Part IV
Chapter 6

A Review

“Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness: the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation”, Graham Greene wrote in his memoir (Greene, 1980, p.275). No doubt the need to escape was an important part in Greene’s psychological make-up. According to Norman Sherry, we can trace it back to Greene’s early childhood when he escaped to the French Garden at St. John’s. It extended even very late into his life; the second volume of his autobiography, which came out in 1980, is titled Ways of Escape.

Writing in different genres, though it provided an escape for Greene did not altogether liberate him from the obsession which corrupted his childhood and adolescence. The Greene canon is
therefore rightly defined by Kenneth Allot and Mirriam Farris in their well acclaimed book *The Art of Graham Greene*, in terms of these “obsessions” (Allot, 1951, p.25). These obsessions as stated earlier, furnished Greene the orientation for applying his sensibilities to his experiences, and these experiences in their turn provided him the much needed raw material for the creation of his characters.

No doubt Greene loved and admired the memory of his parents, but at the same time they were in some way responsible for the building-up of the betrayal theme in Greene's works. His mother's remoteness together with her incapacity to demonstrate her love towards him, coupled with his early "undeserved contempt" for girls, prompted him to portray women in general as intellectually inferior personages. As Greene himself stated, this contempt he "was soon to lose" (Greene, 1971, p.44), but the experiences he underwent later – his first failure in love, the unhappiness in his married life, the easy availability of sex to satisfy his promiscuity without any pursuit or seduction, his ardent admiration without any corresponding reciprocity, and the loneliness he suffered in spite of his many affairs, led him to portray women with immense potential for mischief and misery.
No one can deny that the "backward tunnel" (Golding, 1982, p.15), of Greene’s memory was peopled by men and women who had some associations with him, while he was young. Naturally, when he was in the workshop of his female characters, the “two signs in the sky” (Golding, 1982, p.194) under which he developed, his mother and wife, exerted a great pressure on him. The recurrence of their character traits, or the significant absence of them in the composition of Greene’s female characters, point to the fact that Greene was labouring under some obsessions connected with these women while portraying the ‘Greeneland’ of his plays. This Greeneland may lack the characteristic landscape of his novels, but it exudes the same air of betrayal, evil and corruption.

Speaking of his characters Greene once said that they are an “amalgam of bits of real people” (Greene, 1978). Yet he asserted in his autobiography that it was only possible for him to base a very minor and transient character on a real person: “A real person stands in the way of imagination . . .” (Greene, 1980, p.298). Real persons might have limited his imagination, but nonetheless they were essential for him in the creation of his

---

fictional ones. Norman Sherry, Greene's official biographer, also testifies to this fact:

... Greene made use of his own real life and the lives of those close to him (though suitably modified, changed or expanded so as to allow him to retain the secrecy of his sources - and Greene has a developed taste for secrecy) because such material was essential to his fiction (Sherry 1989, p.419).

The elements of autobiography in much of Greene's fiction are unmistakable. Taking up the novels first, one cannot fail to notice that almost all the women characters of the books reviewed in this research, share many of the virtues and vices connected with the 'real' women in Greene's life. The saintly Elizabeth of The Man Within is modelled after Vivien whom Greene thought would provide him an anchor in his excitability and his wanderings in lust. The lascivious Lucy who prompts Andrews to testify in the court as he had promised Elizabeth to do, plays on his sensibilities as did many of the prostitutes whom Greene had come into contact with during the early years of his marriage. The feelings of remorse guilt, and fear welling up in Andrews after his testimony in the court, have many parallelisms in Greene's own life.
The one woman in Greene’s novels, not modelled after any single woman in Greene’s life is Kate Farrant of England Made Me. No wonder Greene called her the woman who he had drawn better than any other. As Anthony states of Kate, she is a ‘composite figure’ (Greene, 1970, p.54) of many women Greene had encountered in his life till that time. Narcissistic in her psychological make up, she is mother, mistress and sister to Anthony at the same time. The Lucia Davidge of the novel, who allures Anthony away from his comfortable employment, her sister, and from Sweden itself, is a woman of loose morals like many other women with liberated attitude towards sex, whom Greene had come across.

The memorable Louise Scobie of Greene’s popular, The Heart of the Matter has many of the peculiarities and eccentricities of the one and only Mrs. Graham Greene. Louise’s self exile from West Africa, paves the way for Scobie’s intimate association with Helen Rolt, the nineteen year old widow who evoked in him excessive feelings of pity and responsibility. Helen very much resembles Greene’s ‘m.g.’ (my girl) and mistress for a long time – Dorothy Glover – with whom he came into close contact while he was staying away from his wife because of the
war. The third part of the book was written after Greene met the vivacious Catherine Walston, and his sharing of intimacies with her persuaded him to break away from Vivien and Dorothy. Scobie's search and effort to secure peace by committing suicide, must have been motivated by Greene's own feelings of guilt and helplessness in disassociating from the three women in his life – Vivien, Dorothy, and Catherine.

The End of the Affair was written at a time when Greene apprehended the end of his affair with Catherine, who fanned the fire of his passion. In fact it was Catherine's loyalty to her lovable husband, Harry, in spite of her cuckoldry of him with Greene, which persuaded Greene to write that passionate story of hatred and love of great intensity. The diary entries of Sarah Miles of the novel are most often verbatim reproductions of Catherine's own diary.

The first play of Greene, The Living Room, teems with autobiographical material. Besides the shade of colour suggested by the surname of Rose Pemberton's aunts and the 'E' at the end of it, Rose's aunts very much resemble Greene's own. If most of

---

2 The surname of Rose's aunts is Browne, the final 'e' as in Greene.
his aunts were “officially maiden” (Greene, 1971, p.25), so too are Rose’s aunts. Like his own aunts, they too look after in their old age their brother, but there is the difference that James is a priest who is unable to continue in his office because of an accident to his legs. Among his aunts, Greene had an aunt named Helen who chose to remove his photograph from the sitting room of her house to a bedroom, just because he committed the sin of dealing with too much sex in one of his popular novels 3. Rose’s aunt Helen also does something of the kind in the play. In spite of being a very pious woman, she removes the photographs of persons who have suffered the “wages of sin” 4 from her house. James tells Rose,

... when some one dies they’ll do all the right things – they are good Catholics. They’ll have Masses said – and then as quickly as possible they forget. The photographs are the first things to disappear (Greene, 1985, p.20).

If Greene’s aunt Maud lived with her ear “very close to the ground” (Greene, 1971, p.27), Rose’s aunts have “long ears” (Greene, 1985, p.11). The absence of Greene’s mother’s physical

4 Romans 6:23, “the wages of sin is death.” Holy Bible, New King James Version.
traits and *temperament* in Rose's aunt Helen, is also significant. Unlike his mother who was tall, lean, flat chested and gentle, Helen is a fat woman whose "*strong will [is] buried in the big breasts and the stout body*". Ida Arnold of *Brighton Rock* is also several times said to be 'large breasted' and she also shares Helen's independence of mind. Does this point to a Greeneian conception that seems to suggest that bigness of breasts has something to do with the strong will that is buried underneath? Helen's devouring kind of *possessiveness* towards Rose was totally absent in Greene's mother, but it was a major streak of *personality trait* which he resented in his wife.

If Greene during his early life searched for a suitable mother substitute in the context of his mother's remoteness, and found one in Zoe Richmond who was almost double his age, Rose too while hunting for a father substitute – her father having died very early – falls upon the forty-five year old Michael Dennis.

The *neurotic behaviour* of *Mrs. Dennis* and her *possessiveness* towards Michael, despite her strange conduct must necessarily have some personal connections. Or else, the

---

description of the *behaviour* of neurotics as explained by Michael would not have been graphic\(^6\). Greene's attachment to the beautiful Catherine, and his mistress Dorothy's resentment at it, and her frantic efforts to keep Greene with her at all costs, would have been at the back of his mind when Greene wrote this dialogue.

No amount of a writer's ability to enter into the life of another, and imaginatively reconstruct another's suffering, would be equal to the writer's own personal experience. Greene himself has stated:

> A writer's knowledge of himself, realistic and unromantic, is like a store of energy on which he must draw for a lifetime: one volt of it properly directed will bring a character alive. There is no spark of life in *The Name of Action* or *Rumour at Nightfall* because there was nothing of myself in them (Greene, 1971, p.147).

Rose's dilemma, whether to go with Michael or not, after having witnessed Mrs. Dennis' vigorous outburst, has also parallelisms in Greene's life. Having been diagnosed an *epileptic*, Greene's hopes of marrying Vivien were greatly shattered, and he too like Rose, turned to a priest for advice. Like Rose, Greene too

---

\(^6\) See, page 161 of this dissertation for the dialogue.
found the priest’s strict following of the canon law, spiritually crippling (Sherry, 1989, p.334).

*Mrs. Callifer* of *The Potting Shed* shares many things with Greene’s mother, Marion Greene. Like Greene’s mother, the centrality of her *passion* was towards her husband, Henry Callifer, and she pursued it even at the risk of endangering her relation with her son, James. She says,

... for nearly fifty years I’ve looked after his laundry. I’ve seen to his household. I’ve paid attention to his – allergies. He wasn’t a leader. I can see that now. He was someone I protected. And now I’m unemployed (Greene, 1985, pp.94-95).

Just like Greene’s mother who paid “occasional state visits to the nursery”, and was very remote towards her children, Mrs. Callifer too called on her son only occasionally on her visits to Nottingham. James’s unhappiness about his mother’s conduct was also modelled after Greene’s own. If James’s strangeness at fourteen drove him to a *psychologist*, Greene’s situation was not much different. He too had to go to a *psychologist* at sixteen to find out the reasons for his *strangeness*.

The boy in *Carving a Statue* also shares Greene’s views about his own mother. Like Greene who associated his mother
with the "smell of eau de-cologne" and the taste of "wheaten biscuits" (Greene, 1971, p.15), the boy associated his mother with the smell of his soap. "My soap smells of her" (Greene, 1985, p.222).

Unlike Greene's mother who allowed people to be individuals, Mrs. Callifier like Rose's aunt, Helen, is very obstinate in her views. She has a capacity to drive through other people's lives, and is not prepared to allow a free will to her son. Her conduct of showing satisfaction at Sara's divorce of James, has some overtones of the conduct of Vivien's mother, Marion Dayrell Browning, who divorced her husband and forced her daughter to abandon her father (Sherry, 1989, pp.474-75).

**Annie**, the thirteen-year-old girl of The Potting Shed, shows much of the precociouslyness of Vivien when she was her age. Energetic and exuberant as Vivien, she has a capacity to alter any situation which hinders her individual development. Though slightly intimidated by the "grandmother eyes" of Mrs. Callifer (Greene, 1985, p.111), Annie makes it her mission in life to guarantee the freedom of thought, and spirit of James. What Greene expected from his wife was exactly that. He hoped that the slow passage of time would help him realise his objective.
The fact that Greene disregarded the unity of time in writing the
drama points to this fact, subsequently he regretted it though.

*Mary* and *Ann* in *The Complaisant Lover* lust after Clive,
and the most important *trait* in them is their craving for *sex*. It
does seem that the interest in, and *motivation of sex* in their
characterisation, stem from Greene's own strong *sexuality*. As
Otto Preminger has observed in his autobiography, “Though he
(Greene) gives a first impression of being controlled, correct, and
British, he is actually mad about women. Sex is on his mind all
the time” (Preminger, 1977, p.153). Much evidence has been
collected by Norman Sherry in Greene's biography to prove that
Greene went after women, before and during his marriage with
Vivien. The frigidity of Vivien when he wanted sex most, forced
Greene to turn to many prostitutes.

Mary in *The Complaisant Lover* though carried away by
Clive's *masculine* charm, was not initially amenable to Clive's
proposal to abandon her kind husband and marry him. She
however yields to Clive's wish after securing a diamond earring as
a gift. Victor who can only give Mary a scarf with a map of
Amsterdam printed on it, is no match for Clive Root with his
costly gift of diamond earrings. What Greene seems to aim at, is
to deprecate the craze of women for material wealth, something which he resented in his wife. In spite of all her failings, Victor admits Mary's ability to endear herself to him. Greene too felt the same way about his wife.

Ann, the nineteen year old girl of *The Complaisant Lover* who runs after the thirty-eight year old Clive Root, carry with her a lot of the inquisitive Greene. What she wants most from her *profane love* is new experience. Greene, after his treatment by the *psychoanalyst* also felt an urge to try anything new, to seek out the unknown. Morality was not a problem for him. In *A Sort of Life* he puts it quite candidly: "Morality comes with the sad wisdom of age, when the sense of curiosity has withered" (Greene, 1971, p.98). Ann is also moved by this *passionate inquisitiveness*, this "terrible curiosity".

Except for a passing mention in chapter two, nothing has been said about Barbara, Greene's cousin, in whose company Greene made his first journey into the unknown, which became the subject matter of his travel book, *Journey Without Maps*. This appraisal will be incomplete without at least a brief reference to her views on Greene. In her justly famous book, *The Land Benighted*, she writes: "Apart from three or four people he was
really fond of, I felt that the rest of humanity was to him like a heap of insects that he liked to examine, as a scientist might examine his specimens, coldly and clearly” (Greene, 1938, p.6). Despite Greene’s own statement in *Ways of Escape* that, “My cousin left all decisions to me and never criticised me when I made the wrong one, and because of the difference of sex we were both forced to control our irritated nerves” (Greene, 1980, p.46), Barbara constantly reminded herself not to pin any hope on Greene’s help to save her from trouble: “If you are in a sticky place he will be so interested in noting your reaction that he will probably forget to rescue you” (Greene, 1938, p.6).

True; Greene had taught himself what Lord Chesterfield called, “the knowledge of the world,” acquired by reading men and women, and studying all the various editions of them. Beginning with his *Stamboul Train*, Greene had taught himself to observe and read people, and it is this keen “knowledge of the world,” which makes his portraits of women sharp. Greene, Barbara recalls, often tore down her cherished ideals in such a way that she had to re-build them frequently. Yet, she concludes

---

7 Lord Chesterfield, letter to his son, 1739.
that he was the best companion one could have had on such a
trip as to Liberia.

On a review of everything so far said about Greene's women
characters, it may be noted that in his fiction Greene did not
portray women in a favourable light. He believed that a writer
should not marry, and Vivien too agreed with him on the point.
Greene felt that if at all a writer should, it is better for him to
marry a bad woman. It was Alexander Korda, "a man whom [he]
loved", who told him so, and recalling Korda's "hesitant
Hungarian accent, which lent a sense of considered wisdom to his
lightest words", Greene made use of it in the characterisation of
Dreuther, the business tycoon in *Loser Takes All*. There,
Dreuther advises Bertram, the accountant who is to marry
shortly; "My dear boy, it is not easy to lose a good woman. If one
must marry it is better to marry a bad woman" (Greene, 1980,
p.217). The same dialogue is made use of by Greene in *The
Complaisant Lover* also. But this time, it comes with slight
variation from the mouth of Mary, who can well be called the
controller and director of the actions of the chief male characters
of the play: "Victor, be glad you aren't married to a good woman.
The good are horribly hard to leave" (Greene, 1985, p.201).
Greene believed that a writer "must learn to set every precious scrap of personal experience where it will receive the greatest number of converging rays". True to his belief, Greene made use of every bit of his personal experience where it will receive intense concentration than anywhere else – in the presentation of his characters. According to Albert Camus, one cannot create experience, but has to undergo it. Greene by his own life and writings firmly proved that he too held the same view. The women characters he painted with such dexterity, using several permutations and combinations in his fiction, in fact highlight to a great degree the experience he suffered in the company of the women he encountered in his real life.

Finally, a word has to be said on Graham Smith's complaint of a "curious lack in the plays . . . of memorable characters" (Smith, 1986, p.200). Speaking of Greene's plays in his book, The Achievement of Graham Greene, Graham Smith contends:

There are no Scobies or whiskey priests here, only rather dimly remembered figures who perform their parts adequately enough in the dramatic puzzle, but who fail to live on as part of one's inner life as

---

8 Greene, in Spectator, 1 June 1934: 864.
so many of the novel's characters do (Smith, 1986, p.200).

There is some truth in this averment. But the lack of embodying details in the plays is not because Greene lacked the ability, but because he had to cope with the demands of operating within the modern theatre. There may not be Scobies and whiskey priests, but more important than them, the plays furnish a gallery of women, a small one though, who can turn the people about them into puppets and lead them to their salvation or damnation or thereabouts—Helen, Mrs. Callifer, Mary, to mention only one from each play dealt with here. Greene's women characters may not be as good as the procession of women issued from Shakespeare's brain, but he is certainly not a puny playwright having little power of characterisation. He may be a "small" playwright, but his female characters have surely cut a niche for themselves in the world of the stage.
References


