



## Apocalyptic Heroes: An Instrument of Change in the Select Novels of Graham Greene

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### Abstract :

Graham Greene is a prolific writer of the twentieth century literature. He is a novelist, short story writer, journalist and a playwright. His novels are both religious and humanitarian. He emphasizes that 'faith' in God is mandatory to lead a peaceful life. It is surprising that most of his novels end up with a vision of apocalypse nevertheless of the plot. It highlights the obsessive nature of Greene over the theme of apocalypse. The protagonists in these novels are apocalyptic heroes who become the instrument of change.

### Key Words:

Apocalypse, apocalyptic hero, God, faith, sin, adultery, betterment

### Introduction :

The word 'apocalypse' has a religious origin. It has been derived from the Greek word "apocalypse" which means, "to remove the cover from (to uncover) or (to reveal)". It is in the last book of the Bible, the Revelation that apocalypse signifying the end of the world find its full expression. Apocalypticism is a feature of all three monotheistic religions. The Book of Daniel describes the Hebrew Prophet's Vision of the end. In Islam the resurrection, the Day of Judgment and salvation are apocalyptic features of orthodox belief as evident in the Quran. The Hindu doctrine teaches that the human cycle called Manvantara is divided into four periods. These periods correspond with the Golden, Silver, Bronze and Iron Ages of the ancient Western traditions. It is believed that we are now in the fourth Age kali-yuga or Dark Age. (Tasleem A War, 6-7)

W.B. Yeats has portrayed the destruction of the world in his poem '*The Second Coming*' :

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
 Things fall apart : the center cannot hold;  
 Mere anarchy is loosened upon the world....  
 Surely some revelation is at hand,  
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
 The Second Coming!

The twentieth century becomes an age of alienation with man in confusion and meaninglessness. Wars, class conflict, loss of faith in God, man's fall due to natural havoc and disease are the reasons that push the mankind to irredeemable suffering. "The hiatus between what the individual aspires for and the hard reality of what he achieves, between what he professes and what he practices and between what he really is and what he would like to appear, has mercilessly crumpled his life leaving an insidious effect on his inner being" (Pathak, 44 - 45).

Death is the leveler of all human beings. Graham Greene has understood this reality and tries to portray his characters with universality. Most of his protagonists face 'death' at the end. Greene wants to instill the thought that we human beings are helpless before the supremacy of God. "He was one of those who have great strength, but strength merely to suffer. He could not escape suffering and could not transcend it, so he attracted pain to himself". (T.S Eliot on Baudelaire). Graham Greene deals the protagonists with his humanitarian approach. The Characters Scobie, The Whisky Priest and Sarah are sinners but they seek salvation. At the end we are made to believe that God is Supreme.

All Greene's characters nurse an excessive fear of God's love. The fear of Him because in loving Him they might experience pain and suffering. In that Greene insists they are like all mankind. No one can give a complete answer to why there is pain and suffering. Greene contends that even though all men forget that there is a sacrifice involved – through love of God, suffering becomes a sacrifice. In '*The End of the Affair*', Sarah Miles pleads with God to take away His pain and give it to her another time; the whiskey priest in '*The Power and the Glory*' feared exceedingly the pain that was part of his martyrdom; and Scobie who could understand death, could not understand pain and suffering. Greene says through his characters that somehow a cross fits into the plan and purpose of this sinful world; otherwise He would not have allowed His Divine Son to be crucified. Once an individual turns to God, his fear turns to yielding and he discovers peace. (Kumar, Amit, The Atlantic Review,28).

T.S. Eliot states in one of his poems 'The Hollow Men' about the apocalypse of the world:

"This is the way the world end  
 Not with a bang but a whimper"

One can witness a great truth in the writings of Eliot. The world is destructed gradually. Today people suffer from the fear of epidemic diseases like Covid which has taken away the millions of life within a short span of time. Similarly the twentieth century writers were the live witness of the two great world wars, Spanish Civil War and Vietnam War. They felt life is temporary before the mighty nuclear weapons. Writers like E.M Forster, Virginia Woolf wrote with new perspective which deviated from the faith in God. Graham Greene wanted to instill the faith of God in the minds of his readers.

The three novels '*The Heart of the Matter*,' '*The Power and the Glory*' and '*The End of the Affair*' deal with the theme of sin and salvation. The protagonists in all the three novels commit sin willfully. They never regret for their wrong doings. But there is a gradual transformation in the minds of the protagonists. They undergo a silent journey with plenty of turmoil in their mind. At last they seek salvation. "However Greene cultivates a profound respect for the mysterious transformation powers of grace which can enable a penitent thief on the cross to 'steal' paradise". (Maini Irma, 58) The epigraph of the novel '*The Heart of the Matter*' is taken from the quote of Charles Peguy :

“ The sinner is at the very heart of Christianity

No – one is as expert as the subject of Christianity”.

(*The Heart of the Matter*,xiv)

The epigraph forms the essence of all the three novels. All the three protagonists face 'death' at the end of the novel. Though there is apocalyptic vision in all the three novels, they end with a note of hope. "Hence in spite of nihilism in modern literature, hope of faith springing from the courage of despair constitutes the distinguishing mark of the modern hero. (Tasleem A War, 104)

The novel '*The Heart of the Matter*' is set after the WWII, in a place called Sierra Leone. The protagonist Major Henry Scobie is a sincere deputy commissioner police who loves his job more than his family. There are many people who talk behind his back about his 'snobbish' wife. His wife Louise wants to be with the Elite class. She is unable to move with all people as Scobie does. The death of their nine year old daughter 'Catherine' makes Louise to be child – like. She becomes more dependent on Scobie. There is no conjugal relationship between the couple. They lack compatibility. Yet Scobie feels responsible as a husband. He fulfills her needs though he has no love for Louise. He always wants to keep his wife in a comfort zone. Louise also cares for Scobie's position as a reputed officer. When Scobie is passed over for promotion Louise is unable to bear that. Hence she decides to go on a tour to South Africa. Scobie is unable to afford for the journey. He borrows a huge sum of money from the Yusef. After the departure of his wife, he involves in an affair with a young widow Helen Rolt. Louise returns from Africa to know about Scobie. Now Scobie is caught under two sides – his love for his wife on one hand and his love for Helen Rolt on the other. Finally Scobie commits suicide.

"The evil corruption, cruelty, smuggling, deception blackmailing and other ills amid which the hero Scobie finds himself there are symptomatic of the general atmosphere of the seedy world that seeks to present in the novel" (Tasleem A War, 114). The atmosphere hints the readers that novel's ending may turn abnormal. The apocalyptic heroes are 'too good' at heart. They do have negative traits. Scobie is

very kind and gentle. He pities others. He prays for other's welfare. "All Scobie's sufferings springs from terrible promiscuous passion – this emotion which is at once noble and wasting. Pity turns out to be despite its Christian 'beauty', the 'Achilles heel' of Scobie". (Irma, Maini, 55). During his duty he happens to see the victims of the shipwreck. He has made all arrangements and could go home. But he wanted to be with them and enquires about their health to the Doctor and Mrs. Bowles the attender. He happens to see the pain of a six year old girl and immediately prays "Father, he prayed give her peace. Take away my peace forever, but give her peace". (THM, 112). It is the excessive kindness that makes Scobie to arrange a huge sum of money. When the bank denies him a personal loan, he could have easily convinced his wife about the difficulty. Yet he takes a step beyond to borrow money from Yusef for a huge interest. He knows that Yusef is a smuggler yet he borrows money from him in order to make Louise happier. He never denies his duty as a husband.

Scobie commits suicide though he knows it is against the norms of Roman Catholicism. He makes everyone believe that he died of a cardiac arrest. He is forced to help Yusef by betraying the higher officials. He knows that the sixth commandment of the Bible says 'adultery' is sin. But he is unable to get rid of his affair with Helen. "The shedding of his loyalties to the norms supplied by the external forces and acting in sincerity to his own self point to Greene's protest against conventional standards of morality, social as well as religious". (Tasleem A War, 115)

The novel '*The Power and the Glory*' is based on an actual event in Mexican history when in 1926 then president Calles began a persecution of the Roman Catholic Church by burning churches and killing priests and in general creating a Godless Country. (Varde, C.S, 129). The novel is set in a port city of Mexico. The protagonist of the novel is never given a name but addressed Whiskey priest throughout the novel. The epigraph of this novel is the quote from Dryden. "Th" inclosure narrow'd; the sagacious power of hounds and death drew nearer every hour" (*The Power and the Glory*, xiv) The Whiskey priest as his name suggests is addicted to drinking. He also fathered an illegitimate child Brigitta. The priest lives in a state where all the priests are forced to marry, renounce priesthood and lead an ordinary life. The police officers are instructed to shoot the priests dead if they are proved to practice the religious doctrines. The Whiskey priest loves his profession as a priest. So he is always on his heels trying to escape from the police officers. He also performs his duties as a priest by conducting mass and listening to confessions. His unfailing commitment as a priest is astonishing till the end. He knows that he is going to be trapped while listening to confessions yet he does it. As he expects, he is arrested by the police and executed.

The Whiskey priest and Padre Jose are given as contrast characters. Padre Jose had married and renounced priesthood abiding by the norms of the government. The Whiskey priest is remarkable by remaining unique and becoming a fugitive and outlaw. His bad nature is his addiction to liquor and that had made him to commit an illicit relationship with Maria. But he realises his mistake. He always admits that he is a sinner.

He addresses to the prisoners :

Martyrs are holy men. It is wrong to think that just because one does .... I tell you I am in a state of mortal sin ... I'm a Whisky priest. I am in here because they found a bottle of brandy in my pocket . . . I have a child .. He said my child ...I haven't repented .... I don't know how to repent" (*The Power and the Glory*, 115-126)

Through the death of the priest many feelings of innate goodness arises in the minds of the readers. Catholic religion was degraded by the immoral behaviour of the priests. At the same time the novel alarms that church has to be more humanistic. The priest repents for his sin very gradually. The transformation is slow but steady. The priest becomes a martyr in preserving the 'Faith in God'. He seeks salvation at the end. "This was the last chapter and in the last chapter things always happened violently. Perhaps all life was like that dull - and then heroic flurry at the end. He was calm and happy and smiling at the chief of the police, he asked him if he had come to lead him to the banquet. Even that evil man who had persecuted so many innocent people, was visibly moved." (Watts, 216)

The novel '*The End of the Affair*' as the title suggests deals with the affair of Maurice Bendrix a writer and Sarah Miles the wife of a civil servant. The novel is set during the Second World War in London. Greene describes the noise and the sights of the air crafts and bombs. In this novel the major theme is 'adultery'. Henry, the husband of Sarah Miles is working as assistant Secretary in the ministry of pensions. Henry becomes impotent and hence he evades his physical relationship with Sarah. But he is always a sincere husband and does everything for her. Sarah Miles involves herself in extra marital affairs with many men. But the love affair with Maurice Bendrix continued for a longer time. Bendrix always fears Sarah Miles will leave him for her husband.

Sarah and Bendrix are too much involved in their relationship. They did not mind the air raids or shooting of the guns. To their dismay, once a bomb is been dropped on the house in which they made love with each other and Bendrix goes under the debris. Sarah prays to God to save the life of Bendrix and even took the oath never to meet him again if he is saved. Bendrix slowly comes out of the debris by himself and Sarah leaves him after knowing that he is alright. Sarah breaks off her relationship with Bendrix. She did not attend phone calls too. Two years later Henry becomes close with Bendrix and tells that he suspects Sarah. Bendrix takes this as cue and hires a detective to watch on Sarah. Sarah Miles has befriended Richard, a rationalist, and shares her feeling how she is suffering in her marriage. She is unable to neither convert herself into a Catholic nor seek divorce. Neither Henry nor Bendrix knows whether Sarah abides by the norms of Catholicism. It is Richard Smythe who tells them that Sarah is not a Catholic, but somehow becomes involved herself is Catholicism. Sarah Miles dies due to uncured pneumonia. Richard Smythe suggests them to give her a Catholic funeral.

It is generally believed that dead people bless their friends and families. Maurice Bendrix receives a letter from Sarah Miles, which was written at her death bed. " ..... God has more mercy, and then I came out of the Church and saw the crucifix they have there ..... of course he's got mercy ....." (*The End*



of the Affair, 120). “Strange things happen, incidents take place one after the other that are beyond the reach of human mind and understanding – say miracles” (Varde, C.S, 226). Sarah helps three people. Sarah helps Bendrix to avoid any physical relationship with woman without having true love; The son of the detective Mr.Parkis is cured from appendicitis; Richard Smythe whose face was ugly by a scar on the left cheek is cured overnight. All these three people believe that they have been helped by Sarah Miles. “The novel embodies in itself three paradoxes, the arrival of love through, hate, arrival of faith through disbelief, the arrival of sanctity through sin”. (Varde C.S ,249)

Thus Graham Greene’s apocalyptic heroes act as an instrument of change. All three heroes Major Henry Scobie, the Whiskey priest and Sarah Miles work for the betterment of others during their life and even after death. Scobie works for the common people, tries to be sincere and unflinching in his job. His act of death too has made two people prosper. Louise who is always considered nagging and snobbish by Scobie has found Wilson who has similar tastes; at the same time Helen Rolt being young decides to marry Bagster. The Whiskey priest has successfully established the need for Religion and a priest to communicate between the God and the people. Sarah Miles too evades the emptiness in the minds of both Henry and Bendrix. Both of them befriend each other like bachelors. She emphasizes the trust and Faith in God which Bendrix accepts at the end. “Greene has brought to the literary front a modern approach of giving deep insights into human nature and suffering specially in a world where to quote Nietzsche’s phrase *God is dead*”. (Sinha, Sunita, 169). All these three apocalyptic heroes mould the readers to grow stronger by the faith in God Almighty.

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