indifference that demands his allegiance. (HM 147). Scobie commits the mortal sin of suicide so that he may solve, as he hopes, the problems of securing the happiness of the women he loves. He
accepts damnation through suicide, and is prompted to do so by the love and pity for others. He is that human soul who fights its battle all alone—a battle for his ultimate truth underlying the concepts of worldly circumstances. Father Rank rightly rebukes Louise for insisting too much on what the Church says: “I know [what] the Church says. The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn’t know what goes on in a single human heart” (HM 254). Therefore, it seems that it is pity that prepares a smooth ground for the occurrence of every significant action in the novel, and Scobie is doomed because of pity towards the end of the novel.

References