

Graham Greene: Violence against Women and Male Power

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ABSTRACT

Male violence, being a common motif in fiction today, concerns all women, as the radical feminists argue. The present paper deals with the theme of male power and violence against women as perceived in the novels of Graham Greene. His novels are concerned with various forms of injustice – the injustice inherent in the patriarchal order in which men enjoy a natural precedence and power over women who are seen as mere objects or the body or the “other”. The violence against women occurs in all kinds of social spheres women and men share whether it is the public arena, the public-private world of work or the private space of a woman’s home. His novels are cluttered with conventional images of women. Man-woman relationship in Greene is usually battered into a precarious no-win situation leading to sexual disgust, emotional betrayal and broken homes.

KEYWORDS

Male Power; Violence; Oppression Sexual Abuse; Feminism; Subservience; Gender; Sexual Politics.

A persistent theme of radical feminism today is the limitless male-power and violence against women. One of the most significant aspects of feminist theory and practice has been to find / create / redefine words which reflect and record women’s experiences. Concepts such as ‘domestic violence’, ‘sexual harassment’, ‘child sexual abuse’ didn’t exist before the present wave of feminist activism. First wave feminist referred to them as ‘unspeakable outrages’. Radical feminists like Susan Brown miller, Susan Griffin, Mary Daly and Mary White Stewart draw attention to the ubiquity and diversity of male crimes of violence in phallographic culture. Their prevalence, they claim, supports their argument that “men, collectively and as individuals, have an interest in maintaining women’s oppression.”¹

Graham Greene’s fiction abounds in horrific images of violence in general and violence against women in particular in the present day world. Violence perpetrated by men against women is a common feature in the novels of Graham Greene. The violence against women occurs in all kinds of social spheres women and men share whether it is the public arena of the streets, the public-private world of work or the private space of a woman’s home. But the most frequent abuse occurs in a woman’s own home from the man she knows. Several references point out to the instances of rape and murder in the public arena. In *It’s a Battlefield* (1934), bold headlines in newspapers such as ‘The Stratham Rape and Murder, Latest Developments’ speak volumes about the common occurrence of rape and murder in the broad day light.

Greene's fiction proliferates with incidents of atrocities on women resulting as an aftermath of different wars waged from time to time. In novels like *The Quiet American* (1955) the images of the mother and child caught in the line of fire in a narrow ditch and a woman with the remnants of the dead body of her baby, show women and children alike as hapless victims of the horrific event of war.

Women are continually subjected to sexual abuse, coercion, exploitation and assault. Women like Anna in *Stamboul Train* (1932), girls at the club in *A Gun for Sale* (1936), Ida Arnold in *Brighton Rock* (1938) are used by men as camouflage for their safety and defence just to eliminate any doubt regarding their involvement in robbery, clandestine activities and heinous crimes. Andrew's father in *The Man Within* (1929), Minty and Krogh in *England Made Me* (1935), Raven in *A Gun for Sale* (1936), Pinkie in *Brighton Rock* (1938), Muller in *The Human Factor* (1978), Dr Fischer in *Dr Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party* (1980), Jim's father in *The captain and the Enemy* (1988) are portrayed by Greene as typical men characters who can scarcely hide their contempt for women.

In *The Man Within*, Elizabeth – the very woman who saves Andrews from impending danger is made the subject of his misogyny. Infuriated by her calm and reposed expression on being asked by Elizabeth about his sudden disappearance after the burial, Andrews bursts out camouflaging his fear and cowardice: "You women...you are all the same. You are always on your guard against us. Always imagine that we are out to get you. You don't know what a man wants" (*The Man Within* 52). Minty, the seedy journalist in *England Made Me* (1935) has an ascetic's contempt for women. He can scarcely hide his misogyny: "He did not like girls, he couldn't have said it in words more plainly; tawdry little creatures, other people's sisters, their hats blocking the view at Lord's" (*England Made Me* 126). The sight

of any woman wakes his malice: "...he was ready to suspect the worst of any woman who troubled to talk to him" (*England Made Me* 206). Fred Hall couldn't bear the thought that Kate was trusted: "She's is not our class, he thought. She was a skirt; she only lived with Krogh..." (*England Made Me* 163). Kate's explanations "beat like a bird against the blank pane of Hall's inattention and fell at its base" (*England Made Me* 190).

Likewise Raven, the hare-lipped murderer in *A Gun for Sale* (1936) has a deep aversion for women. Of course in this case he is equally averse to men too. He calls Alice a 'humpbacked bitch' and treats her in a brutal manner. He takes pleasure in hitting her and she cringes in pain away from him, not daring to say anything. She feels helpless before his bestial manners. He even threatens to shoot her in public-call box if she reveals his identity to the police: "Don't say a word or I'll plug you" (*A Gun for Sale* 19). Raven prides himself on his lack of interest in girls. He has some rigid notions about girls. He is highly skeptical about Anne's going to the police when he says: "That's what always happens in the end with a skirt" (*A Gun for Sale* 67). Initially, when Anne doesn't inform the police about him, he is surprised by her behaviour. He thinks that probably she is not aware of his intentions to kill her: "she had been as innocent of his intention as a cat he had once been forced to drown" (*A Gun for Sale* 65). When his confidence is betrayed by Anne Crowder, he accuses the female sex in the words: "How could he have expected to have escaped the commonest betrayal of all: to go soft on a skirt" (*A Gun for Sale* 169)?

Another revealing fact is that in Greene's world, man's misogyny, malice, treachery and bitterness for the woman folk emerge out of his own deficiencies and shortcomings. Raven in *A Gun for Sale* (1936) has been fed the poison of deceitfulness and bitterness drop by drop since his childhood. His ugly look with a harelip together with the bitter

experiences of his life have iced up his emotions and perverted his normal instincts. He suspects even Anne's genuine concern for him. Krogh in *England Made Me*, and Dr Fischer in *Dr Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party* (1980) suffers from 'infernal pride' and lack the ability to appreciate art and music. Out of inferiority complex, Dr Fischer hates his wife who is a great lover of music. Bendrix in *The End of the Affair* (1951) starts hating Sarah Miles out of mistrust. In him, jealousy has turned even the obsessive love into hatred. His masculine self-assertiveness and possessiveness induce in him a 'monstrous egotism'. In *The Third Man* (1950), Rollo Martins always tries to dismiss women as "incidents", the things that simply happen to him without any will of his own.

Another form of manifestation of violence and male power is women's experience of sexual harassment at workplace. Sexual harassment at work is recognized as a form of abuse experienced by women, which can occur in any context of paid work in which women work with or for men. In *It's a Battlefield*, Greene paints a broad and graphic picture of sexual harassment at work, social injustice and sexual inequality in contemporary society. He shows an awareness and deep concern for the suffering endured by the millions of low paid and unemployed including the young girls on account of doing the menial and mechanical jobs as factory girls. The match factory, where Kay Rimmer is employed, is a heartless environment of drudgery, accident and ruthless exploitation. The mechanistic nightmare of the factory girls is similar to that of the prison where Jim Drover is confined. These factory workers are in no way better than the prisoners. Women's lack of financial security and their failure to survive by respectable ways of earning drives them to earn a living through the trade of flesh. In *The Honorary Consul* (1973) Clara as a mother Sanchez girl truly represents the

experience of the prostitutes' victimization. Her character very realistically reinforces that prostitution both promotes and perpetuates male dominance. A prostitute is exploited, enslaved and treated like a commodity. Wilson in *The Heart of the Matter* is unable to hide his feeling of an awful disgust seeing a "girl in a duty shift spread out on the packing cases like a fish on a counter" (*The Heart of the Matter* 174).

The loss of innocence through corrupted childhood and sexual abuse especially of the girl-children is so convincingly portrayed in *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Confidential Agent* (1939) and *The Power and the Glory* (1943). Coral Fellows in *The Power and the Glory* and Else in *The Confidential Agent*, are typical Greene children, gifted and sad beyond their years. D. is touched by the unhappiness and the mute appeal of Else. Her innocence and her worldly knowledge fill him with horror. He sees her as the victim of a corrupt and unjust society. Like Brigitta and Coral in *The Power and the Glory*, Else in *The Confidential Agent*, is preposterously young to have 'complete theoretical knowledge of vice'². All the three have learnt too much in their childhood before they come of age. D. is completely outraged and shocked to see Else dead, laid out ready for burial. Her gruesome death hurts him deeply and reminds him of "a bird discovered at the bottom of a cage on its back, with the claws rigid as grape stalks; nothing could look more dead" (*The Confidential Agent* 115). Greene brings home the oppressive effects of the immature sexuality of a girl child at a number of occasions through these characters. Sexual awareness and experience at a minor age is not without its inherent dangers. His novels amply reflect his views on the risks and dangers encountered by a girl child at such a small and tender age in this world of terror and lust, leading her to utter destruction and complete parish.

In women's private sphere, yet another complex form of violence is manifested in their intimate relationships known as 'domestic violence'. Greene's novels display systematic physical, sexual and mental abuse in form of wife battering, violation of the women of their will, their ability to act through the use of intimidation and threat. Man in Greene's novels becomes a plunderer, an invader and a conqueror that treats woman's body as a territory to be looted, invaded and conquered. In *The Quiet American* (1955) the very act of love making by Fowler is shown as another form of male violence and hatred. Fowler makes love to Phuong in crude and offensive manner as savagely as he hates her. Both Pyle and Fowler contest with each other to possess and lay claim to Phuong's mind and body.

Even this 'domestic violence' in its worst form culminates in wife killing in many of the novels of Greene. In *The Ministry of Fear* (1943) Greene gives a number of times the references regarding the killing of his wife by the protagonist Arthur Rowe. Arthur Rowe's friend Henry Wilcox commits the same crime. In *The Man Within* (1929) Andrew's father is a bully who kills his wife too. In *Brighton Rock* (1938) Pinkie enters into a fake suicide pact with Rose in order to shut her mouth forever. In *A Burnt-out Case* (1961) Rycker's berates his young wife Marie for neglecting her marital duties, i.e. gratifying his sexual desire. He uses his fake Catholic faith as a ploy to perpetrate his sexual abuse and 'domestic violence' against Marie. In *Dr Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party* (1980) Dr Fischer's relations with his wife are superficial without any love lost. Dr Fischer breaks up their innocent relationship, and hounds and nags his wife to her death. In *The captain and the Enemy* (1988) Victor Baxter's father is a tyrant who roams as a raging lion. He wants his wife only to be bedfellow without any right

to motherhood. He enforces his wife Lisa for abortion resulting in her lifelong sterility, which leaves her completely shocked and desperate.

The theological dimensions of Greene's novels prompt us to interrogate and criticize the Church's attitudes to female sexuality and the position of women. These social institutions and their mode of operations and values they generally propagate are also to large extent responsible for the degrading and demeaning position of women in society. These institutions function as powerful symbols of patriarchal authority. Man cannot be blamed alone as many a times he simply advertently or inadvertently acts as an agent leading to women oppression. Considering in *The power and the Glory* the priest's quagmire and its fallout on Maria and Brigitta on the one hand and in *The Heart of the Matter* Scobie's dilemma and its fallout on the lives of Louise and Helen on the other, one infers that man alone cannot be blamed for woman's predicament. It is not the men per se but man made institutions and structures that are also responsible for oppression and suppression of women in society.

In other words the novels of Graham Greene amply prove that violence against women cannot be disentangled from the cultural, economic, and social context within which it occurs. Violence against women cannot be understood as an expression of individual rage or inadequacy or as a characteristic of the violent or the violated. It is a direct outcome of social, political and economic decisions supported by a cultural ideology of female inferiority. As long as women are "the other"- degraded and devalued because they are female - and as long as women do not have power equal to that of men in the political, economic, and social realm, they will be abused.

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