

Victim of Fate or Choice: A Study of Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*

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ABSTRACT

*The present paper aims to find out the possible justification to the question, why an honest and incorruptible police officer like Henry Scobie in the novel *The Heart of the Matter* indulges in a chain of criminal activities. Paradoxically, this is not the story of Henry Scobie's life, but the story of every common man, who one or the other day in his life, indulges in such type of activities which are tagged by society as 'anti-social acts' or 'criminal acts'. But the question remains the same, why? This question is the ultimate question for a perpetrator to answer. His mind dwells with the dilemma that whether I was chosen by fate or it was my own choice. Greene's protagonist, Henry Scobie is like every common man, whose life was entangled with unexpected complexities and miseries. Let's find out whether it was Scobie's fate or his choice. The prime objective of the present paper is to find the hidden answer to the question with regard to Greene's protagonist Henry Scobie's life. To attain the proposed objective the present study relies upon textual analysis and draws upon the relevant criminological theories like Agnew's General Strain Theory and Rational Choice Theory.*

Keywords: criminal activities; society; anti-social acts; strain; criminological theories

INTRODUCTION

Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* was published in the year 1948 and since then it has received critical appreciation from all over the world. Greene's works of fiction have always been critically weighed from religious and theological perspectives and *The Heart of the Matter* is not an exception in this regard. Greene's *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Power and the Glory* (1941) and *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) were considered among Greene's 'Trilogy' of Catholic novels because the central themes in all three focus on Catholic perceptions of salvation and damnation.

Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) is the story of a man, Henry Scobie, serving as a Deputy Commissioner of police in an unnamed British colony in West Africa. Critics believe that the choice of setting of this novel by Greene is to portray the contemporary picture of the corrupt and seedy society and unlike Greene's other novels it does not reflect the intense picaresque of seediness and squalor. Moreover critics say that, "Not only the place reeking with physical discomfort but with immorality of every kind: it is parasitic cosmopolitan corrupt" (Neumann 1951). Kulshrestha (1977, p.96) rightly comments that "West Africa is yet another picture of Hell, another province of 'Greenland'". As the novel opens, the readers find Scobie's character as that of an honest and incorruptible police officer. However, as eventually the story unfolds the degree of complexities in simple life situations of Henry Scobie takes a new turn. As Bergonzi (2006, p.118) rightly says "Greene presents

the character of Henry Scobie with a psychological depth and complexity” and “Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter* is truly three dimensional in a way that no other character had been in Greene’s work to date” (Wyndham 1962, p.18). Along with that, throughout the novel, Greene symbolises his character as that of pity and responsibility too. Paradoxically, the story of the novel ends with Scobie’s suicide. Some critics believe that Scobie’s suicide and his “decision to live in a place whose moral and natural conditions are unfit for decent living, is a sign of protest against the evils of a corrupt urban society, seedy and meretricious” (Rai 1983, p.47). We agree with what Rai observes, but along with that we would like to extend this notion a little further and trace some more factors prevailing in the corrupt society which makes an individual invalid. Going back to the significant question: why does an honest and incorruptible police officer like Scobie need to sacrifice his life? As is previously mentioned, in this paper our intention is to look into Scobie’s life with a bird’s-eye view and also to analyse some of the major events which take place in his life, thus solving the dilemma which dwells in our minds.

This novel was published in the year 1948 and critics believe that Scobie’s character reflect Greene’s own life experiences during his stay in Sierra Leone at the time of the Second World War. In this novel through the character of Scobie, Greene beautifully delineates the extent of suffering, pain, and mental agony in an individual’s life. It is indeed true that one of the major objectives in Greene’s writing is to portray the extent of human suffering and pain in an individual’s life, so that the understanding of love for others and also for God will eventually develop through the period of pain and suffering. In this novel also, the main protagonist, Henry Scobie sacrifices his own life for the love for others and Greene leaves the ending of the novel open ended, and throws a question to the readers about Scobie’s salvation and damnation. As the novel was written during the period of the Second World War, it reflects the agony of human suffering in a corrupt world where there is no place for honesty, innocence and trust. Scobie is also a victim, and in the corrupt system where humanity is questioned, he “is fighting single-handed against the rotten, corrupt world” (Prasad 1008, p.147).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework adopted for the present study draws upon the relevant theories of criminology namely Strain Theory and Rational Choice Theory. The Classical Strain Theorists “argue that the cultural system encourages everyone to pursue the ideal goals of monetary success and/or middle-class status. Lower-class individuals, however, are often prevented from achieving such goals through legitimate channels” (Agnew 1992, p.51) whereas Agnew’s General Strain Theory “recognises that only some strained individuals turn to delinquency, and it predicts that several factors condition the impact of strain on delinquency” (Agnew et.al. 2002, p.43). Whereas, on the other hand Rational Choice Theorists asserts:

[I]ndividuals are seen as motivated by the wants or goals that express their 'preferences'. They act within specific, given constraints and on the basis of the information that they have about the conditions under which they are acting. At its simplest, the relationship between preferences and constraints can be seen in the purely technical terms of the relationship of a means to an end. As it is not possible for individuals to achieve all of the various things that they want, they must also make choices in relation to both their goals and the means for attaining these goals. (Scott 2000, p. 3)

ANALYSIS

However, before analysing Scobie's life under the light of the theories mentioned above, it would be pertinent to put some questions before us:

- 1) What is the extent of pressure in Scobie's life which makes him a deviant in his professional career?
- 2) Why did Scobie throw himself into an adulterous relationship?
- 3) Why did Scobie commit suicide?

Though hardworking, honest and incorruptible, Scobie is passed over for promotion. It is not because he is not loyal to his duty, but it is the system which is not loyal to him. He stands alone in the midst of treachery and corruption. The commissioner calls him 'Scobie the Just'. He is the lone survivor in the world where with every step, corruption and betrayal stabs him back. This particular failure changes his overall outlook towards life and also makes him a different person. This event leaves a deep impact upon his professional career and personal life. It is an inevitable escape for Scobie; he is not left with an option to look back, but to move forward with this decision. He considers himself a loser as if it is his trademark: "it was one of the rules by which he set his life, to be a good loser."(p.19) Scobie's wife Louise is totally disappointed after hearing about his failure for Commissionership. She feels insulted and worries about the colony gossips. Scobie not only feels sorry for her, but feels a severe sense of pity towards his wife and holds himself responsible for Louise's unhappiness. His failure doesn't cause him much pain, but his wife's unhappiness puts him in severe pain and agony. This particular feeling of Scobie about Louise's unhappiness reflects his one of the significant personality trait, that is, his altruism.

Theorists believe that this particular personality trait which is associated with criminal behaviour can easily motivate any individual to take certain actions, "Altruism can be thought of as the action component of empathy; if you feel empathy for someone, you will probably feel motivated to take some sort of action to alleviate that person's distress if you are able."(Walsh 2006). And Scobie's further decisions in his life spring from his particular sense of pity and empathy for others. Louise wants to go for a vacation to South Africa to escape from the colony gossip. However because of the economic constraints, Scobie is not in the position to arrange for such a luxurious trip and hence becomes more anxiety ridden. As rightly observed by Sinha (2007, p.37) "Louise's disappointment at Scobie's failure to get a promotion has a detrimental effect on him: in fact this failure may be the starting point from where the tension in the husband-wife relations is aggravated". He feels pity for his wife and as days pass by his sense of responsibility to make her happy at any cost becomes aggravated as if "it had always been his responsibility to maintain happiness in those he loved."(p.17) Scobie visits the Branch Manager, Robinson who refuses to lend him money. He feels dejected. He is left with no other option. It occurs to him as if "he had been detected in a mean action-he had asked for money and had been refused. Louise deserves better than him. It seemed to him that he must have failed in some way in manhood."(p.37) Not in a position to handle more stress both financially and mentally, Scobie for the first time in his life deviates from his own norms of conduct. He borrows money at the rate of four per cent interest from Yusef, a Syrian trader and diamond smuggler. Greene tries to portray the characters of Yusef and Scobie with a contrasting similarity. Both of them are the victims of loneliness. On one hand Yusef is a criminal, a smuggler who even tries to put false charges against Tallit, his business rival and on the other, Scobie who is an honest police officer finds himself trapped in the midst of corrupt people. He considers himself corrupt too because of his sense of pity. For the second time he deviates from his moral conduct when he destroys

the letter found in the Captain's bathroom of the Portuguese ship during the search operation. The captain of the ship even tries to bribe him but he refuses it. He thinks that "he had been corrupted by sentiment. Sentiment was the more dangerous, because you couldn't name its price." (p. 45)

Looking at the situational conditions in Scobie's life we agreed on the point what critics rightly say about the novel "*The Heart of the Matter* is pre-eminently the story of corruption settling on one man – Henry Scobie." (Kulshrestra 1977, p.96) In support of this view it would be evident to comment how slowly and eventually the corrupt system around Scobie forces him to embrace the path of criminality. The degree of external pressure turns him into a different man who is a deviant in the eye of society. Society which plays an important role in an individual's life can sometimes be held responsible for the fall of the individual. To make matters worse, gossip that Scobie is being bribed by Yusef spread throughout the colony like a fire and everyone suspects Scobie. To prove it, Wilson, comes to the colony and spies on Scobie. When Scobie comes to know about Wilson's intentions, he becomes more angst-ridden. Wilson falls for Scobie's wife, Louise and thus bears a strong seed of jealousy inside him against Scobie.

The extent of external pressure on Scobie by the corrupt system; by Louise's disappointment; Wilson's conspiracy, and colony gossips is so severe that he is not in the position to handle stress any further. The actions taken by Scobie such as borrowing money from Yusef and smuggling diamonds are basically the outcomes of his incapability to handle stress which in turn puts him under severe strain. Strain is the individualistic factor in Scobie's life which born out of his characteristic factors like pity and responsibility. As per Agnew's General Strain Theory this phase in Scobie's life could be explained in a better way. Agnew's theory underpins strain on individual level whereas Merton's Strain theory explains it under social level. Agnew mentions: "the greater the intensity and frequency of strain experiences, the greater their impact and the more likely they are to cause delinquency." (Siegel 2007, p. 195) We have seen that not only once but repeatedly this extent of pressure creates strain in his life which leads him to become a deviant.

Moreover, along with the complexities present in Scobie's professional life, much more complex situations are awaited in his personal life too. Now we will concentrate our discussion on them and try to pin down the complexities which are waiting to be disclosed. Scobie's relationship with his wife is not a harmonious one, rather a burden of responsibilities to both of them. He feels pity for Louise. They have been married for fifteen years and in an accident lost their only child, Catherine. Also, Louise and Scobie's personal choices differ. Louise likes poetry whereas Scobie is not at all interested in poetry and literature. Their relationship reflects monotony and boredom. They communicate very little and in a mechanical manner. Scobie admits that "he never listened while his wife talked." (p.17) Feminist critics like Meena Malik (2009, p.62) rightly observes: "[t]o Scobie, there is no distinction between a living being i.e. his wife and an inanimate object i.e. her photograph, both serving the same purpose. She is equivalent to any fixture or handcuff on a nail". In their fifteen years of marital relationship, love is substituted by pity. There is no physical and mental intimacy between them. Scobie finds Louise unattractive because of her age. It seems to Scobie that he "was bound by the pathos of her unattractiveness" (p.19) and "the fact that Louise is no longer young or beautiful only intensifies his sense of responsibility." (Kulshrestra 1977, p. 97)

His stressful, boring, and monotonous marital life with Louise, enforces Scobie to indulge in an adulterous affair with a nineteen year old widow, one of the survivors of the torpedoed ship, Helen Rolt. After Louise leaves for her vacation to South Africa, Scobie finds himself in extreme loneliness. Helen Rolt lost her husband recently and she is as much as lonely as Scobie. Scobie and Helen eventually find themselves to be drawn towards each

other. And finally, both of them fall in love with each other and Scobie, as a convert Catholic commits his next crime, the sin of adultery. Scobie admits that he loves Helen more than his wife and needs both Louise and Helen to be a part in his life. However he also knows that it is impossible. He feels guilty and thus goes to the Church for confession. During his confession, he is not convinced by the words of Father Rank. To Scobie the words are just like a magic formula used for everyone. Also, he is not so sure that he will break off the relationship with Helen. Even after his confession he continues his adulterous relationship with Helen. Scobie again finds himself a trapped man. He feels responsible for Helen's happiness and his pity again wins him over. Though Scobie believes that love and happiness are present only for a short period of time in a man's life, his sense of pity for others compels him to continue his relationship with Helen.

As a chain of consequences, complexities come into Scobie's life. His servant Ali came to know about his affair with Helen and betrays him by delivering the letter, which Scobie once had written to Helen Rolt, to Yusef. Yusef blackmails Scobie. Scobie, who is already guilty of borrowing money from Yusef, now finds himself "caught in a ceaseless moral struggle, a struggle in which he has to defend his integrity against a vicious world." (Prasad 2008, p.144) He smuggles a small packets of diamonds to the Captain of the ship *Esperanca* as per Yusef's order. Louise sudden return from her vacation adds a different kind of anxiety in Scobie's life. Scobie loses his trust completely in others, and especially in Ali. He fears that Ali will tell Louise about his adulterous affair. Out of anxiety and fear Scobie confides in Yusef who plans for Ali's murder. Sitting in Yusef's office, Scobie knows that Yusef has planned something bad for Ali, but still he doesn't protest rather he hands his broken rosary to Yusef. Though not directly involved, Scobie consider himself as a conspirator for killing Ali. Under Louise's constant pursuance to attend Holy Communion, Scobie commits the act of sacrilege and "suffers the torments of mental agony before committing the unpardonable sin of killing himself." (Sinha 2007, p.40)

To end all the complexities, Scobie commits suicide. For a Catholic, suicide is the ultimate sin of despair. Paradoxically enough, Scobie's last act, that is, his suicide can't be separated from his sense of pity. Pity destroys Scobie. The man who once thought that it would be better to die before retirement ends his own life by committing the terrible act,

[t]he thought of retirement set his nerves twitching and straining: he always prayed that death would come first. He had prepared his life insurance in that hope: it was payable only on death. He thought of a home, a permanent home: the gay artistic curtains, the bookshelves full of Louise's books, a pretty tiled bathroom, no office anywhere—a home for two until death..." (p.33)

Scobie studied all the signs and symptoms of angina from the encyclopaedia at bank manager's office and accordingly prepares himself for death. He fabricates his death to look like as a natural one and not from the drug overdose. He does it so because, his innate desire is to make Louise happy and it would only be possible if Louise gets the money from medical insurance. Scobie wants peace for himself and also happiness for others. Neither Louise, nor Helen ever understands him. They blame him for not giving them part of deserved happiness which they had expected. In the last chapter of the novel we have seen, how Louise tells Father Rank that Scobie's act leads him to damn himself:

'He was a bad Catholic.'
'That's the silliest phrase in common use,' Father Rank said.
'And at the end this—horror. He must have known that he was damning himself.'

‘Yes, he knew that all right. He never had any trust in mercy—except for other people.’

‘It’s no good even praying....’

Father Rank clapped the cover of the diary to and said furiously, ‘For goodness sake, Mrs. Scobie, don’t imagine you—or I—know a thing about God’s mercy.’

‘The Church says...’

‘I know the Church says. The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn’t know what goes on in a single human heart.’ (p.254)

But Father Rank tells Louise that it is impossible to make out what goes inside the human heart, “although the Church knows the answers concerning the character of sin and grace, man’s final justification is in the mind of God alone,...”(Neumann 1951). Scobie only knew what was going inside him. The Church only formulates rules and regulations but it does not have any access to human heart. One’s faith and mercy in God can lead him to the path of salvation or damnation. And in Scobie’s case God’s mercy is on him because he had mercy on others. Seeing Louise’s hatred towards Scobie, Father Rank questions Louise with a harsh tone “do you think God’s likely to be more bitter than a woman?” (p. 255).

Greene leaves the novel open ended and tosses a question towards the reader: Is Scobie damned or saved by God’s mercy? Since the novel was published, critics render over this question from theological and religious perspectives, but as we have already mentioned previously, our emphasis will be entirely on Scobie’s actions and to pin down the enforcing motivational factors of his life. The main motivational factor to become a deviant character in Scobie’s life is his inability to control strain. Strain is omnipresent in Scobie’s life. Whether in his professional front or personal life, he was surrounded by the thick cloud of Strain. Slowly and eventually he becomes a criminal character. After looking at Scobie’s major life events, we certainly pinpoint two major enforcing factors in Scobie’s life which are responsible to turn him into a criminal. First, the environment in which Scobie lived is halfway responsible for his suicide and secondly, Scobie’s personal choice to choose the deviant path to attain his one of life’s important goals “happiness for others and solitude and peace for himself” (p. 174).

Prasad (2008, p.144) rightly observes that “had Scobie been promoted, things would have been much different” and this is indeed true in a sense that all the complexities in Scobie’s life have started from the day when he was passed over for Commissionership. If Scobie is promoted, neither Louise will have to go for vacation nor does Scobie borrow money from Yusef. These chain of events put Scobie under tremendous pressure and anxiety that he was even found guilty of Ali’s murder and at last commits suicide.

Apart from strain, we can definitely say that all the decisions made by Scobie are rational and taken to achieve his deep rooted personal desires. His actions along with the Strain Theory of Criminology could also be justified by Rational Choice theory, which asserts that before a person chooses a path of deviance, he/she is well versed with the advantages and disadvantages of the act. In view of *Rational Choice Theory*, Herrnstein (1990, p.356) mentions:

Rational choice theory holds that the choices a person (or other animal) makes tend to maximise total utility where utility is synonymous with the modern concept of reinforcement in behavioural psychology. Because utility (or reinforcement) cannot be directly observed, it must be inferred from behavior, namely, from those choices themselves. Rational choice theory is thus a rule for inferring utility.

Though Scobie feels that it was solely out of pity and to give happiness to Louise, he borrows money from Yusef, but at this point we would like to argue by saying that somewhere we can

trace his sole interest in this action to send Louise away. Louise to him is nothing but a responsibility. Louise to him is a vow which he is keeping for the last fifteen years. He feels no love for her rather he feels pity. Not in real life but in his dreams he feels happy and paradoxically enough, there is no space for Louise in them rather he dreamt of his servant Ali who never spoke in his dreams. Inside the core of his heart, he wants solitude and peace for himself which he can only get if he sends Louise for vacation. Thus, for Scobie borrowing money from Yusef is a rational choice which he pays for Louise's happiness and his own peace.

Similarly his relationship with Helen Rolt is also taken by his rational choice. He knew that being a Catholic, he is not allowed to maintain relationship out of the marriage institution, but still he is drawn toward Helen and ultimately ends up in an adulterous affair. His primary notion is to gain a companion because he feels lonely when his wife leaves him to go on a vacation. Even after confession he is not sure whether to break off with Helen and continues to visit her. Last but not least his suicide is also the outcome of his rational choice. He knows that it is the only way to attain peace. Moreover if he manages to portray his death as a natural one, Louise will be financially secure through his insurance. Thus, Scobie plans his death methodically. Weselinski (2011, p.172) comments about the end: "the reader is led to identify not with the brave and honest hero, but with an anti-heroic and criminal character; Scobie is a lonely hero, or rather anti-hero who has lost everything except the knowledge of his fatal end".

CONCLUSION

Greene crafted the character of Henry Scobie with shades of mental agony, misery, pain, and suffering. He makes us believe that Scobie is the one who was chosen by fate. His act of borrowing money from the Syrian trader Yusef, smuggling of the counterfeited diamonds, strenuous relationship with his wife Louise, indulging in an adulterous relationship with Helen Rolt, indirect involvement in the murder conspiracy of Ali and at last his suicide were all the consequent acts of fate and destiny. He was destined to do so. However, our intriguing bird's eye view in Scobie's life from a criminological perspective has identified one of the important motivational factors held responsible for all the acts, and that is Scobie's own personal choice, his rationalistic approach. Thus, after considering all dimensions, we would like to infer that Scobie's life which is full of intermingling complex situations, sometimes arises because he was destined to do so and sometimes due to the immediate environmental factors along with his own choices.

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