

Identity and Redemption in Graham Greene's 'The Power and the Glory'

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Abstract:

Renowned British novelist Graham Greene's critically acclaimed novel 'The Power and the Glory' traces the last few weeks of the life of a fugitive Catholic priest in the Mexican state of Tabasco in 1938 at a time when the Mexican government was attempting to suppress the Catholic Church. The guilt ridden alcoholic priest considers his religious obligations, in spite of his fallen nature, are far more important than his own life when he willingly returns to administer last rites to a dying man. In the end he is captured by an idealistic police lieutenant and executed. Throughout the novel the unnamed priest considers himself a failure to maintain his identity as a Catholic priest. But, his redemption comes in the end when he is executed for being a Catholic priest who did not succumb to the government pressure to abandon priesthood and performed his priestly obligations.

Key Words: Identity, Idealism, Humanity, Sinfulness, Redemption

British novelist Graham Greene's famous novel 'The Power and the Glory' deals with the life of a fugitive Roman Catholic 'whisky priest' spent in the Mexican state of Tabasco for few weeks in 1938 at a time when the Mexican government was attempting to suppress the Catholic Church. The priest is not named in the entire novel as well as his main opponent the lieutenant. Both the priest and the lieutenant have diametrically opposite idealisms and practicality.

The unnamed priest struggles to overcome his own failures and considers himself a sinner beyond redemption. In the midst of all his inner struggles he loses his identity as a devout priest. He is an alcoholic and also he is a father of an illegitimate daughter. But, in spite of these moral failures, he accepts suffering as an inevitable part of life in a Christian's life. He considers humanism above the rituals and customs. He considers it is his duty to minister the people. While evading from the authorities, he performs his duties as a Catholic Priest and ministers to the people. His humanism and his religious duties and responsibilities take upper hand when the mestizo informs him that the dying Gringo needs to be administered the last rites. In spite of the knowledge that this may be a trap set by the mestizo to hand him over to the authorities, he immediately returns to perform his pastoral duties to a dying man. He does this with full understanding that he would be caught and sentenced to death. If he had wished, he could very well have led a peaceful life in the mountains instead of returning.

On the other hand, the unnamed police lieutenant represents idealism. He considers religion as a corrupt agent which spoils people and as dutiful government servant tries to get rid of all

corrupt institutions such as religious orders, its clergy and the adherents. He wants to erase the influence of religion and practice socialism in terms of equality to all generations. As an idealist he imagines that the world can be a much better place than it is if religious practices are wiped out from the earth. He is dissatisfied when the things do not go as he wishes. However, his identity as an idealist simply cannot be realised. But, in the midst of his ruthless desire to pursue the religious leaders and exterminate them, the lieutenant shows his human nature when he agrees to arrange for confession of the priest on the eve of his execution. He tries to engage Padre Jose to hear the priest's confession. This act of the lieutenant indicates that in the face of idealism, there always remains some form of realism albeit to a small extent. One cannot be one hundred per cent idealist. In fact, the lieutenant expresses that he does not have anything personal against the priest. When he arrests the priest initially – without knowing that he is a Catholic priest – for possession of alcohol, he offers him some money and lets him off thinking that he might soon be too old to work. This act of kindness shows the human side of the lieutenant.

Padre Jose is a Catholic priest, who compromised his religious obligations in fear of his life in the wake of religious persecutions and renounced his priesthood and got married. Due to his cowardly action, he loses the respect of the town and also his self-respect. He loses his identity as a priest. But, even in his family life, he is dominated by his wife. Due to his fear for the authorities he refuses to do any priestly duties, even when people beg him. When the lieutenant requests him to hear the condemned priest's confession, his wife prevents him to go. In contrast to the unnamed priest's human and religious nature, Padre Jose is innately selfish. As a Catholic priest, Padre Jose is opposite to what the unnamed priest stands for.

The unnamed priest considers himself a sinner beyond redemption. He considers himself inferior to Padre Jose. But, the humility of the priest makes him a better person and even a better priest who is a human being who has all the flaws of human nature. The priest attains his redemption in spite of his guilt and humility. His desire for wine represents his fallen nature. But, this same wine is used – albeit in small quantity – in the Catholic Mass where it is transubstantiated into the blood of Christ. The sinner priest attains redemption for his extreme sacrifice.

There is a scene in the novel where the priest fights with a dog over a bone with a few bites of meat on it. It brings us to the question whether anything separates the human beings from the animals. He struggles to justify his desire to live in spite of the adversities. It makes him to think whether it is really important for him to live by hiding in the village and thus exposing the villagers to danger. But, he does not realise that his presence amidst them in fact helps them to fulfil their religious obligations. When the government has banned all religious activities, it is the priests like him are their own hope. In the village, the guilt ridden priest worries about the fate of his illegitimate daughter. The priest falls, but with this fall he rises in stature in contrast to Padre Jose who compromises and loses his identity. It is noteworthy that the priest does not hate mestizo in spite of having full knowledge that he is being trapped. For him, his duty and responsibility as a priest becomes utmost important.

The novel highlights notion of the conflict between idealism and reality through the different identities of the priest. It shows that the real life differs from idealisms. Throughout the novel the priest struggles to maintain his identity as a Catholic priest. He considers himself as an

unworthy sinner. A Catholic priest takes a vow of celibacy and he is supposed to maintain it throughout his life. However, the unnamed priest in the novel is guilty of breaking this vow because of his relationship with a village woman named Maria and fathering the illegitimate child Brigitta. His alcoholic addiction and the guilt of fathering a child torment him throughout his life. But, these very guilty feelings cause him to be a better priest. Accepting his failures and shortcomings and willingly acceding to the demands of his religious duties and the obligations in the face of death make him a true hero. His redemption comes in the end when he is executed for being a Catholic priest who did not succumb to the government pressure to abandon priesthood like Padre Jose did.

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