

The Significance of Bleak and Seedy Milieu in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*

Rajesh Kumar
English Faculty
Govt. College for Women
Karnal (Haryana)

Abstract:

The Present research article intends to explore the significance of bleak and seedy milieu in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*. Greene has a predilection for the poor, the sick, and the suffering people of the society who live in such living conditions that are wretched and squalid shown in this novel. Greene uses the sordid imagery of vultures, rats, flies, pye-dogs, lizards, and cockroaches frequently in the novel. The ghastly climate with the heavy rainfall, humidity, and unbearable heat also contribute to the seedy background of the novel. Greene deliberately creates this type of setting for the novel because these seedy conditions significantly affect the mental attitude of characters, which consequently influences the general course of the novel. Thus, the article not only dissects the bleakness and seediness in the above mentioned novel but also tries to explore the impact of such milieu on the psychology of characters in the novel.

Keywords: Bleak, Seedy Milieu, Suffering People, Maverick, Psychology of Characters

Full Paper:

Henry Graham Greene is considered to be one of the most widely read novelists as well as the most enigmatic figures of twentieth-century world. The adaptation of his several novels into films provides a huge testimony to his versatile and widely popular writing. From *The Man Within* (1929) to *The Captain and the Enemy* (1988), it is a long journey indeed for Graham Greene through the vast world of literature. During this journey, he has written some twenty seven novels in addition to plays, short stories, children's books, film criticism, literary criticism, travel books, memoirs, biography, two volumes of autobiography, and the book of essays. The world which Greene's characters inhabit is a sordid and squalid one in which the tone emphasizes the presence of evil as a palpable force. His novels display a consistent

preoccupation with sin and moral failure acted out in seedy locales characterized by danger, violence, and physical decay. It is important to note that Greene's social sympathy always lies with the victims—the poor, the sick, the suffering, the weak, and the oppressed people who are like the helpless puppets who caught in the chill grip of circumstances. His characters often face such living conditions that are harsh, vicious, brutal, wretched and squalid. The setting of his stories is poverty-stricken places like Mexico, West Africa, Vietnam, Haiti, Argentina—countries that are hot, humid, and abject—a trait that leads to the coining of the expression 'Greenland' by some critics for describing such type of settings. 'Greenland'—though a territory of the mind that is disturbingly close to the real world—has become familiar as landscape of terror and lust for his novels. Whether Graham Greene goes out in search of God in troubled Mexico, war-ravaged Saigon, the dark night of Duvalier's Haiti, the leper's colony in Congo, the British colony of West Africa during wartime, or tries to fish the human factor out of a God-forsaken world ravished by the K. G. B. and the C. I. A., he always portrays the unavoidable bleakness and seediness in his novels. This type of setting for the novels creates a seedy background which further significantly affects the characters of the novels physically as well as spiritually. Therefore, it is important to note the seediness as a setting for Greene's novels.

The Heart of the Matter (1948) is set in a small and unnamed British colonial outpost, presumably in Sierra Leone where Graham Greene had worked for the foreign office during the World War II. The novel comments on various subjects of war, espionage, love, adultery, treachery, and betrayal. It has won the 1948 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction, and is considered to be one of the most significant works of serious fiction by Graham Greene, which is distinguished from his other works called entertainments. The novel is situated in a "typical Greene territory: a physical and moral wilderness in West Africa where the harsh climate and the still harsher struggle for survival furnish the backdrop to an intense moral drama" (Ousby 419). 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 the British colony, situated on the West Coast of Africa. The environment and conditions play a very significant role throughout the novel. "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 characters of the novel. Here, in the heat and damp of the colony, moths and mosquitoes, lizards and rats, and pye-dogs and pigs, ants and cockroaches, and flies and vultures in association with heavy rain and mud create a perfect climate full of bleakness and seediness which is an appropriate background for showing human meanness and misery. James Wood appropriately writes about the seediness in the novel:

Sealed by the war—letters are censored, shipping routes limited, and borders closed—Greene’s colony resembles the rat-infested closed town of Oran that Albert Camus allegorized in *The Plague*, a novel that appeared in 1947, a year before *The Heart of the Matter*. Camus’s town becomes a kind of hell Greene’s colony shares with Camus’s town something of the hellish, and something of the allegorical. (Wood vi-vii)

Greene deliberately creates this kind of setting for his novel. He seems to be concerned with the environment of the place and the conditions of the characters so much so that every action that takes place in the novel directly depends on them. The effect of circumstances on the psychology of the characters can be seen throughout the novel. When the novel opens, Wilson is sitting in the balcony of the Bedford Hotel. He is new to the colony, and therefore “almost intolerably lonely” (HM 3). Soon after, Harris, another lonely figure, appears on the scene. He is a cable censor who has got stuck to the dreary routine without any interest. Sick of what he is always required to do, he heaves a cold sigh while sitting down: “What a job! What a place!” (HM 4). Harris invents a seedy game of killing the cockroaches that appear in the apartment each night. Wilson also joins him in this game but unfortunately, in their very first match, they end up quarreling over the rules of match. Both of them—they are old Downhamians—are misfits in their new surroundings. And Greene is so much concerned with their living conditions that he does not present Wilson as a morally weak character, though Wilson is shown visiting brothel, and courting Scobie’s wife Louise. Greene attributes his action as the result of his surroundings which are bleak and lonely: “It was like having a box of chocolates shut in a bedroom drawer. Until the box was empty it occupied the mind too much” (HM 159). 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. Therefore, rumours are spread everywhere that Scobie sleeps with niggers. But one cannot believe all that one hears in this place, otherwise, as Father Rank aptly puts it, “everybody would be living with someone else’s wife” (HM 57). However, “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). Greene emphasizes on these conditions of the colony in which people are likely to be corrupted:

In the dark narrow passage behind, in the charge-room and the cells, Scobie could always detect the odour of human meanness and injustice—it was the smell of a zoo, of sawdust, excrement, ammonia, and lack of liberty. The place was scrubbed daily but you could never eliminate the smell. Prisoners and policemen carried it in their clothing like cigarette smoke. (HM 7)

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, and moreover he “cherishes the meanness of life in colony” (Wood-viii). However, for his wife Louise, his failure means “the loss of face at the club” (HM 11). It upsets her personal ambition as well as her hope that now the local British community will begin to accept her. Therefore, the fear of facing the humiliation, the ghastly climate, the remoteness from native land, and moreover the lack of friends enhance the depth of her misery, and she makes up her mind to go away to South Africa, leaving behind not only the place but also her husband. “Life has been continuously disappointing to her, and this has weakened her endurance and has made [her] capable of monstrous cruelty and selfishness” (Hudson and Arnold 64). Therefore, she decides to leave the place because she suffers terribly from loneliness, as she says, “Ticki, I can’t bear this place any longer. I know I’ve said it before, but I mean it this time. I shall go mad. Ticki, I’m so lonely. I haven’t a friend, Ticki” (HM 48). On the other hand, Scobie’s love for Louise is not that for a wife but 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:

When he found her in the bedroom under the mosquito-net, she reminded him of a dog or a cat, she was so completely out. Her hair was matted . . . her hair which had once been the colour of bottled honey was dark and stringy with sweat 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)

Their minds are apart and their bodies are distant. The death of their only child seems to have caused a void in their relationship. “After fifteen years of marriage to Louise, it is a wretched victim of time Scobie sees when he looks at her, not a partner in life” (Hudson and Arnold 64). So this despairing relationship is only a question of keeping a terrible vow. Significantly, when Louise makes a possessive claim on Scobie—a parasite demanding love—the image of the hunter and the hunted follows: “The lizard flicked across the wall and came to rest again, the wings of a moth in his small crocodile jaws” (HM 49). Therefore, the sordid relationship between husband and wife explicitly shows Greene’s obsession with the element of seediness in the novel.

The element of seediness is also noticeable in the novel when the survivors of a shipwreck 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. 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:

He had no sense of responsibility towards the beautiful and the graceful and 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)

Therefore, the relationship between Scobie and Helen is another example of Greene’s concern for wretched and miserable characters which are the living portraiture of seediness in the novel. But, apart from the seedy relationships, the novel is furnished with minute details about the wretched environment and bleak conditions which influence the psychology of the characters throughout the novel, and play a vital role in the course of action in the novel. For instance, the miserable conditions of the ship captain, who resembles the animal of a zoo with the same lack of liberty, clearly show the wretchedness in the novel. Oppressed by the loneliness of his private enclosure, he craves for communication with his daughter by a letter in spite of the peril of his arrest as letter writing is prohibited in these war-time situations. Then, the surroundings of Nissen huts, the area of wharf, the hot and humid climate, the heavy rainfall, the muddy streets of the colony, the conditions of Pemberton’s suicide, the murderous scene of Ali, together, create a seedy picture of violence and misery in the novel. Moreover, the imagery of moths, mosquitoes, lizards, frogs, rats, pye-dogs, pigs, ants, cockroaches, flies, and vultures, is frequently used by the novelist throughout the novel in such a way that they seem an indispensable part of the novel. Therefore, it becomes clear that Graham Greene has an explicit obsession with bleak and seedy milieu which he consequently shows in the novel in order to present the psychology of his characters.

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