



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Alienation and Meaninglessness of Relationships in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*

Dr. Anupam Sharma

Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Sciences and Humanities,
Raj Kumar Goel Institute of Technology, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Abstract

The End of the Affair perpetuates the theme of alienation and meaninglessness of relationships. The novel consist of a kind of inverse Christian apologetics, through their disbelief and then hatred of God, Sarah and Bendrix are drawn toward reluctant belief in and then love of God. Bendrix is the main character, a lame man who is a writer and who has had an affair with a married woman Sarah Miles. The novel is in one respect a story of tragic love, and it brings to mind Greene's childhood conviction of love and despair being inseparable. In the passionate and promiscuous love of these two, Greene reveals all the pain and all the painful happiness that lovers experience. The love affair begins casually when Bendrix makes out with Sarah in his search for 'copy' for a novel about a civil servant, and it ends abruptly during a flying-bomb raid. Bendrix spends much of the novel puzzling out her struggle between faith & doubt.

Keywords

Alienation; Meaninglessness; Graham Greene; *The End of the Affair*.

◆

The End of the Affair, published in 1951, is a fine product of Greene's craftsmanship. *The End of the Affair* perpetuates the theme of alienation and meaninglessness of relationships. Bendrix is the main character through whom Greene expresses his ideas. The story is told by Bendrix, the hero, himself. He is a jealous lover as well as God's eye-view in the novel. He is a novelist. He hopes to write a novel about a civil servant. Bendrix has a chance meeting with Sarah, the wife of a civil servant named Henry. Bendrix takes Sarah to lunch. Their affair develops until Bendrix feels that he cannot live without Sarah. He is seized with a selfish desire of possession. But the inevitable happens. Their affair abruptly ends leaving Bendrix alone. He feels jealous and unhappy. After a lapse of two years Bendrix meets Henry, who has been betrayed by Sarah. Their meeting throws fresh light on Sarah's conduct.

The novel is in one respect a story of tragic love, and it brings to mind Greene's childhood conviction of love and despair being inseparable. The lovers are Maurice Bendrix, a novelist, and Sarah Miles, the wife of a civil servant. In the passionate and promiscuous love of these two, Greene reveals all the pain and all the painful happiness that lovers experience. The love affair begins casually when Bendrix makes out to Sarah in his search for 'copy' for a novel about a civil servant, and it ends abruptly during a flying-bomb raid.

On a wet January night in 1946, Bendrix has a chance encounter with Henry Miles, the husband of Sarah. Eighteen months have passed since Sarah and Bendrix met last. Before that, they had been lovers for five years, for nearly every minute of which Bendrix had been agonizingly jealous. The jealousy flames up again when Henry tells him that he suspects Sarah of unfaithfulness. Without Henry's knowledge, Bendrix employs Parkis, an inept and slightly grotesque private detective, to follow Sarah's movements. The

detective purloins Sarah's diary from which Bendrix learns the truth about Sarah's conduct. She, all human love surpassing, has caught belief like a disease, and before Maurice can win her back to human love, she dies of pneumonia. Her death is followed by miracles which indicate her sanctity and Bendrix is left praying to God, who has taken Sarah away, to leave him alone.

Bendrix is, like other Greene's protagonists, the imperfect man, the good-bad man, who is in the grip of a demonic passion. In him jealousy has turned, obsessive love into obsessive hatred. "I am a jealous man", he confesses frankly in what, he supposes, is 'a long record of jealousy: jealousy of Henry jealousy of Sarah, and jealousy of that other ...' (*The End of the Affair*).

Bendrix is certainly a nasty character; his malice and caddishness affect his relations with others in the novel, Henry, Sarah, Parkis, Waterbury and Smythe. He makes no attempt to conceal the hatred that has become his state of mind. It is indistinguishable from love. "Hatred seems to operate the same glands as love; it even produces the same actions" (*The End of the Affair*).

Bendrix is torn between love and hate. He spends sleepless nights thinking only of Sarah. He must get Sarah. He is devoured by the flames of physical love. His hatred is aggravated by his misery and loneliness which induce in him a 'monstrous egotism'. The same egotism characterized his love. In the carnal passion of Bendrix and Sarah, his masculine self-assertiveness and possessiveness are combined with her feminine ecstasy and self-effacement. Bendrix's passion made him suspicious, jealous and mistrustful. He tormented Sarah with his fears. Sarah, a woman without scruples passionately offers herself to Bendrix, she loves him and believes in him as fervently and deeply as she later believes in God.

Sarah could never convince him of her love because she refused to be jealous of his past, or of his future. Bendrix's egotism made only his kind of love acceptable to him. It is no wonder that Sarah found his love like 'a medieval chastity belt'. She could never make him feel secure and the

sweetness of temper with which she met his re-approaches only added to his resentment.

Both Sarah and Bendrix are in the beginning aesthetes living for the pleasures of the moment. Sarah, a woman of loose morals whose husband is impotent, has adulterous relationship with different kinds of men and Bendrix is only one of the many – the favorite lover for the moment. A woman without scruples, Sarah passionately offers herself to Bendrix. Impervious to the passage of time, she is concerned with the pleasurable present and commits adultery in her husband's house. After sometime Henry doubts his wife's character. He even requests Bendrix to spy on his own wife, who at once gets ready because he wants to take revenge on her at any cost.

But when Bendrix comes into contact with Sarah her presence again confuses him. He starts loving her. He forgets the responsibility given by Henry and tries to fulfill his physical needs. Actually Sarah also has physical hunger, as her husband is impotent. When Bendrix tries to kiss her she does not even stop him or scold him. In this way both of them cheat Henry badly as –

After the first dinner, when I had questioned her about Henry's habits and she had warmed to my interest, I had kissed her there rather fumblingly on the way to the tube. I don't know why I did it, unless perhaps that image in the mirror had come into my mind, for I had no intention of making love to her: I had no particular intention even of looking her up again. She was too beautiful to excite me with the idea of accessibility. (*The End of the Affair*)

Bendrix's sense of insecurity and frustration made him badger as whenever Sarah refused to speak of endless and enduring love, yet she often surprised him with the 'sweetness and amplitude' of her assurance that she had never loved any man as she loved him.

Henry has full faith in Bendrix. But Bendrix and Sarah betray him. Again they both are in deep love. No one can call it spiritual love. It's a kind of love

based on physical needs. Both of them stay at a hotel and have physical relations with each other. Bendrix is so possessive regarding Sarah that he cannot tolerate even Henry's presence around her. They were so wild in their relationship that they choose Henry's home to make love instead of a hotel. When Bendrix asks Sarah about Henry she gives a very bad reply which shows meaninglessness of their relations. Bendrix does not like Sarah's two-sided attitude. He is guilty of betraying a simple man like Henry with Sarah. They even kiss each other on the door when Henry is inside the house. At this time, Bendrix feels a little pity on Henry.

Henry, an important assistant secretary in the Ministry of Pensions, is the typical product of present abstract and calculated systems. As he has come under the possession of complex social machinery, he is completely shut off from himself. His pre-occupation with office work has deprived him of his humanity and he has since long ceased to feel any physical desire for Sarah and needs her simply for companionship. Worried and full of despair, Henry is living in terrible insecurity because he feels "excluded from Sarah's confidence", and is afraid of being condemned to a life of terrible loneliness and barren solitude. He got married with Sarah but he was unable to fulfill her physical desires because he was impotent. But, he feels that Sarah and Bendrix are very close to each other he suspects Sarah of infidelity. He even strictly asks Bendrix about their relationship.

Sarah does not, of course, stand, quite outside the plot. Her role is conditioned by the Sardonic whims of God but she is 'capable of the surprising act or word'. It is Bendrix who tries to hinder God's design. Because of his agonizing suspicion that God is now working on him, Bendrix now assumes the role of the Devil's Advocate who maintains a vested interest in disproving Sarah's sanctity which is confirmed by the miracles.

On the day of Sarah's funerals, Bendrix tries to seduce the girlfriend of Waterbury, a critic; because he wishes to show the dead Sarah that he can do

without her. But his lust, like Sarah's, has been corroded: he is incapable of loving anyone but Sarah. Therefore, he implores Sarah to get him out of his predicament, to save him from going through 'the gestures of love' without love. Bendrix is the secular commentator on the religious theme of the novel.

Faith is the alternative to sin. But for Sarah it is not a happy alternative. In Sarah's life, it is like a baleful growth, recorded in her diary, an extremely painful document. It reveals that, as a consequence of her vow, Sarah's being is lacerated by the conflict between 'ordinary corrupt human love' and faith which she has caught 'like a disease'.

At first, Sarah is aware only of her desolation consequent upon the loss of her love. She finds herself in a 'desert' and wonders what one can do in the desert, and whether God, if one could believe in Him, would fill the desert. She says 'I have always wanted to be liked or admired.' Sarah's misery and emptiness make her rebellious and desperate in the beginning and she makes repeated attempts to escape from the 'dark night of loving fire'. She tries to convince herself that a vow to someone she does not know or believe in is not important and that God cannot exist: 'you can't have a merciful God and this despair.'

But she knows that He exists because he put the thought of the vow in her mind and she hates Him for doing it. Sometimes she hated Bendrix because she loved him and she wonders 'Oh God, if I could really hate you, what would that mean?' Sarah does not acknowledge her love of God because, like Scobie, she cannot put her trust in him. She seeks to avoid the implications of her vow by taking recourse to drink and sex. She even tries to reach Bendrix on the phone but he is away. She succeeds only in making herself even more desperate and in being drawn closer to belief. Sarah has been made to drive love out of her life and there is no lust left in her. She has been caught inescapably in the love of God, but, unreconciled to it, she wants to rob God of what He loves in her – 'a bitch and a fake' – as he has robbed her

of what she loves. She wants to do something which she enjoys and which will hurt God but she despairs of it because there is no joy left in her life.

Greene's religious novels suggest the incompatibility between human and divine love. Characters like Scobie and Sarah come to look upon God as an enemy who demands the annihilation of their love for a human being. But it may be noted that in the lives of these characters the experience of human love seems to be a prerequisite for their realization of the love of God. It is not until they love each other, however imperfectly and selfishly, that Sarah and her lover begin to have any idea of God. Of course, thereafter, they try to destroy in themselves anything that God may possibly love. But God's love is persistent and unflinching and it breaks through their resistance. Sarah is prevented from asserting her natural inclinations against the will of the creator by coincidences which she comes to see as parts of a design. Her fit of coughing prevents Bendrix from kissing her when they meet again after their separation. She follows Bendrix to a bar and decides to go in and join him if he turns round. But he does not. She is on the point of leaving her husband. But she finds that she cannot, because Henry returns home earlier than expected and, out of pity, she promises not to leave him. Sarah goes on fighting a lost battle. She is driven by her 'wretched need of not being alone' and her craving for love to question the existence of God. She goes to Richard Symthe, an agnostic, to see if he can convince her that 'nothing happened' on that fateful night of the flying – bomb raid and that her 'promise doesn't count'. But Symthe's arguments against God give her only 'a sense of inverted belief'. Weary and tormented, Sarah goes to the church but she is told by the priest that she cannot have both God and Bendrix. Thus, gradually and painfully, at the end of her tether, Sarah submits to God. She writes to Bendrix in her letter:

I believe there's a God – I believe the whole bag of tricks; there's nothing I don't believe; that could subdivide the Trinity into a dozen parts and I'd believe ... I've caught belief like a disease. I've

fallen into belief like I fell in love ... I fought belief for longer than I fought love, but I haven't any fight left. (*The End of the Affair*)

Sarah comes to understand God's love which has taken away her disbelief and hatred, His mercy which sometimes 'looks like punishment.' Sarah hated God for making her keep the vow, Bendrix hates him for taking Sarah away and leaving him with a crippled existence, 'the empty life, odourless, antiseptic, the life of a prison.' God is using Bendrix, as he used Sarah, to his own ends. Bendrix's hatred is an indication that God is not leaving him alone. He reflects on how hatred of God can take a man to Him: "I mustn't be like Richard Symthe, I mustn't hate, for if I were really to hate I would believe, and if I were to believe, what a triumph for you and her" (*The End of the Affair*).

Bendrix's feeling of anxiety leads him to believe in the existence of God, though he resists the 'leap' as it involves a denial of his autonomous existence and all interests in the here and now: "... loving Him there'd be no pleasure in anything at all with Him away. I'd even lose my work, I'd cease to be Bendrix. Sarah I'm afraid" (*The End of the Affair*).

Bendrix's anxiety about his situation implies anxiety about human situation. Like a natural man, he experiences the absurd in life and sees God as a corruptor of human happiness.

The novel illustrates the value of suffering as a creative process, a mode of spiritual regeneration. Besides Sarah, Bendrix also suffers and grows in awareness of the truths which he has either ignored or suppressed in his life. Having learnt from her diary that Sarah still loves him, even though she has crucified the flesh, he seeks to renew their affair. He feels triumphant because he thinks he knows who will win in the conflict 'between an image and a man.' In chasing Sarah out of her sickbed, Bendrix still plays, unwittingly though, the Devil's disciple trying to destroy love. Sarah, who is suffering from an acute cold, goes out into the pouring rain in order to avoid Bendrix. He finds her in

the church and persuades her to seek dissolution of her marriage to Henry so that they may live together. Sarah is sorely tempted but God intervenes to claim her. Before Bendrix can approach her again, she dies of pneumonia.

Like the Whisky-Priest and Scobie, Sarah is always seized with a deep sense of human affection. Her love for Bendrix signifies pure selfless love one human being feels for another. She triumphs over her human weaknesses which make her, like the Whisky-Priest, conscious of her own unworthiness: "I'm a bitch and a fake and I hate myself" (*The End of the Affair*).

Her liking for Richard Smythe, her kindness to the sick boy of Parkis and her willingness to share the misery of Henry with his astigmatism are signs of her deep human love. Her feeling of revolt against the priests, who can't understand her situation and sympathize with her, reflects Greene's own impatience with the priests and the rituals of the church. She comments out of disgust: "... to hell with the whole lot of them. They are between us and God ... God has more mercy" (*The End of the Affair*).

Thus, the novel reveals Greene's concern with the themes of Christian existentialism – man's alienation, meaninglessness of relationships, feeling of despair, human love and suffering, inspiring faith and the denunciation of dogma.

References:

- Bernard, Bergonzi. *The Art of Graham Greene*. UK: OUP, 2006. Print.
- Bosco, Mark. *Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination*. UK: OUP, 2005. Print.
- Demert, Brain. *Graham Greene's Thrillers and the 1930s*. Knoph, Canada: McGill-Queen's UP, 1966. Print.
- Greene, Graham. *The End of the Affair*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981. Print.
- Philips, Gene D. *Graham Greene: Films of His Fiction*. Bloomsbury: Teacher's College Press, 1974, Print.

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Sharma, Anupam. "Alienation and Meaninglessness of Relationships in
Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*." *Literary Quest* 2.5 (2015): 36-45.
Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.