

# Morality, Sin and Redemption in the Selected Works of Graham Greene

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**Abstract** - Morality and innocence are prerequisite qualities for a pure spiritual human existence, in this universe. If evil can find a home in a human body, a man has the power of redemption, by which he retains the aspects of innocence in him that he had, in original, once in the past. Graham Greene holds firmly the idea of religion and spirituality, and strongly believes that baptism and realization could fundamentally restore one to a complete redemption, and then, evil and sin will never be again.

**Keywords**-Catholicism, Spirituality, Religion, Redemption, Salvation, Purification, Christianity

## I. INTRODUCTION

Graham Greene, is one of the most renowned British writers, and is considered “the last of the great literary giants” [1] of the twentieth century literary world. In his 67 years of long writing journey he has to his record, twenty-six novels, in addition to short stories, plays, poetry, travel books, biographies and autobiographies, and much more. His oeuvres deal with a variety of themes that include wars, revolutions, film history, global history, Catholicism and communism and human morality and his redemption. Many critics and psychoanalysts observe his religious predominance, which is reflected spiritually, in his novels, at large. The present piece of work emphatically examines the crucial revolving theme of human morality, sin and redemption, which is an obsessed theme that concerns almost all of his literary oeuvres.

## II. GREENE’S IDEOLOGY OF MORALITY, SIN AND RELIGION

Greene employed the Catholic ideas and visions such as the sinner at the heart of Christianity and God as the

Hound of Heaven, in many of his most celebrated works that are the “Catholic novels” such as, *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), and *The End of the Affair* (1951). The elements of morality, sin in his works, are complex and thought provoking subjects that underline the web of philosophy of life through art of literature. Thus man’s sin, suffering and salvation in deep relation with religious dimension, have been the focus of this study. Greene aptly remarks through his characters in his works that evil and sin can affect one’s life but there is grace of God and a state of purity of mind that is attainable to man. He suggests to hopefully looking at life with courage and faith in man and God.

Of the similar ideology, Greene reminds us of Plato’s doctrine where he considers man as ‘a fallen creature’, who soon after realizing his miserable condition, undergoes salvation and strives towards attaining purification. And, if he is fortunately blessed divine enough, attains the true essence of knowledge, regaining his divinely human character and wisdom that he had originally, once in the past. The writer realizes like a theologian, the fact that man is prone to commit sin. Not a single man is free from evils. In *The Heart of the Matter*, Greene says:

“Point me out the happy man and I will point you out either extreme egotism, evil or else an absolute ignorance” [2].

Even *The Bible* witnesses of the fact that no man is without ills and sins, not even one, but the divine God, Jesus Christ, forgives and defends them, all. He forgives and derides those who have lost their

purity, physically. But again for their spiritual sins, he criticizes them, as it is in his words when he says,

“Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the spirit will not be forgiven” [3].

Therefore, for spiritual salvation, one has to undergo purgation (redemption) adopting the only path guided by his religion (Christianity), himself. Some novelists like Murdoch and Compton-Burnett are inspired and hence emphasized Greene’s theosophical ideas in their own novels too [4]. But still Greene’s works attain a great concentration, to this principle, with such elements of sin and morality, as Christian principle that he has presented in a lucid and terse manner that it falls directly in one’s heart, with a perfect divine message.

### III. GREENE IN THE LINE AND LIGHT OF CRITICS

The famous writer Herbert R. Haber defends this spiritual philosophy of Greene to Hemingway (who forgets to imagine another world, but Greene could), and remark-fully comments that Greene has a strong faith in the unseen spiritual power that is omnipotent and never dies, and that is God, who always reciprocates in kindness [5]. Faith in spirituality shifts him to another world.

In Greene’s explanation towards religion and belief, we see that his characters lack the manner of consideration and appreciation. To them God and his mercy are complex and confined to any religion or faith. It is apparent in the last section of his great novel, *The Heart of the Matter* where the priest points out to Louise that he himself can know only about the unimportant things throughout their lives, and that is only sins. When Louise remarks that Scobie had been a bad Catholic as he had extra-marital relationship, Father Rank reacts saying that it was the silliest phrase in common use, and further adds that both of them do not know the least about the mercy of God [6]. This is confirmed of Greene’s logical explanation that he observes throughout his novels.

The essayist, Morton D. Zabel, in an essay on Greene, sets a connection between *Brighton Rock* and T. S. Eliot’s essay on the French poet, Baudelaire, where Eliot remarks that,

“Often sin took on a curious dignity and damnation itself takes an immediate form of salvation... because it at least gives some significance to living” [7].

Greene strongly believes that in due course of impurity will come, the purity, from demonism saintliness, from unbelief belief, from vice virtue and that is why his heroes often seem closer to demons than to saints [8].

The noticeable element in Greene’s character is that all bear a strong faith in religion and have complete awareness of the presence of God that enshrines their actions. Even the evil characters in his novels, are conscious of the grace of God if they switch on to the path of saintliness. The writer presents to its readers the aspect of war between the good and the evil and its well-known consequences. In the *Brighton Rock* critics point out that the character Pinkie is driven by forces beyond his control that he is possibly a victim of society. So he cannot be directly considered among the damned ones but for the devil forces, instead he deserves the sympathy and understanding of the others. But all these, he fails to win from his relatives and society as a consequence angularities and psychic disorders become a part of his character.

Greene very aptly defends this character and signifies that Pinkie is damned, which gives a clear notion that the writer stresses the moderating circumstances of his sins and holds back him in a favorable light. Thus Greene has presented Pinkie as a character who may be accepted by God, who is highly merciful and graceful and his strange mystery cannot be comprehended by an ordinary man. Thus, the conventional approach towards sin and its redemption is skillfully made in his novels.

Greene’s works accompany personal and social aspects of human sin and morality by which his acts and thoughts are bonded. It further intends to teach the

world at large about living and making good and moral lives with social restrictions, because if human beings are left free they tend to be selfish. Hence morality is intended to curb the human evils and sins with issuing social prohibitions which Greene's characters are moral in accordance with the present theme.

On the contrary there is the case of Ida Arnold. This Greene's character keeps him in frustration and dissatisfaction. Also Greene sheds his anguish over such characters growing with an attitude of increasing materialism. Hence, he maintains in his writing that these characters receive the minimum sympathy from the readers. These characters are overconfident, reluctant and pretentious about their character and actions. In reality they are far from purity and perfection, physically, mentally and spiritually. Although they are very keen in disgracing the ordinary and little imperfect human beings, without bothering about their own inner self. The very characters like Ida Arnold in *Brighton Rock* fail to win either love or compassion of either their society or God. It is all their purity of mind engulfed by their ego. This evil hinders their spiritual progress and retards the steps on the spiritual path.

Greene takes it as an interesting subject to reveal the disastrous effect of such flaws as in the characters that can destroy a man. The flaw of Greene's character Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter* deviates them from their path of sin and immorality and finally leads to the saintliness which is longed for, by any true believer. This is how Greene serves these elements thorough his novels in exalted and manifested manners.

#### IV. SIN AND REDEMPTION: A SOCIAL ASPECT

Now considering morality and sin from the social point of view, William Glasser suggests that crimes and sins are certainly due to personality failure of the characters in most of the cases. As a consequence the sinners and criminals should be considered as failures and thus treated with kindness and sympathetic understanding, and not anything else. He further adds that these victims and sufferers failing to establish their identity in the

existing society try to resort to all kinds of perversions. This ideology is very similar to the ideology of the character Pinkie, in *Brighton Rock*, who won social sympathy of the readers.

Greene has his own ideologies regarding different types of sin. For example, despair is thought to be an unforgivable sin in Christianity but Greene is of the opinion that the corrupt or evil man would never pay any heed to it. He is always after fulfilling his desires and lust in the present world as well as the next birth. Greene truly remarks, "Only a man of goodwill can carry in his heart the capacity for damnation" [9]. This idea qualifies justifiably the attitude Greene has towards his characters that are presented as the model of sinners and evils to the readers of the society.

Moreover the utter feeling of salvation and damnation is appreciated in the character of the protagonists of most of his famous and controversial novels. Such pure and humanistic attitude itself shatters the conventional attitude of the believers and religions like Christianity and Catholicism, about the fate and damnation of a person. Thus, Greene's novels give an elevation to the idea of damnation and purification of the mortal existence of human beings, which is today absolutely absent, but still theologically, remains the only sine qua non of attaining purity and good-will in the eyes of the God, in his created world.

Considering this ideology according to Hinduism it can be comprehended that earthly or materialistic lust, takes a man far away from the path of achieving salvation/ *mukti*. Considering the example of our highly religious man, Swami Vivekananda said that,

"In certain moods 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 superimpositions 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 belong, in the words of his Master,

to the class of *Acharyakois* or world teachers, are born to take upon their shoulders the burden of a whole world. They care not for their own *mukti*, or for remaining merged in the bliss of the Absolute, though these are within their reach” [10].

Thus with the above high statement of a highly spiritual saint it becomes apparently clear that Greene too, with his great oeuvres has constantly remained hard to establish a spiritual lesson for the common man, with the support of his protagonists of his novels.

Approaching further towards attaining redemption (salvation), which is a must to gain the original and pure spirituality, loaded with dignity and nobility of one self, (here presented through the characters of Greene), suffering is the only sine qua non to attaining it back. Greene puts forth the path of religion, Christianity, which ennobles a human being relieving him from the burden of his sins. The more he suffers, the more is his redemption gained. He has got to accept the damnation for the welfare and satisfaction of the others.

Greene presents this supreme notion through the character, Scobie, in *The Heart of the Matter*, in whose life there is a lot of suffering. Scobie’s character remarks the disastrous effect of pride and pity. He being a catholic ceases to love his real devoted wife Louise, and keep immoral sexual relation for his physical pleasure, which is apparently a sin that he commits very knowingly. He could have declined Helen and stayed with his wife Louise, or he would have owed Helen as legal wife and left Helen. But he did not, just because of want of sinful pleasure. He was very much aware of his sins, but ignorance gave him no way and he remained on the errant path, for long. It sets a dialectical tension in Scobie’s mind. In this process he had to suffer a lot in the later phase of his life. He fails to put his faith in trust of God. For his love and faith remains in his short physical pleasure. This indicates so much his theological convictions as his yearning for self-destruction. He prays to God, but fails to comprehend the appalling divine mercy. Because of his

pride and does not trust Him who loves him. But Greene remarks that a sinner is very close to God.

Michael Torre in *Greene’s Saints* says,

“Scobie is driven to this act is quite believable because his inner anguish is fierce and death seems the only release. In a way, he is trying to be true to that which is best in him, trying to live out the form of his life in faith, trying to maintain his solitude for all those he has undertaken to care for and protect in a way that will hurt them at least. This is, of course, a foolish and pretentious thing to do: he is being too dutiful, is too busy playing God” [11].

Scobie suffers the maximum for his rejection of God’s assistance forever. It is much of his free choice through which he moves toward his voluntary death or redemption. Greene brings out this notion successfully that it is his indecisiveness that Scobie rejects God’s help, knowing very well that it would mean damnation. Inside the Church, he imagines that he has an argument with God. He says to God,

“You’ll be better off if you leave me once and for all. I know what I am doing. I am not pleading for mercy. I am going to damn myself, whatever that means...but you’ll be at peace when I am out of your reach...you’ll be able to forget me, God” [12].

Thus Greene Records the minutest sensations and impressions through *The Heart of the Matter* where he advocates the central paradox that love is the factor that has led his ardent character in this novel, both to sin and to redemption.

## V. CONCLUSION

Conclusively, it can be accepted that Graham Greene has amply and effectively made use of his literary philosophy accentuating the elements of morality, sin and redemption, which strongly interferes with the human activities who are not born free, but bonded with various religious dimensions, as depicted throughout his novels. Greene’s success is obvious in using Christian concept of sin and salvation. His works justify that sinners and immoral human beings have successfully turned out to be a saintly human only on

the ground of true realization of the grace of God, firm spiritual faith and submission in Him.

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