

Human feeling in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*

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Abstract

The Power and the Glory examines two opposed ideologies i.e. religion and communism from a different view point. 'Power' represents the state and 'Glory' represents the church in the novel. If the state stands for secularism, church stands for religion: both are contradictory in terms as one upholds materialism and the other speaks of a metaphysical power. Being a humanist Graham Greene is averse to anything which ignores the reality of human feelings. So, he lets the two ideologies unfold and ultimately points at the areas that go against human beings. For him, the priest in the novel is not a sinner if he takes whisky and is a father of a daughter. Similarly, communism is unwelcome to him, despite its human interest, if it involves violence and bloodshed. For Greene humans and their existence come first than any other philosophy.

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Introduction

The Power and the Glory presents two different ideologies which have been in "universal and timeless" contest ^[1]: the church and the state. Church represents religion - a metaphysical philosophy- and state represents communism- a materialistic view of life. If religion believes in some unseen supernatural power controlling the universe, materialism rejects any supernatural idea and accepts man as the sole architect of his destiny. Here Graham Greene kills two birds with one stone: on the one hand he gives opportunity to two contrary philosophies to operate freely, on the other, he exposes the evils hidden behind the two.

The novel shows Mexico State under totalitarian regime where church has been outlawed and priests are forced to quit. The priests have either deserted their priestly life or have left the state in fear. Those who refuse to denounce their religion are shot dead. How the anti-church campaign is going on in the state is obvious from these words: "Altogether they had shot about five priests-two or three had escaped, the Bishop was safely in Mexico City and one made confronted to govt. law that all priests must marry" ^[2] (p.25). Moreover, the churches are demolished to eliminate the name of religion from the state. Nobody can claim to be a preacher or believer in religion. As a result the faith of people in God is shaken. In this state of affairs the novelist offers a unique type of priest who is fond of whisky and has fathered a daughter too. The people in the state call him a "bad" or "weak" priest as he himself admits before the lieutenant:

I don't know a thing about the mercy of God: I don't know how awful human heart looks to Him but I do know a thing - that if there's ever been a single man in the state damned, then I'll be damned too... (p. 200).

As he is committed to his duty towards the people, the priest represents the glory of God in the novel. His commitment and honesty in behavior washes him of his mortal sins. Despite threat to his life he does not leave the state thinking that his presence in the state gives people mental peace and joy. He knows that he can put "God into man's mouth" (p. 145) and this realization

makes him proud of his role in a purely secular state. On the opposite side is the advocate of materialism, the lieutenant, who is a "staunch rationalist who holds a purely materialistic view of life and is fanatically opposed to the priest." ^[3] If the lieutenant is bent upon evacuating the state of the idea of God along with the believers in it, the whisky priest has decided to carry on the idea of God in the state. To the lieutenant priests are traitors of the state and those who shelter them are the traitors too. In place of the spiritual values he upholds materialistic ideas. He is convinced of hunger, poverty and ignorance of the people but not of the idea that the people have souls. He thinks himself to be the committed enemy of those who give people the ideas like God or soul. He has ordered the people not to shelter the priests because they believe in the things which don't exist at all. He has killed many priests and when he gets the wind about the presence of the whisky priest in the state he decides to kill him too. He warns people thus:

You are fools if you still believe what he priests tell you. All they want is your money-what has God ever done to you? Have you got enough to eat? Instead of you they talk to you of heaven. Oh everything will be fine after you are dead, they say. I tell you everything will be fine when they are dead. This child is worth more than the Pope in Rome (p.210).

So under lieutenant's rule the priest is considered no less a criminal than murderer in the state: whisky priest's photo is displayed at the police station with a Yankee murderer. The lieutenant has fixed prize of seven hundred Pesos for capturing him. How violent is the hunt for the whisky priest is obvious from these words: "They are taking hostages now from all the villages where they think you have been. And if people don't tell, somebody is shot and they take other hostages." (p. 63) But Greene does not even accept communism in totality. He is critical of the bloodshed and violence involved in it. As he witnessed World War II, Greene doesn't like the world to go on following the old path of violence which for him is an inhuman phenomenon. He declines to adopt any social theory which neglects human feelings and support violence. So communism

does not appeal Greene as it shoots down men, women and children social change. The lieutenant and his government is harassing and torturing the people of Mexico. The Fellows family is being interrogated by the Red-Shirts. They have lost their only daughter in the encounter between the police and the American gringo. After coming out of the prison when the priest comes to the banana plantation he finds destruction all around. Captain Fellows has either left or has been killed. The deserted look of the village is symbolic of the destructive side of the philosophy the lieutenant stands for. The storm in which the face of a woman's child is badly injured by the pistol-shell is also suggestive of the violence in communism.

Greene seems to suggest that communism is not free from common drawbacks: its preachers fail to practice what they preach. Except the lieutenant, other persons like Governor and Jefe are hardly bothered about their duty. The Governor's cousin drinks and sells wine stealthily when it is a crime under the totalitarian govt. Here the priest gets the upper hand who, at least, feels ethically responsible to the people. He points out the loopholes in the so called anti- church campaign:

It is no good you are working for your end unless you are a good man yourself. And there won't be always good men in our party then you'll have all the old starvation (p.195).

But Green likes the theory of the lieutenant because it calls spade a spade which religion cannot. Religion believes in future and hopes much from God but communism believes in the present only awarding importance to man and his individuality. The lieutenant asks the priest very rational question:

You are so cunning, you people... what have you ever done in Mexico for us? Have you ever told a landlord he shouldn't beat his peon- oh, yes, I know, in the confessional perhaps and it is your duty, isn't it to forget it at once... your duty not to know that he has murdered a peasant (p. 194).

He is committed to create a society where human beings live in a state of perfect happiness and equality without clinging to the idea of God and the church. Since priests give false hopes, he regards them as the greatest enemies of the people. His materialistic approach is obvious from his words:

No more money for saying prayers, no more money for building places to say prayers in, we'll give people food instead, teach them to read, give them books, we'll see they don't suffer (p.194).

Greene is not against the lieutenant as an individual but he is against lieutenant's philosophy. The lieutenant is not a bad man. He is very kind to the priest when the latter is arrested and is made to do physical work as a punishment for carrying liquor. He releases the priest on the ground that he is "getting too old for work" (p. 140) and pities him for his old age. It is also his humanitarian self which allows the whisky priest to have his last drink and then make confessions before Padre Jose. The human feeling bet more pronounced when looking into a little child's eyes he says:

...he would eliminate everything from their childhood which made him miserable all that was poor superstitious and corrupt-they deserved nothing less than the truth-vacant universe and a cooling world, the right to be happy in any way they choose. He was quite prepared to make a massacre for their sake. First the church, then the

politicians - even his own chief would one day has to go. He wanted to begin the world again with them in a desert (p. 58).

The lieutenant hates the priest not for personal reasons but for his love for the people: He tells the priest, "You are a danger, that's why we kill you, I have nothing against you... as a man" (p. 193). He further says:

I have shot three hostages because of you, poor men. It made me hate you... Those men that they were my own people. I wanted to give them the whole world (p. 198).

In fact the lieutenant is in revolt against everything which brings misery, poverty, superstition, corruption in his society. His mission is to create happiness. Greene has artistically shown that the priest may be a bad priest but he is not a bad human being. As a priest he is coward and scrupulous and gathers some courage only with the help of brandy:

O God forgive me I am proud lustful, greedy man ... I have loved authority too much. These people are martyrs protecting me with their own lives. They deserve a martyr to care for them, nor a man like me who loves all the wrong things (p. 95).

While hiding in banana shed the priest confesses before Coral that he is very much frightened and even requests Mr. Fellows to have some wine. After having drunk he tells Coral: "why, I do defy... the devil" (p.49). And when he is caught by the Red Shirts for carrying spirits and is brought before the lieutenant, he is overwhelmed with terror. On the day of his execution he fails to hide his cowardly self. The lieutenant consoles him saying his pain will last no longer after death. The priest pays his profound thanks to the lieutenant for giving him small flask of brandy and giving him confidence.

Greene acknowledges the priest's devotion for his duty, but it is priest's pride of which the novelist is critical. The priest is highly proud and vainglorious. He wants to leave the state of Mexico but the feeling that he is the only priest hearing other's confessions makes him proud: "the sin by which the angels fell" (p. 95). When he feels that he was the only priest left in the state, "his pride had been all the greater" (p. 95). He is even denied last confession by the renegade priest Padre Jose. In the opinion of common people he becomes 'damned' soul at the end.

Apart from lust, despair, and drinking bowls, priests' own estimates and the estimates of other characters about the priest damn him also. When the priest is hiding in some banana plantation he asks Captain Fellows for some wine, the latter contemptuously remarks: "What a religion ... begging for brandy, shameless:" (p. 38). Maria, the mother of illegitimate daughter Brigetta, calls him good to none: "Suppose you die you will be a martyr, won't you? What a kind of martyr do you think you will be... it is enough to make people mock" (p. 79). The pious woman in the prison instead of praying for his long life prays for his early death. She threatens him of reporting to the Bishop, for he is a slur on the name of priesthood. The priest also accuses himself to be over-ambitious. He realizes that he doesn't deserve to be a priest, "... The killed hostages are better than him". And, he is aware that "I have not done anything for anybody. I might just as well have never lived".

To our surprise, the same priest turns out to be "one of the martyrs of the church" because he "wouldn't want the church to be mocked" (p. 79). This does not mean that Greene is siding

with adultery or drunkenness to which the priest is a victim. In fact, he believes that no sin is great enough to deprive man of God's grace if man is true to himself. For Greene saints have more capacity for sins: "The greatest saints have been men with more than a normal capacity for evil and the most vicious men have sometimes narrowly evaded sanctity."^[4] This is also true to the whisky priest. His weaknesses, as a priest, become his strength.

Graham Greene, being a writer of human experiences, could not think of a priest having all catholic values. He is a figure of sin purified by suffering. Like Sarah Miles in *End of the Affair* and Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter*, the whisky priest also passes through purgatory. Once a callous young man, the pudgy cheeked innocent of the photograph at the police station the priest is ennobled through suffering. Here the priest appears to have got a saintly wisdom. He says: "Pray that you will suffer more and more. Never get tired of suffering" (p. 64). Through his illegitimate child Brigitta, the priest realizes the power of love and the immense load of responsibility. Like all good parents he feels duty bound to protect his child against all corruption of this world.

Green is not critical of sex which is productive and which evokes the feeling of love and charity. He admires the kind of sex which Major Henry Scobie has in *The Heart of The Matter* and which the whisky priest has in *The power and the Glory*. Whisky priest's illegitimate child becomes a symbol of human love for him and teaches him the feeling of love for humanity. He finds his lost identity in Brigitta and feels attached to the whole world due to this child:

I love you. I am your father and I love you. Try to understand that. I would give my life, that's nothing, my soul, my dear, my dear, try to understand that you are so important ... This child was more important than the whole continent. You must take care of yourself. You are so necessary (p. 82).

The priest is highly compassionate by nature. When he is captured he wants Mestizo to take the prize which the farmer carried on his head. This prize would help Mestizo in leading his life peacefully. Rising above selfish motives he finds Christ in his fellowmen:

"... at the centre of his own faith there always stood the convincing mystery that we were made in God's mercy - that we were made in God's image God was the parent, but He was also the policemen, the criminal the priest, the maniac and the judge (p. 101).

Priest's knowledge of what he is and what he could be makes him a saint: As he falls asleep in the prison on the last night of his life, he has a dream of laughter and a long passage without door. This laughter is the celebration of joy of the release of priest soul from sin; the long passage is the door to Heaven. Greene has recorded that *The Power and the Glory* is his only novel devoted to the idea: "power is bound to fall against those who carry on the work of God howsoever benighted by corruption and failure their lives may be"^[5]. The priest, despite his alcoholism and constant fear, finishes as a martyr. A.S. Collins says:

Greene's insistence, indeed, is on the under- lying power and glory that shine through lives however flamed by weaknesses: they cannot be quenched and if apparently the

last priest is caught another will come. Against this the secular power is bound to fall (p. 101).

To the novelist only humans and their existence are important. Any philosophy whether worldly or theological has no significance for him if it votes against humans. He finds good hidden even in sin, corruption and seediness. His martyrs and saints are not supernatural beings; they are beings made of blood and flesh. Greene's heroes commit sins like murder, suicide, adultery still they are exonerated by God. To him, God's grace can thrust martyrdom on mean and cowardly men like the whisky priest who becomes martyr with his legs buckling under the influence of fear and alcohol. Priest's martyrdom puts a question mark on the philosophy of the church and of the communism both. To the novelist none of the two is acceptable if they deny man his right to exist as a human being.

References

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