

A WORLD OF ALIENATION AND PAIN: AN EXISTENTIALIST READING OF GRAHAM GREENE'S NOVELS

AYO KEHINDE

Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Since literature often reflects the mood of its age and enabling context, it is the contention of this paper that Greene's fiction dwells on the conflicts and pains of the modern world. How does he approach this artistic feat? What are the ideological thrusts of his art? These and many other critical issues constitute the research focus of this paper. The paper argues that Greene's fiction takes on pervasive tones of irony and intensity, and expresses moods of sobriety and pathos that are intrinsic to the human condition in the modern world. Thus, in the world of Greene's novels, man is dumped in a setting which is unfriendly and harsh to him. The society flows with tears and bile for the occupants. The prospect for the modern man is portrayed as very bleak, and his life is marked by spiritual sterility, boredom, pain and alienation. His bright hope is all too easily repealed by cynicism and consciousness of failure. Hence, in every corner of the Greenean world, despair is written in the face of the characters. In fact, not only the people, but also the whole society of Greene's fiction stinks of degeneration. It is also the argument of this paper that the allegorical period of Greene's fiction is the world-war years and after. Devastation, bloodshed, emotional and spiritual barrenness, the waste of modern civilization, etc signify this. Greene, in the two selected novels, depicts struggling men who end up being alienated and disillusioned. In sum, the paper reveals that the modern world, which is, by inference, the referent society of Greene's fiction, is marked by depersonalized cruelty, mutual animosity, absence of love and community; it is a world where man's struggle always ends up in vain.

The concept of Dystopian Fiction refers to the attempt by a novelist to portray a 'bad place'. Among others, such fiction depicts a world that is very unpleasant. It pictures the ominous tendencies of the world's contemporary socio-political and technological order. It is predicated on the impossibility of a perfect existence for man, and it is antithetical to utopian fiction's vision of the world in which man learns to live at peace with himself in a federation of the world. In contradistinction to such utopian novels, like Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1934) and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), the dystopian novel sees man in a corrupted state, a community bedevilled with historical evils that man has always suffered. It also centres on the impossibility of growth without conflicts and the unfeasibility of a homogeneous society – a society of equality and symmetry. Indeed, this type of novel portrays a world of social disorder and a valley of tears. Among the readily available examples of dystopian novels are Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1945) and Huxley's *Brave New World*. Most of Greene's novels also fall into this canon. In dystopian fiction, the novelist is always blunt; s/he uses the

text to interrogate the idyllic posture of utopianism. This is due to certain sad and unexpected events in the modern world – cold and violent wars, revolutions, totalitarianism, such as Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia. In such a bleak world, man is capable of destroying himself and all of mankind; governments can also bend people to any kind of purpose (Hemmings 1990:555).

It is against the backdrop of the foregoing that the world of Greene’s novels should be considered. McDonnell, et al capture the essence of the modern world, as found in modern English Literature, thus: “Modern English literature took on pervasive tones of irony and intensity, and expressed moods of sobriety and pathos that writers believed were intrinsic to the human condition in the modern world” (1978:575). Thus, in the world of Greene’s novels, man is dumped in a setting that is unfriendly and harsh to him. The society flows with tears and bile for the occupants. The prospect for the modern man is portrayed as very bleak, and his life is marked by spiritual sterility, boredom and loneliness. His bright hope is all too easily repealed by cynicism and consciousness of failure. Hence, in every corner, despair is written in his face. In fact, not only the people but also the whole society of Greene’s fiction stinks of degeneration.

The allegorical period of Greene’s fiction is the world-war years and after. Devastation, bloodshed, emotional and spiritual barrenness and the waste of modern civilization signify this. Clarke (1976) has provided an illuminative insight into the artistic oeuvre of Greene. To him, Greene’s merit as a novelist lies in his “willingness to look at the ugly face of so much of the twentieth century, without flinching but with pity” (1976:94). This is done by depicting struggling men who end up being disillusioned. Indeed, the modern world, which is, by inference, the referent society of Greene’s fiction, is marked by depersonalised cruelty, mutual animosity, absence of love and community. It is a world where communion and communication have broken down (Stumpf, 1993; Orr, 1990).

The thematic preoccupations of Greene’s fiction are many and varied. They cover many areas of human endeavour (alienation, faith in the modern world, pity, religion, betrayal, etc). He is a novelist of multiple thematic foci (Berman 1994; Diemert, 1996; DeCoste, 1999). To Greene, happiness is impossibility in the fallen world for the sensitive man. What he must feel, therefore, is pity – for youth and innocence, for suffering of all kinds, and for the wicked. Greene therefore portrays man in his solitariness. Man is also depicted as incapable of relationship with others, and he is always at a loss in the world. His fiction is also marked by his decadent concern with neurotic aberration and his portrayal of man as being trapped by incomprehensible circumstances in a state of total impotence and paralysis. He is also a didactic novelist, most especially from the perspective of his ideal ‘hero’ who is a person with ‘exemplary’ characters, so that others can learn from him. He emphasizes the limitations of the ‘hero’, not his great deeds. This is to hint that, actually, in the modern world, what exists is anti-heroism, not heroism. In order to convey his view of the human condition in the modern world, Greene deliberately

employs recurring features in his themes, characterization and techniques. The tones are similar, and the recurring moods are those of pathos, pity, crucifixion and antagonism.

Undoubtedly, Greene was one of the most socially realistic modern novelists. Two of his novels which foreground the central focus of this discussion have been selected for this paper: *The Power and the Glory* (1940) and *The Heart of the Matter* (1948). The novels seem to be few of the best novels that embody Greene's reactions to and presentations of the problems of alienation and pain in the modern world (Palmer, 1986).

The Power and the Glory grew out of the materials that Greene gathered when he travelled to Mexico in 1938 to investigate the religious crises there (Allot and Farris, 1951). The totalitarian government declares religious activities, most especially the Roman Catholic Church, illegal. Among the old-age charges levelled against the Church are hypocrisy, corruption, exploitation and oppression. The church is also accused of encouraging poverty and flourishing in it. It is against the avalanche of criticisms that the totalitarian government clamps down on the Roman Catholic Church. Consequently, the church is destroyed and banned in certain states. The priests are put to death, forced to flee or made to renounce celibacy and embrace a secular life (for example, Padre Jose accepts that final humiliation). The government attempts to deny the people the freedom of religious affiliation. This does not make them happy; they are completely crushed and dehumanised. The novel thus centres on the ideological dissonance between the spiritual hegemony (the church) and the political hegemony. The conflict is noticeable in the symbolic dissonant relationship between the angry and determined revolutionary lieutenant and the whisky priest. The lieutenant pursues his job with dedication, without any fear. On the other hand, the whisky priest does not have the power to defend himself and his religion.

The pervading tone of the novel is very tense. This is revealed in the symbols of the vulture, eagle, decaying teeth and the like. Man is depicted as a carcase waiting to be devoured by some voracious vultures. The reader is excited by the repeated occurrence of some images of isolation, guilt and spiritual denial. Greene, in the novel, presents the picture of man hunted by fellow men and by God. It is not a normal world but that of restlessness. Ordinary and spiritual activities are threatened by terror and torture. Normalcy is only experienced in reminiscences (of the priest) and in his dreams. Such 'normalcy' is always very brief indeed. Through the escapades of the whisky priest, the reader knows much about the plight of the entire people of the society. Actually, the society is plausibly presented. It is not far distant from the vices of kings Herod and Pharaoh in the Bible. The novel vividly depicts the blasted prospects of the victim-hero (the priest) and the exploits of the unrelenting pursuers (the lieutenant, the chief of police, the red shirts and their civilian collaborators).

In the text, Greene seems to be asserting that the modern world is a 'wasteland', manifesting a spiritual aridity where no divine assistance is forthcoming because the Almighty God has been banished from the land. The novel is therefore a narration of estrangement and isolation of man from God. It is a story of God abandoning man in a blind alley of time. In such a world where human communion with God is destroyed, man's condemnation is to an empty and futile solitude. God is portrayed as a supernatural being of retributive justice, hence the society, whose mundane rulers have ejected religion and God, is plagued with despair. Therefore, the people of the 'Godless' society, irrespective of sex, creed, class and status, experience agonies. They drift without purpose and fulfilment. There is a cluttered world "devoid of spiritual meaning" (McDonnell, et al, 1978:578). Heidegger also comments philosophically on the pains that have arisen from the dissonance between God and man in the modern world: "To men of our age, God seems to be withholding himself, perhaps, he seems to be absent or dead, such that the consequence is that the journey of man through the world seems to be terribly uncertain and perilous" (Quoted from Marjorie Greene, 1957: 28).

The characters are products of their Godless environment; they are symptoms of the diseases affecting their milieu. The image of the society is not a very attractive one. It is rife with indices of poverty, abandonment, brutality, squalor, petty and major crimes, corruption, diseases and starvation. Therefore, the whisky priest, Padre Jose, the lieutenant, the pious woman and her children, the commissioner of police and his cousin, and other characters in the novel signify a sick society. For instance, Mr. Tench, the dentist, evinces a life of desolation and abandonment. He is an index of the state; he is lonely, frustrated and demoralized. The chief of police also suffers from toothache, memory lapse and indigestion. This is a consequence of the schism between God and the spiritually empty society. It is a place where the church has been destroyed and nothing has been, and can be, put in its stead. This spiritual barrenness engenders a lot of dissonant and painful experiences, like hunger, starvation and violent competition between man and man. It is a deserted place: "it wasn't only people who were going, even the animals and the reptiles moved away" (157). Indeed, nobody is spared pain.

The world of the novel is a tension-soaked society: "things you couldn't put a name to – jaguars perhaps – cried in the undergrowth, monkeys moved in the upper boughs, and the mosquitoes hummed all round like sewing machines" (87). This suggests that the three levels of existence (subterranean, celestial and terrestrial) are fraught with problems. Characters are set against one another. The police (the chief of police and the lieutenant) and the red shirts are against the whisky priest and the Yankee (an armed robber, the Mestizo) is also set against the priest. Even in the prison custody, the inmates are against one another. It is a scene of apparent violence. This reveals the reality of the age, that is, no place is free of dissonance and pain in the modern world.

Again, the world of *The Power and the Glory* is replete with moral and spiritual degeneration. This is shown in the outlook and deeds of the whisky priest. He is a forlorn hopeless man whose struggle to escape proves abortive. The unpleasant truths of the allegations levelled by the totalitarian state against the church, as presented in the whisky priest's deeds, signify the spiritual and moral problems of the modern world. The accusations are both seen in the priest's activities and in his reminiscences. For instance, during his sojourn with the Lehrs, the priest reverts to some of his old habits and makes stern financial demands on the peasants. Indeed, the two representatives of the Roman Catholic priesthood (the whisky priest and Padre Jose) are perversions of the ideal priests; they are not particularly exemplary figures. The priests who are supposed to bear the banner of the church in the dissonance between church and state, that is in the state's effort to break the ontological link between the creator and the creature, are apparently unworthy representatives. However, in the conflict between the church and the state, we come to realise the fact that the strength of the church does not depend entirely on the quality of its priesthood, but on the strength of the peoples' faith. This is revealed in the eager reception the priest is given in the first village he arrives at after leaving the Fellows' bungalow. The villagers, who had not seen a priest for five years, treat him like a celebrity. The Indians also walk a long distance of fifty miles to see the priest. This is the plight of people who are spiritually starved.

It is relevant at this juncture to surmise some philosophical reasons for the decision of the totalitarian government to banish religion from the society. Actually, religion constitutes a subject of controversy among the people of the modern world (Cuoto, 1988). To some, religion does not seem to have any capacity to solve the problems of man; rather it serves as an avenue to keep man away from the realities of existence. Sartre's critique of religion, as explicated by Caws, goes thus: "General laws and concepts and all such abstractions were nothing but hot air: people, he maintained, all agreed to accept them because they effectively masked a reality which men found alarming" (Caws, 1979: 9).

Philosophers, like Sartre, abound in the world. They do not only reject religious doctrines but are equally against any claim pointing to God's existence. This is informed by the fact that they, and many other atheists like them, believe that religion is a way by which people escape the realities of life. To such atheists, religion beclouds the worshippers' ability to reason and face the challenges of life. It equally destroys their will power, thereby leading to what Camus refers to as "philosophical suicide" (1955:23).

The conflict between the state and the church in *The Power and the Glory* can be located within the foregoing philosophical ponderings. It is also akin to the philosophical and ideological dissonance between Hegel and Kierkegaard. Hegel, in his philosophical postulations, defends rational Christianity and sees the history of mankind as God's intelligible plan. He claims that the life of man has been so

planned that everything he does is naturally part of him. That is, it is naturally and universally systematized for every man to believe in God. In reaction to this position of Hegel, Kierkegaard maintains that a “leap of faith”, which is solely the choice and responsibility of each individual, is the only way by which one can justify man’s belief in Christ (1936:113). The lieutenant in Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*, like Kierkegaard, believes that it is only the fools who follow religious dogmas: “You are fools if you still believe what the priests tell you. All they want is your money. What has God ever done for you?” (74). Even Nietzsche, a successor of Kierkegaard, declares in his work, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, the death of God in the world of today (Mugge, 1908:11).

The whisky priest struggles to the grave. This tells us that life is indeed a mystery, and its meaninglessness is reflected in almost all the facets of man’s existence, as the ordeals of the whisky priest suggest. He sees his life as that of regret: “What an impossible fellow I am.... And how useless. I have done nothing for anybody” (211). There are many things about man which are not very clear to him and which keep raising a series of fundamental questions within him, especially when he finds himself in what Jaspers describes as “Frontier Situation” (1969:136). This is a situation in which man is confronted with guilt, conflict, pain and death. Such is the plight of the whisky priest in the novel. In the end, he keeps on wondering why he was ever born into this world of wars, worries, disaster, disillusionment, hopelessness and hardship. The plight of Mr. Tench (the dentist), the Chief of Police, Padre Jose and the Fellows is not significantly different from the priest’s. Their lives suggest that man in the modern world is a being who laughs today because he is at the zenith of his success, but tomorrow he may be seen crying because he has crash-landed.

The significant difference between the past and the present of the priest vividly captures the agony of man in the modern world. The hitherto plump and round-faced priest is now an ugly man with a hollow face. He has “the appearance of a business man who had fallen on hard times” (107). This is part of life’s absurdities. To Greene, human nature is “not black and white but black and grey” (Friedman, 1990: 141). We find it also appropriate to concur with Friedman’s description of Greene’s work as a “post-mortem fiction” (1990:131). The ordeals and descriptions of most of the characters in the novel show that man in the modern world is a doomed and retrogressive individual.

How does one live in a world where faith says one thing and the authority and experience say another thing? This is the plight of the people of ‘Greeneland’. The society is naturally a religious milieu. The people’s unceasing revering of the priest shows the society to be a highly ‘Christo-centric’ one. However, the state has a significantly different ideology (atheism). This creates the tension-soaked and violent background of the text. The ideological dissonance generates dramatic tension and struggle. Hence, the interest that the novel sustains in the reader-audience. The land is metaphorically depicted as a slaughter slab or a battlefield.

The people of the land are mere bulls, and the state, with its agents of terror, is a butcher: "this was an arena, and the bull was dead" (216). Unfortunately, the people are depicted as a pack of morons who dare not fight for their rights. The totalitarian regime has reduced men to mere goats or sheep, who only brood over their plight: "there might have been a demonstration. People are so ignorant" (216).

The dissonance between God and society, as portrayed in the novel, also engenders economic, social and political problems. The economic situation is highly depressing. It is a world of economic thralldom and social dehumanisation. The economy is most unhealthy, similar to the economic situation in most third-world countries, which is marked by galloping inflation, Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP), weak currencies, shortage of foreign exchange, mass unemployment, low per capita income, etc. For example, Mr. Tench, the dentist, had initially thought of going back to his country but, unfortunately, the peso dropped and he now finds it virtually impossible to get the foreign exchange needed to travel back home. He therefore loses contact with his family. He gives up writing because he cannot afford to send any money home. He does not even care much if his wife has re-married. This is the economic situation in a Godless society.

The political atmosphere of the novel depicts a reactionary totalitarian regime, which uses the apertures of terror to enforce its will. We find the traits of the prototypes of totalitarian states in the text: Hitlerite Germany, South African apartheid regime, the Ku Klux Klan and the like. The state has little or no concern for human rights and dignity. The mere fact that one is a priest automatically earns one the death penalty. He is already guilty of treason before judgement. In fact, he can only get a contrived trial because he will not be allowed to be present in his trial. The lieutenant informs the whisky priest: "You had better know everything. You have been tried and found guilty" (205).

The Power and the Glory vividly portrays the devastating effects of anti-clerical purge on the lives of the people. As a Christian, the issues discussed in the novel touch Greene emotionally. However, he portrays the ideological dissonance with objectivity. Actually, he does not lay the blames entirely at the feet of the state; rather he also exposes the villainy and foibles of the priesthood. Through irony, Greene is able to foreground the uselessness of the priests. Since man exists in mutual cooperation with other men and in communion with God, religion is very pertinent for a complete or fuller life of man. Therefore, from the opening pages of the text, Greene, in his narrative voice, launches his ironical attack on the totalitarian government, which subjects people to spiritual starvation.

In *The Heart of the Matter*, Greene continues his thematic focus on the consequences of man's alienation from God, that is, the side effects of spiritual and ideological dissonance between man and God. The world of the novel, like those of Greene's other novels, is filled with symptoms of war between man and man, and between God and man. The overall effects of this on the people are very excruciating. The tone of the novel is unmistakably tragic and pessimistic. Actually,

it is a story rife with instances of dissonance and pain. The quarry for the novel is *A Journey Without Maps* (1936), the travel book about Greene's trip to Liberia and Sierra Leone in West Africa. It is a novel in which he explores the agonies of white men in alien lands. Greene, himself, once comments on the effects of an alien locale on white men: "It is a restlessness that I've always had to move around, and perhaps to see English characters in a setting which is not protective to them" (1968:674).

Therefore, Greene advertently puts his white characters in foreign settings with a view to exposing the side effects of imperialism and confirming age-old prejudices about Africa and Africans. He believes that the problems of Western civilization are vividly revealed in the developing countries, the colonies. Goonetilleke comments on the artistic strategy of exposing white characters to alien lands: "The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies where it goes naked" (1977:5). Fanon (1970), in his *The Wretched of the Earth*, and Stuart (1969), in his *The New Revolutionaries*, also comment on the unexpected and embarrassing revelation of the moral, spiritual and social degeneration of the Western world and the Western women. It is a striptease of man's humanism, telling the naked truth about the misdeeds of man in the modern world.

It is against the foregoing background that Scobie's problems should be explained. His problems with the world and God arise from a number of factors. He is in an alien land, 'a world that pollutes his own perfect culture', sense of values, notion of responsibility to man and God, and piety. All these lead him to be in conflict with God, himself and his society. In his Nietzschean temper, Scobie, a Deputy Commissioner of police in a West Africa colony (Sierra Leone), during a war between the Germans and the French, believes that man should always strive to be a 'superman', a man that is free of any societal and divine conventions. This, he thinks, will make him create new values for himself, and all existing ones, including religious beliefs, will be cast away. Any attempt to become a superman, however, involves risks and dangers. Such a man must also strive to perform chaotic and destructive acts. The ordinary man, to Nietzsche and Scobie, is weak and needs to bridge the gap between himself and the superman by being brave, fearless and strong, and he should always struggle even to perish. To qualify for a 'superman', Scobie distances himself from all the claims of the world and the conventional world's entanglements. In all intents, purposes and utterances, he sees himself as a version of the Supreme Being.

Scobie can also be described as an individual who strives to free himself from God, as well as from some mysterious and conventional bondage. Greene, however, gives the victory to God. The novelist seems to be suggesting that however great a man may be, he cannot sever his ontological link with God. To a Marxist, Scobie will qualify as a 'model' character that fights against 'the opium of the society' (religion), but to a devout Christian, he is a damnable atheist who meets

his tragedy because of his fatal sins. Scobie's behaviour is deviant if we view it from the perspective of the spiritual definition laid down by the Christian doctrine, most especially Catholicism, to which Greene belonged, and which is a socio-spiritual group within the community of the characters of the novel. Scobie is thus a freak that violates and deviates from the norms accepted by his community. He engages in all forms of anti-social and anachronistic behaviour, including heresy, adultery, betrayal of trust, infidelity and collaboration in murder.

Greene, in *The Heart of the Matter*, also dwells on how well or ill his characters understand their deepest human drives, especially how those drives are affected by personal demands and societal and divine expectations (Akporobaro, 2000; Silverstein, 1988). This is the conflict or plight of Scobie. In this sense, Greene shares with Joyce, Lawrence and most other modern writers a concern with the less conscious processes of the human mind, developing this to reveal 'the inner life' of the individual. This is revealed in Scobie's 'solitude' that keeps on warning him of the fatal consequences of his sins. The story is placed in the chamber of Scobie's consciousness. The belief is that it is the quality of mind that determines human uniqueness and vitality, rather than appearance, habitation, nationality and social status. Scobie struggles against dark incomprehensible forces, trapped in a web of circumstances, coincidences and passions.

Scobie finds himself in Sierra Leone, which is depicted as a land of horror. The synecdoche for the land, as found in the novel, is the wharf, which is plagued by constant and pervading acts of horror and social vices. Apart from the nurture-oriented problems of Scobie, his dissonance with God and the subsequent act of suicide arise from the problem with his 'nature', that is his feeling strongly for others (Louise and Helen), not out of love but due to pity. Hoggart attests to this claim: "The history of Scobie...is the history of a man drawn to his death by overwhelming pity" (1953:450). Himself a pitiable figure, he is not corrupted by power but by pity; we can then opine that pity corrupts and absolute pity corrupts absolutely.

Scobie is therefore partially responsible for his tragedy. The sick tone and motives of the novel suggest this. He misuses his chances of the free will, that is, his freedom of choice. The humanistic perspective in studying human personality claims that the internal drives of the psychodynamic perspective as well as the external stimuli of the behavioural perspective, though are not totally irrelevant, are quite inadequate and prone to flaws. Thus, Scobie is both a tragic and scapegoat figure. This is the fate of man in any doomed society. In his final days, Scobie stands as a tragic figure, naked and alone, facing the mysterious power and the demonic tendencies, the difficult truth in himself, the internal and external forces that control him. He is not flawed in the sense of being defective or guilty, but he has taken the tragic path by choosing to serve man, instead of God. From the story of Scobie's conflict with God and society, Greene has enriched the contemporary novel with a fresh idiom of human relationship and a new way of discerning and

evaluating human experiences. In liberal humanist tendency, Greene hints that what should command attention is the human free will and how people voluntarily direct their own affairs (Donaghy, 1992).

Unhappy people become depressed about life generally if the sadness is too prolonged. Scobie's sadness is precipitated by his sense of guilt and loss (of friendship with God and later his adulterous partner, Helen). And his agonies lead him to commit suicide; his suicidal tendency is nourished by nihilism and a breakdown of the link between him and his creator. As a Catholic, who is a moral deviant, Scobie sees suicide as a way of atonement for his grievous sins. The feeling of guilt weighs him down, but he doggedly refuses to make restitution. Because his sins seem so great, he sees no hope of atoning for them. However, when the guilt overburdens him, he seeks to negate and atone for his misconduct. He therefore undergoes self-inflicted pain. He sees problems besetting him from an 'objective' angle and seeks the alternative course of action; then, he takes his life.

Also very many interpersonal crises crop up in the lives of humans as a result of dealing with one another. There are so many problems and disruptions associated with marital conflict, temporary separation or loss of loved ones. The stresses arising from many of these lead to Scobie's suicide. He is in conflict with his wife due to his act of sexual infidelity. Also, he is in conflict with his adulterous partner (Helen). His moral degeneration commences when his wife is temporarily separated from him. He also suffers from the stress he has got from the death of his servant, Ali. Therefore, loss of hope and meaning in life leads to Scobie's prolonged illnesses. His suffering is severe and sustained. He thinks the hope of recovery is not in sight. These problems, coupled with loss of social status, also contribute immensely to Scobie's death by suicide.

Due to his inability to get a loan of two hundred pounds from the bank, he is frustrated. His promise to his wife is not immediately fulfilled, therefore, he no longer enjoys normal rest, and his head begins to ache. He complains to his boy (Ali): "my head humbug me" (80). Voices and visions also play many tricks with his reputation and mental balance. Actually, they are held to prove that he is mentally sick. He has some ideas, which come to him as an audible voice. Medically and legally, he is qualified to be labelled a mad person. His mental dissonance shares the same ground with Joan's in Shaw's *Saint Joan*. Thus, suicide is a method used by Scobie to obtain a relief from his precarious life situation. Instead of seeking another means of coping, he settles for the secret suicide option to atone for his inordinate pride. This happens because he who is hurt and discouraged always closely examines himself to know what to do. Farberou and Litman comment on this:

When clinical depression becomes acute, mental myopia is common. That is to say, a depressed person is emotionally incapable of perceiving realistic alternative solutions to difficult problems. His thinking process is often limited to

the point where he can see no other way out of the bad situation other than that of suicide (1970:3)

In essence, three categories of suicidal motivation and ideation can be isolated in Scobie's acts. One, he has interpersonal difficulties, that is, conflict with or unfulfilled need for another person. He manifests rage and frustration with a tendency to withdraw from the conflicting relationships. Also, he is plagued by feelings of the meaninglessness and hopelessness of life; he can no longer find a meaningful role in human enterprise. He is also troubled by inner conflict (mental dissonance). A debate keeps on raging in his mind. He is anxious, confused and struggles with life and death. His ultimate decision is to discontinue the struggle and end it all.

The futile attempt to solve life's dissonant situations has led man to look at life from the nihilistic point of view. This is probably another motivating factor behind Greene's attempt to depict man as a doomed and spiritually barren being. The novelist is informed by the gruesome historical events of the modern world to pass the pessimistic commentary on human existence. The idea of the emptiness of life is expressed in the novel through the suicide of Scobie, and his rise and fall are used as a reflection of the paradox of freewill in the modern world which is limited by society, economic situations, social norms, mores, history, the church and God. He is in conflict with various institutions and conventions. He rebels against both spiritual and mundane conditions. He is, therefore, not a friend of God since he has stopped following his ways. He has become a friend of Satan. He is, indeed, in darkness and helpless about the happenings around him. He, therefore, makes a lot of heretic statements, like the following: "God can wait, he thought: how can one love God at the expense of one of his creatures?" (179). We are indeed aware of the painful fact that evil appears inherent in Scobie in this world of doom and confusion.

Apart from the problem of the dissonance between the creator and the creature, Greene, in *The Heart of the Matter*, also delves into the problem of social dissonance. From the very first page of the novel, the reader realises that the problem of class schism is very strong in the colony. This is mostly seen in the dissonant relationship between the wealthy and guilty landlord and the poor tenant (Miss Wilberforce). Greene uses the two characters to expose the house owners' crude method of ejecting their tenants. The landowner's sadistic approach of ejecting her tenants is similar to that of Wini's landlord in Mwangi's *Going Down River Road*. The slight difference is that while Wini's landlord is the sole culprit of economic exploitation, in *The Heart of the Matter*, both the landlord and the tenant are despicable. Both have been infested with the virus of get-rich-quick syndrome. Miss Wilberforce's landlord breaks up her home and pulls down all the partitions at night. She even goes further to steal her tenant's chest with all her belongings. However, the tenant also has her own share of the blame. She is very capitalistic.

She has three lodgers, whom she exploits. Therefore, the tenant is as guilty as the house owner because she makes a profit of five shillings a week on a single room, and thus living rent free herself.

Again, in the novel, there is another instance of class dissonance signified by the relationship between the white and the black characters, and the language used by each of the groups. The black characters, Ali and the other boys, are portrayed as short and squat. Their poverty is depicted through their broad ugly face and their bare feet. The cape station club is one of the settings where the problem of social stratification is most apparent. The boys are given odd jobs, and they are misused. They serve as mere agents of spying. The members of the lower class, the working class, are portrayed as a social problem, and frequently, they are presented as comic figures. Hence, they are mostly shown as caricatures.

The characters are also classified through their individual linguistic repertoire. Three of such classes can be identified. In the first group are the white characters, the technocrats and their wives. In this class are Scobie, Wilson, Helen, Louise, etc. However, within the class of whites, there exist internal/social discriminations. This is shown in the intra-group conflicts among the people in the clubhouse. These people's mastery of English is very high; they use the language very fluently. In the second group are the Syrian traders (Yusef and Tallit). Although they are very rich, they are mere subordinate bilinguals. Their use of English is fraught with mother-tongue interference. Ali, the other boys and other faceless Africans fall into the third group. They are mere incipient bilinguals, who possess very minimal mastery of the English language. In fact, their use of English is flawed by literal translation, ungrammaticality, hesitations, pauses and other forms of interference errors. These are indices of their low status. The variety of English they use denotes a low level of education – from outright illiteracy to semi-literacy. Greene, in the novel, uses language to articulate the unspoken feelings of the poor masses that crumble under the weight of an oppressive system.

Also, the African characters, in the novel, are depicted as runts. There are no recognizable adults among them; they are mostly “boys” only used as tools in the hands of their white masters. The novelist portrays them as dispensable spies, a subaltern group in their own land. On the qualitative ladder, black is relegated to the bottom in the social world of the novel. He is considered to be ugly, unworthy of respect and only fit to be trampled upon and condemned to existence on the lowest rung of the society.

In the novel, Greene reveals the dissonant nature of modern society. He does this by portraying the intricate polarisation of the rich and the poor, the white and the black, in a capitalist-oriented economy and racist society. The world of the novel is merchandise one, where everybody, in one way or the other, is involved in the haggling and race for possession. It is a roaring world of tough and fearless exploiters. Often, we come across one-way communication in the novel, whereby

the rich people only disseminate information to the people, most especially their boys, without any reactions from them. Orders are only issued to the boys.

However, the masses, in the society, do not attempt any revolution, thereby emboldening the rich. The few wealthy members of the society are very confident because of their belief that there is no possibility of revolt by the masses against the system that has reduced them to goods being passed from one person to another. The socio-political and economic set-up gives men like Yusef and Tallit the economic privilege even above many people with proper education. This dominant class also shows that money can buy anything. It is used to alienate and enslave the masses, and even to murder them at will (like Ali, the boy of Scobie).

Closely linked to the problem of class dissonance, in the novel, is that of racism. In the text, Greene dwells on some issues, which relate to racial contact. These include the sense of racial superiority, race friction and race compartmentalisation. In the novel, Greene does not maintain fidelity to truthfulness of report, if we view it from the perspective of racial discourse. He is guilty of misleading half-truths, blindness to relevant facts and culturally constructed prejudice. What we have in the novel is a confirmation of attitude (ancient stereotypes about Africa) rather than an exploration of possibilities of objective meanings.

In the novel, Greene portrays Africa and Africans as an “expression of man’s anarchic impulses” (Obumsele 1970: 131). Thus, the locale of the story (Sierra Leone) is depicted as a despicable place, a place, where, according to Harris, nobody will want to pass through more than once: “I hate the place. I hate the people. I hate the bloody niggers” (13). Thus, Greene uses Harris as a persona to signify his negative attitude towards Africa and its people. The setting is also depicted as very hostile to the inhabitants; it is an “unfriendly shore” (14). The environment is replete with scatological materials, like Armah’s society (postcolonial Ghana) in his *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. These nauseating objects include: the smells of a zoo, saw dust, excrement and ammonia. This is an attempt to portray the society as a sick one which needs socio-economic and political restoration.

The continent (Africa) is also depicted as a European death trap, full of mosquitoes that cause the fatal diseases of malaria fever and exhaustion. Harris bluntly refers to Africa as “the white man’s grave” (140) in his letter to the Secretary of the Downhamian, the Alumni Association of his Alma Mater. The age-old depiction of Africans as cannibals also recurs in the novel. For instance, Mr. Bowles declares that Scobie’s long absence from the port will allow the natives to murder each other: “They’ll all be murdering each other without him” (124). Africans are also described as dishonest people. Scobie once frankly warns Ali, “never trust a black” (228). According to Ward, Africa, in *The Heart of the Matter*, is a “cultural artefact of a dangerous kind” (1989:62). This is similar to the depiction of Africa in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

The novel thus offers a litany of prejudices against Africa(ns). This is evident in the images of ubiquitous and perennial death in the 'exotic locale'. It is a world where vulture constantly flaps, a world that ceaselessly echoes dangers. Africa, in the novel, is a world of sin redolent of the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah, a world of treachery and violence, an imaginary world where people long to leave for another place where there is a better climate, better wages and higher status. This is the pervading quest of most of the characters, most especially Louise.

Sexism (gender dissonance) is another issue that gets prominent treatment in the novel. Women are portrayed mainly as excellent housewives. They are not politically conscious enough to participate in the larger socio-political experiences of their immediate society. Thus, the major female characters are relegated to the background. Woman is depicted as a delicate flower not fit enough to be a worker. For instance, Louise, the wife of Scobie, is a full-time housewife and the source of her husband's socio-economic upheavals, the cause of his moral degeneration. Helen, Scobie's adulterous partner, is also depicted as a loafer, who only depends on men for her sustenance - Scobie, and, later, Bangster. She is an irresponsible and untrustworthy woman. In fact, the picture of womenfolk that is found in the novel is very negative indeed. They are whores, capitalistic house owners and tenants. They are incapable of contributing meaningfully to the civilisation and progress of their society. This negative portrayal of women by Greene and most other contemporary male writers is an effect of the disdainful, indifferent, cruel and monstrous manner in which women are regarded in societies.

Greene's novels, most especially *The Heart of the Matter*, are filled with scenes that exaggerate the moral and psychological handicaps of women. Louise is depicted as an unprogressive and unambitious being. She is too static, an object of retardation and inertia. The world portrayed in the novel is that of "male chivalry and macho heroism" (Kolawole 1997: 2). It is a society of patriarchy and patrimony, where women are stereotyped into minimal defined role. The fictional world of the novel is one that breeds and sustains gender dissonance. For instance, the cause of the dissonance between Scobie and Helen lies in the fact that the woman is fulfilled through child-bearing and deeply emotional attachment, while the man keeps on craving for only an intense fulfilment through the woman. Gender dissonance is naturally fed by everything of opposition in the temperaments of two lovers; thus, the conflict of ideas between the two lovers results from their individual idiosyncrasies and the contrary idiosyncrasies of male and female sexes. Their relationship is marred by ideological/gender differences, the regular accompaniment of the relation between two individuals who are seeking vital filial actualisation and are obliged to make an adjustment of will and temperament. However, the pathetic case, the cause of dissonance between both 'lovers', is that adjustment is impossible. Their days of blissful relationship, their glorious happy days, do not last long. One striking feature of *The Heart of the Matter* is its reflection of the culture in which it is written; that is, the socio-economic and

political crises and the dominant tension of the referent milieu are very apparent. Like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, *The Heart of the Matter* is a philosophical, psychological and spiritual enquiry into the 'heart of man', with the pains arising from the ills and malaise of the modern world (Watts 1997: 94).

The foregoing revisionist voyage into the existentialist import of Greene's fiction has proved the novelist's commitment to the depiction of the meaninglessness and nebulousness of the life of man in this unknown and incomprehensible universe. The modern man keeps on wondering why he has to keep struggling in life. Such is the fate of the whisky priest in *The Power and the Glory* and Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter* which is no doubt a long stretch of struggle. It is observed that there are many things about the average Greenean man which are not clear to him and which keep raising a series of fundamental questions within him, especially when he finds himself in "frontier situation", that is, a situation in which he is confronted with alienation, guilt, pain or death. Unfortunately, the Greenean man never gets answers to these questions till he dies. The existentialist reading of Greene's novels has also revealed that he is a deeply critical and pessimistic writer. He is corrosively self critical.

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