

Chapter - III: SUICIDE : - *psychology*

The experiences which haunt Greene are recreated in the plays in the physical and mental atmosphere of seediness and futility in life from which the only escape is suicide. Graham Greene, as a boy, home-sick (though his home was so near) remained absent in the school, then he attempted suicide as he lost his confidence and at last ran away. A course of psychoanalysis in London returned him to school with a new self confidence. But the horrible experience of suicide remained for ever central to his imagination. Therefore, we find so many suicidal incidences in his works. The motivation of suicide may be centred around despair, family disintegration, illusory feeling, feeling of detachment, extreme depression, emotional dying etc. The characters involved in suicide are Rose, James, Victor and sculptor's son. Greene adds an eschatological aspect to his presentation of the situation of sin, damnation and atonement involved in suicide. The characters and their situations are basically unchanged but there is a narrowing down and specialisation of the complexities and the dilemmas that they face.

Suicide is a wilful, self-inflicted, life-threatening act which results in death. The intent is a complex phenomenon which includes the person's evaluation of mental state as well

as the circumstances in which he is. The one who has assumed that he has not been strongly integrated into any social group or into any family is more vulnerable to suicide. As H.G. Morgan writes:

Loss of integration leads to a sense of isolation and morbid individualism which predisposes to egoistic suicide. Closely related is anomic suicide due to conflict between individual's aspirations on the one hand and values of society on the other hand.¹

'Anomic Suicide' occurs when a disturbance in the balance of the person's integration with society leaves him without his customary norms of behaviour. The anomic could explain the greater incidence of suicide among the divorced as compared with the married. But proneness to suicide is to a great extent when a married person undergoes the divorce situation.

In Greene's third play The Complaisant Lover, the climax develops in a hotel room in Amsterdam where Mary and her lover Clive Root have gone for a holiday. Mary has invented a friend called Jane Crane to put her husband Victor Rhodes off the smell. Victor arrives a day before he is expected; he finds Mary in her hotel room, the mythical Jane gone, and Clive close by. He suspects nothing, but Clive, to precipitate the action, pays a valet hundred guilders

to pen a poisonous note informing the husband of his wife's infidelity. When the note arrives in London, Victor, annoyed at his failure to understand the situation, confronts Mary with facts, Mary shows her intention to divorce him and marry Clive. Victor cannot stand the situation any more, He goes to a garage to put an end to his life.

MARY : Of course, I knew you wouldn't do anything silly really.

VICTOR : Silly is the operative word. I only wanted to be alone, so I sat in the car. Then I remembered something I had read in the papers. I turned the engine on. I shut the garage doors. But the word 'silly' came to my mind too, and the headline in the newspaper : 'Love Tragedy in West Dryton'. This isn't West Dryton, but the district is wrong for tragedy too.²

Victor has undergone the divorce situation. His balance of mind is disintegrated. So he thinks of committing suicide. Greene has presented 'anomic' suicidal situation and has given turn to suicide. Otherwise the play would have been a common place domestic tragedy and Victor might have extended his suicide plan, but Mary accepts the moral basis and they are reconciled to each other. Eliot's The Cocktail Party, has a similar atmosphere and movement. In this play the wife has a love affair with a young man who is secretly in love with her

husband's mistress. The psychiatrist solves the tangle by advising them that they should honestly realise their limitations and accept the moral basis for successful marriage. At the end they are reconciled to each other.

Even Henry Miles and his wife Sarah in The End of the Affair have grown used to one another's company, and the habits of domestic life are too strong to be easily severed. But Clive Root is not Maurice Bendrix, nor could he be in the comic context of the play. Root's jealousy and his mania for possession are equally as strong as Bendrix's; but he has his knowledge of the past love affairs to sustain himself. He says to Ann Howard, a girl of nineteen: "In my case the husbands have always been complaisant...they love their wives too much to leave them".³

Graham Greene's earlier plays and some novels too depict suicide. Sometimes it is physical suicide, or suicide for atonement, suspicion or threat. Philip Stratford says: "Suicide, a recurrent theme, is treated tragically in The Living Room and in earlier four novels. It is present, but abortive, in the last two plays. In The Potting Shed, the hero's salvation lies in the release of his repressed memory of a boyhood suicide attempt. In The Complaisant Lover the deceived husband considers suicide but, the district is wrong for the tragedy, he decides".⁴

In the first play The Living Room, the heroine, Rose Pemberton commits suicide. She is in love with Michael Dennis

who is unhappily married, a non-Catholic person, and who cannot divorce his wife and marry Rose. Her wish to marry him remains unfulfilled. Psychologically Rose is very much depressed. At the time of crisis she is not given help by her two aunts and her uncle, a crippled priest. All these instances lead her to extreme depression. She finds no other way than to commit suicide. She takes the sleeping pills and there is the end of her life.

(Graham Greene returns to the idea of a Catholic suicide. Without repeating the ideas of his novel The Heart of the Matter.) Scobie, the just, caught in chaotic condition, felt, he cannot give justice to his wife, Louise, and so to his mistress, Helen Rolt. His desperate promise to Helen constitutes for him an oath as ineffaceable as his vow at Ealing altar to make Louise happy. As the two vows are irreconcilable, Scobie begins to lose control of himself. The heart of the matter was that Scobie felt that it was his moral duty to make his wife happy and his heart loved Helen. He was torn between his conscience and temptation. He felt that God would never pardon him. He felt the need for 'atonement', and in this depressed condition he found that the only way was to commit suicide. For depressed persons sometimes atonement appears to be substitute and with that they fight off the intolerable depression and overcome the situation of suicide. The relation between depression and suicide, H.L.P. Resnik writes:



Something of the relationship between suicide and depression can best be understood by the need for atonement that can underlie both. Depressed persons may attempt suicide just as they appear to be recovering from their depression. And a suicide attempt can cause a depression of long standing to disappear. One form of atonement appears to substitute for another. Of equal relevance, many suicidal patients use a way of fighting off intolerable depression.⁵

Scobie's endeavour to pit his own compassionate self against the Omnipotence allows unreasonable anguish in human life. Scobie in his emotional crisis commits suicide; Rose, in the disorganized mental state finds the futility of life without love, and her responsibility to herself and to a code. The conception of her death may perhaps be better understood in the light of Scobie's suicide. Scobie's suicide is self-punishment. The original motivation may be centred around failure, guilt over aggression or attempted expiation and the only way to make both women happy. Both Rose and Scobie take pills and kill themselves. But A.A. DeVitis observes that "Rose's suicide need not be viewed in the same perspective with Scobie's death".⁶ In Brighton Rock, Pinkie's despair over sin leads to (for a Catholic) the ultimate sin of despair, suicide. J.P. Kulshrestha points out that "In Pinkie's case, Greene explores the special difficulty of

repentance, man's unwillingness to be forgiven, the nature of his continuation in sin and his despairing of forgiveness".⁷ Rose kills herself because her life can bring only unhappiness to the people she loves. She has unconscious fantasies of immorality. Also she rejects the truth. Rose does not believe in God. Her uncle tells her about God but she says:

I don't believe in your Church and your Holy mother of God. I don't believe, I don't believe.⁸

She has neither affection nor fear of God. She loves only Michael. So her unbearable condition is not planned by God. Frank Kermode states: "Scobie's intolerable position is plotted by God; he demands more pity and love than anybody else".⁹ Though Scobie is aware only of his eternal damnation, a sense of forgiveness seems to attend his loving self-sacrifice. Eliot's The Family Reunion handles similar problem of guilt and redemption. It deals with Harry, the hero of the play, who feels restless as he is obsessed with the idea of having killed his wife. And on account of that he is pestered by Furies. This is nothing but hallucination produced from the inherited unconscious memory of his father's desire to kill his mother. (Because he (the father) was in love with his wife's (Amy's) sister Agatha.) Harry believes that the Furies are not instruments of blind revenge, but rather of absolution, and so he decides to leave his ancestral home, and sets out. Scobie too feels the need for absolution, but

his worst sin, suicide, is the outcome of his humanity. Scobie is a good Christian in spirit though he violates the rules of the Church. But for Rose, her worst sin, suicide, is the outcome of her immorality.

In The Potting Shed, James, the hero, attempted suicide at the age of fourteen. The play begins with death and has also an action of suicide. As R.W.B. Lewis points out: "The outer plot of The Potting Shed, begins with the imminent death of an elderly intellectual, while its interior action departs from the suicide of his son".¹⁰ Henry Callifer the head of the family, is a rationalist, who in his youth and vigorous middle age had preached an extreme rational belief. He got fame throughout his life and now he is dying; but the wife who is aware that her husband exists for the admiration that has always been granted him, that he is a fake (her own word); that if he is to survive he must be preserved in his 'life illusion'. Father Callifer has always given lessons of Christian religion to James since his childhood. But a boy just reaching adolescence has attempted suicide. 'A congenital self-destructive impulse' in him is released by his father, who has rudely disillusioned his beliefs in the 'mysteries' of the Church. But the boy is brought back to life by a bargain prayer of his uncle Callifer, which is even more embarrassing to his father than his death would have been.

Jacob H. Adler has correctly associated the suicidal situation in The Potting Shed with Ibsen's play The Wild Duck:

The Potting Shed, is a play which might have grown directly out of the conclusion of The Wild Duck. In that play, the daughter of the household, a girl just reaching adolescence, has committed suicide because she has been suddenly and violently disillusioned by her father.¹¹

*link with
existential
element*

Suicide attempts and the possibility of suicide seem to give a person an illusory feeling of mastery over a situation through the control of life and death. James in his childhood, is totally abandoned in the family because of his love towards Church. What happens to children when they are separated from the family is described by H.L.P. Resnik:

The concept of death as an act of leaving -that is, as abandonment - derives from childhood. Children's reactions to death frequently imply either that a violent act was inflicted on the dead person or that he left voluntarily. Children who lose or are separated from their mothers react as the mothers had chosen to leave them.¹²

James is neither loved by his parents nor by anybody in his family. In depression he develops such an anger towards his family that he turns back on himself. Being an exiled member

naive / of the family he regards suicide as the ultimate answer to it and he attempts suicide. Greene in his childhood attempted suicide. So he tries to depict his own portrayal through the character of James. While comparing Greene's characters and their relationships to one another in his plays Jacob H. Adler observes:

The priest in a moment of spiritual crisis is infinitely better realized in The Potting Shed, as is the use of the bottle of pills intended for suicide. The sisters reverting to their childhood relationships, which is the effective enough conclusion of The Living Room, seems the raw material for the much more effective temporary reversion of the Callifer mother and son to an earlier relationship in midplay. Even the drawing together of man and wife against the lover of one of them which is subtle and dramatic more than anything else drives Rose to suicide in The Living Room, is more effectively and ironically handled in The Complaisant Lover.¹³

Greene's characters involve themselves in an experience of life, sometimes they have the emotional and spiritual complications involved in basically tragic situations and sometimes they have the comic involvements of a domestic tragedy.

In his fourth play, Carving a Statue (1964), a sculptor has given his life to the making of a statue of God the Father. Everything except his dreams is sacrificed to his task though he does not realize its worthiness. He knows that his work is a refuge from the pressures he would suffer if he abandons his task he has no notion of how to complete.

The sculptor is obsessed. His son is imprisoned by his obsession. He tries to discover freedom first through sex with a tart he finds, and then through love with another girl who is dumb and deaf. But he is robbed of both as the first girl is taken away by his father and the second dies on the street under a vehicle. The Boy (sculptor's son) threatens his father with committing suicide:

BOY : I'm going away. I am taking first train out of here. Express. Non-stop.

(The Boy sees the rope and takes it. He climbs a few steps up the ladder.)

You wanted a new way to see me dead. I'll hang from God the Father's neck. Ask me not to go, father.

(The father comes out of the tool-shed. The Boy stops.)

BOY : You are a father, aren't you? Indifference in the right eye and a bit of tenderness in the left. But you could never get round to finishing the left eye. Could you?

FATHER: Why are you bleming me? I did nothing.

BOY : Nothing for me and nothing for mother. You know all about indifference, don't you, and nothing about love.¹⁴

The Boy does not get love from his mother as she is dead and even from his obsessed father who is not firm in his life. The Boy is bereft of love in his life since his childhood. He wants to fill the hollowness of love. But he is robbed of it by his obsessed father. Psychologically, he is depressed and mourning in his heart. He cannot do anything. As a result, he generates 'self-hatred'.¹⁵ In the shocked state he loses his temper and mental balance. In such condition he thinks of suicide and he threatens his father that he will hang from the neck of the statue and commit suicide. In The Complaisant Lover, Victor Rhodes's strong feelings of detachment, repressed aggression and dampened affectivity are perceived by him as equivalent to emotional dying because of his wife's disloyalty. His self-hatred in depression originated in anger towards his love object - Mary, as she plans to leave him and marry Clive Root. He sees suicide as a release from his emotional suffering. So he plans to commit suicide but refrains from doing so. He overcomes the acute crisis when he remembers the headline in the newspaper. Victor expresses his changed thought to Mary:

It's unfair, isn't it we're only dressed for a domestic comedy. A suicide looks better in a toga, and Carbon Monoxide poisoning is exactly a Roman death.¹⁶

Graham Greene has introduced suicide in this play but he has given a turn to it successfully. The point appears to be didactic, but, Greene seems to subscribe to it. As Philip Stratford says:

Although the play observes many of the conventions of drawing room comedy, it pushes perilous close to Greene's favourite tragic subject suicide... The point is not that he introduces suicide, but that he skirts it; his use of the practical joke, for all its superficial grotesqueness, is complex and subtle, and the ending can just as well be interpreted in the new comic spirit as in the old spirit of insoluble tragic dilemma.¹⁷

The strong emotion and suffering sometimes mature a mind. They cannot revolutionise a vocabulary in a couple of minutes. As Henry Raynor points out:

Rhodes might carry out his suicide plan, but it is his wife's need which persuades him to abandon it: If she wants a husband and a lover she must have both for the sake of her happiness, it is the adulterer who finds the solution outrageous until Rhodes persuades him that to love is to give the beloved what she needs.¹⁸

In the final analysis Greene proves the husband-wife relationship vital for the preservation of family. Clive Root realizes that he will accept Victor Rhodes's terms and remain Mary's lover, until one day he will find it no longer possible to be complaisant. And then the end of the affair.

Thus, Graham Greene discusses how the thought of suicide is motivated in a man. He depicts the acute spiritual and moral crisis within man which lead to suicide. Also how persons develop feeling of self-hatred due to total damnation which leads an individual to suicide. He discusses the intent of suicide not only in adults but also in children. When children have the feeling of detachment they attempt suicide. When a man undergoes divorce situation he commits suicide. But at the same time Greene stresses that the strong emotion and suffering matures the mind of a suicidal person and then he abandons the thought of suicide. When Greene talks about emotions concerning suicide in his plays, he also tells us about other emotions like 'love' concerning sex, despair, money, Church, God, society and, an emotion like 'fear' concerning loneliness, eternal damnation, death; it becomes a major theme.

G's treatment of suicide seems to raise the question fundamental to his plays which is whether religion, (R.C) or psychoanalysis can offer a remedy to man's suffer. If modern science has cast doubts on the ancient religious faith, it calls to question modern psychological insights and techniques.

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13. Jacob H. Adler, 'Graham Greene's Plays' in Graham Greene: Some Critical Considerations, Ed. R.O. Evans, Lexington: Kentucky Press, 1963, p. 227.

14. Graham Greene, Carving a Statue, London: The Bodley Head, 1964, pp. 77-8.
15. The first important psychological insight into suicide came from Freud. Freud's statement quoted by H.L.P. Resnik from Freud's 1917 paper viz. Mourning and Melancholia. Freud states: "The self-hatred seen in depression originated in anger towards a love object, anger that the person turned back on himself. He regarded suicide as the ultimate form of this phenomenon". in Modern Synopsis of Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry/III, Maryland: 1981, p. 706.
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