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Women in Graham Greene's Entertainments and Thrillers with special reference to *Stamboul Train*

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Abstract

Greene depicts women as marginalized characters in most of the novels and thrillers. He provides many insights into women's lives and experiences that are relevant for feminist analysis. Women in Greene's *Stamboul Train* are destined to suffer and their treatment seldom transcends the prejudices of the patriarchal society. By and large, woman in Greene is the victim of her vicious circumstances. He throws subtle hints of female subservience in a male dominated universe. Most of the time, woman is found looking for some support and protection as she lacks confidence to manage herself in an estranged and hostile world. She is completely bogged down by the inherent gender conditioning and becomes representative feminine figure of fragmented self-symbolizing emotional repression and sexual inhibition. On the contrary, the woman like 'manly' Mabel Warren, who shows a bit of courage to swim against the current, is unable to reconcile the contradictory needs of the self

and constantly struggles in vain for a more authentic being. All through, she is found suffering from inferiority complex and a sense of failure that acts as an obstacle in her quest for wholeness and a full life.

Keywords

Marginalization; Alienation; Subservience; Gender; Oppression.

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A man feels himself more of a man when he is imposing himself and making others the instruments of his will.

-Bertrand de Jouvenel, *Power*

Greene's entertainments, from *Stamboul Train* (1932) to *Our Man in Havana* (1958), with the exception of *Loser Takes All* (1955), are not merely entertaining. Most of Greene's entertainments are thrillers with all the paraphernalia of crime and violence, espionage and surveillance, chase and hunt, and love and lust. These entertainments, endowed with a touch of authenticity, are grim books about the dismal realities of life. In this context, Anthony Lejeune avers, "The impression they leave is like the dirt which comes off on your finger when you rub it along a grubby window-sill. They are as bleak as a February wind cutting through cheap cloth. Every character in them is weighed down by cares almost beyond bearing" (Lejeune 25).

Greene's thrillers, however, have an edge over other specimens of the genre as they have all the sufficient ingredients of intellect, glamour and psychological interest to capture the imagination of the reader besides raising the vital social and moral issues. The topical themes and ideas render these books the most wanted legitimacy. As such, no deliberate attempt to demean and dehumanize women is visible in his entertainments and thrillers, but there are many straight as well as oblique indications throwing light on the general standing of women and their inner lives in contemporary society. All these

characters serve as signposts to Greene's extraordinary and obsessed sensibility towards man-woman relationships, overflowing their individual outlines. Greene does not develop his women characters in his thrillers. They are made only to love and suffer. Greene's general biased view for women could be traced back to his early childhood. As is evident from his biography, *A Sort of Life* when he writes, "... that I had a good deal of undeserved contempt for my elder sister Molly and through her girls in general – a contempt which I was soon to lose. My interjections were pointed and repetitious: 'You are silly, Molly. Girls are so silly.' 'Girls wouldn't know. They know nuffin.' 'Girls are always slow and always last'" (44).

Greene's first thriller, *Stamboul Train* (1932) inscribes the beginning of a new phase in Greene's fiction. He makes his debut as a writer of contemporary thrillers, the genre in which he produces some of his best-known and much appreciated works. The plot of *Stamboul Train* is well constructed having the both traditional as well as modern elements. Greene presents before us the microcosm of the contemporary society through a wide-ranging multitude of characters both men as well as women brought together by a chance factor, in an unplanned fashion. The lives of the characters are so marvelously interlinked that nowhere does the reader get the impression that they are not real. Through the in-depth psychological details, Greene exposes the evil in the society and reveals the crudities and cruelties of the modern wasteland. Instead of focusing on one or two principal figures, Greene follows the lives of several of the passengers through the closed setting of the train journey.

First there is Myatt, the Jewish merchant going to Istanbul to conclude an important business deal. He has a brief love affair with the chorus girl Coral Musker who is also going to Istanbul on her dance assignment. Coral is the prototype for a number of waif-like characters in Greene's novels. She is thin and pale, physically immature but attractive in her disposition. She has a 'plain and piquant' face and 'daring and depressed' demeanor. With her limited

intelligence and education, she is in need of some support and protection. Like Milly in *It's a Battlefield*, Loo in *England Made Me*, Anne in *A Gun for Sale*, Rose in *Brighton Rock* and Helen in *The Heart of the Matter*, she is the true 'feminine' figure who is in need of male espousal and backing for her survival in the male-dominated world. Her hard and insecure existence has instilled in her a sense of alienation and hostility of the world. Despite all the oddities of her circumstances, she wears an outward veil of courage: "...and she was compelled to emerge from her hidden world and wear a pose of cheerfulness and courage" (*Stamboul Train* 15). She dreads her journey to Constantinople and finds that life is far more ugly and appalling than she ever thought it to be. When Coral faints in the corridor from hunger and cold, Myatt immediately comes to her rescue and readily offers his coat and first class sleeper to her. But for Myatt, Coral is no more than a sexual object to gratify his sense of so-called love or lust. Myatt's love for Coral is stimulated by his strong sexual urge and feeling of pity for her: "He took her hands and chafed them, watching her face with helpless anxiety. It seemed to him suddenly of vital necessity that he should aid her. Watching her dance upon the stage, stand in a lit street outside a stage door, he would have regarded her only a game for the senses, but helpless and sick under the dim unsteady lamp of the corridor, her body shaken by the speed of the train, she woke a painful pity... and in a flash of insight he became aware of the innumerable necessary evils of which life for her was made up" (*Stamboul Train* 26). Coral's love for Myatt seems inspired mainly by a pathetic gratitude to him for his kindness and generosity, and his promise to rescue her from the present conditions of her life. Greene puts very starkly and simply the danger of such encounters culminating in sexual exploitations as narrated in the hard admonishments of old dry women of experience to Coral:

'There is only one thing a man wants.' 'Don't take presents from stranger.' It was the size of the present she had been always told

that made the danger. Chocolates and a ride, even in the dark, after a theatre, entailed no more than kisses on a mouth and a neck, a little tearing of a dress. A girl was expected to repay, that was the point of all advice; one never got anything for nothing. Coral is anxious and at a loss to pay back for Myatt's act of generosity: "She became frightened, as if a moneylender were leaning across her desk and approaching very gently and inexorably to the subject of repayment. (*Stamboul Train* 77)

She tires of being 'decent' and out of her gratitude and anxiety to do the right thing she loses her virginity to Myatt. She feels happy and smug at the prospects of the security which being the mistress of wealthy businessman offers:

Away from the rattling metal, the beating piston, she stepped in thought, wrapping a fur coat round her, up the stairs to her flat...she laughed out and clapped her hands with the sudden sense that love was a simple affair, made up of gratitude and gifts and familiar joke, a flat, no work, and a maid. (*Stamboul Train* 106-07)

It is a dream of happiness, which soon turns into a nightmare. It is then the outside world of politics and violence shatters her dreams. She sacrifices her own chance of freedom to have a bright future with Myatt in order to help the dying Dr Czinner. She has learnt to accept responsibility wherever and in whatever form it comes. Coral, thus, is damned by her faithfulness: "She wondered for a moment whether Dr Czinner's case was not the same; he had been too faithful to the people who could have been served better by cunning" (*Stamboul Train* 187-88). Myatt, on the other hand, seizes the very next opportunity to have another beautiful lady Janet Pardoe as Coral's substitute. He retreats into safety of a known world feeling assured of a settled future with

Janet as his wife. The marriage also entails promotion of his business through her uncle's contacts.

Consciously or unconsciously, Greene depicts women as marginalized characters in most of the novels and thrillers. He provides many insights into women's lives and experiences that are relevant for feminist analysis. In *Stamboul Train*, the fundamental fact of male domination over women could be discerned in all walks of life. In the man-monopolised territory of public life, women are no more than the mute spectators: "... women in black veils waited along the platform; without interest, like a crowd of decorous strangers at a funeral, they watched the line of first class coaches pass them..." (*Stamboul Train* 21). Moreover, man defines woman as inferior by virtue of being nothing but her sexuality. She is called 'the sex' by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. Myatt's view of women in the second-class compartment defines the oddities of the second sex from the male point of view:

He was passing the non-sleeping compartments in the second class; ...women with hair in dusty nets, like the string bags on the racks, tucked their skirts tightly round them fell in odd shapes over the seats, large breasts and small thighs, small breasts and large thighs hopelessly confused. (*Stamboul Train* 23)

The view outside the compartment is no different while Myatt is traveling, wedged between the walls of the corridor and compartment after having offered his berth to Coral Musker:

...they watched the girls' faces as they walked in pairs along the lamp lit eastern side, shop girls offering themselves dangerously for a drink at the inn, and the fun of the thing; on the other side of the road, in the dark, on a few seats, the prostitutes sat, shapeless, and shabby and old, with their backs to the sandy slopes and the

thorn bushes, waiting for a man old and dumb and blind enough to offer them ten shillings. (*Stamboul Train* 31)

Near the end of the novel, the scene at the Petits Champs, where Myatt takes Janet Pardoe for dinner, offers the contrast between lifestyles of Turkish men and women: “The Turkish gentlemen, drinking coffee, laughed and chattered and shook their small dark feathery heads like noisy domestic birds, but their wives, so lately freed from the veil, sat silent and stared at the singer, their faces pasty and expressionless” (*Stamboul Train* 213). Through these lines above, Greene is able to evoke the passivity and dependence that mark the lives of the young girls, women, prostitutes and Turkish women alike. Greene also points out the general prejudice for women in the minds of people belonging to bourgeois strata of the society. The dialogue between Mr. Peters and Amy Peters; the Mr Peters seeking sly harmless cheap satisfactions; Amy Peters’ own fears and imaginings about Coral Musker, calling her a ‘tart’ of Arbuckle Avenue, all eloquently speak about the attitude and mindset of middle class people towards women in general.

In phallographic society, woman’s sexuality is culturally maimed. This is the condition that Germaine Greer very appropriately terms as *the female eunuch*⁴. Coral Musker in *Stamboul Train* (1932) is an example of a woman whose sexual urge lacks naturalness and spontaneity. From the beginning it is the element of quest in her sexuality that the female is taught to deny. In *Stamboul Train* Coral Musker is extremely conscious of her sexuality. Coral finds herself in the dilemma characteristic of the young girl who cannot remain without accepting her femininity, but lacks the ability to express it. Out of gratefulness, she herself agrees to have sex with Myatt, but at the same time she finds it terrifying: “In spite of her smile he thought her frightened and wondered why... Her body trembled and moved under her dress like a cat tied in a bag” (*Stamboul Train* 121-22). In this case Coral’s sexual urge is so repressed that she seems to Myatt awkward in a mysterious innocent fashion:

“He could not have been more startled if a ghost had passed through the compartment dressed in an antique wear which antedated steam” (*Stamboul Train* 123).

When Josef Grunlich visits his mistress in *Stamboul Train*, we are given a picture of Anna ‘as an object of pursuit’ that would have graced Arbuckle Avenue (a famous red-light area). The deadly isolation and frustration of Anna is painfully described: “She shared his age, but not his experience, standing lean and flustered and excited by the window; her black skirt lay across the bed, but she still wore her black blouse, her white domestic collar, and she held a towel before her legs to hide them” (*Stamboul Train* 82). Though her uneven and discoloured teeth are disgusting to him, yet he tries to entice her and begins talking to her in ‘baby language’. He wags a finger at her playfully and asks What Anna has got now: “A great big man? Oh, how he will rumple you” (*Stamboul Train* 82). Anna drops the towel and comes toward him, ‘with the thin tread of a bird, in her black cotton stockings’. Giving her false assurance to be soon with her, Josef Grunlich locks in the naked Anna and sets out to break open the safe of her employer. On being caught by Herr Kolber, he first uses Anna’s invitation as the pretext of his entry into the house. He callously exploits the lower instincts of lonely lovelorn maid Anna and tries to use her as a garb to hide his attempt of robbery. After shooting Herr Kolber point blank, he warns Anna of dire consequences if she does not keep her mouth shut: “If you don’t keep quiet for ten minutes. I’ll put you underground too – see” (*Stamboul Train* 88)? Sexual exploitation of innocent girls is nothing new for Josef Grunlich: “...because he was guilty of vanity, of several meannesses; once he had got a girl with a child” (*Stamboul Train* 115). Thus, Greene manages to convey to the reader a sense of moral horror, even outrage, at the brutally degraded treatment of women like Anna.

Greene occasionally uses his women characters as the demonic projections of men’s sexual resentments and terrors. In *Stamboul Train*, Greene

explores the psyche of the sexually inhibited Mabel Warren in a society of fast changing morals, where “with awakening of the intellect there has been a coincident awakening of the senses” (West 63). Mabel’s perverted sexuality and lesbian tendency is the outcome of her repressed sexual instincts, which she partly tries to fulfill through her companion, Janet Pardoe. But she constantly suffers from a sense of sexual insecurity and is always on the look out for Janet’s substitute in case men like Dr Czinner lure her.

From feminist perspective, women in Greene’s *Stamboul Train* are destined to suffer and their treatment seldom transcends the prejudices of the patriarchal society. Coral Musker is the true ‘feminine’ figure who like a live doll surrenders herself in the hands of Myatt. She is the victim of her vicious circumstances. She looks for some support and protection as she lacks confidence to manage herself in an estranged and hostile world. As a result she is completely bogged down by the inherent gender conditioning and becomes another representative feminine figure of fragmented self, symbolizing emotional repression and sexual inhibition. On the contrary the ‘manly’ Mabel Warren, for all her courage to swim against the current, is inevitably a loser who struggles in vain for a more authentic existence through her intensely privatized world of personal emotions. Mabel is unable to reconcile the contradictory needs of the self. She suffers from inferiority complex and a sense of failure that acts as an obstacle in her quest for wholeness and a full and vibrant life.

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