



Spiritual Despair and Femininity: The Absence of Redemptive Agency in Graham Greene's Women

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Abstract— This paper explores the intersection of spiritual despair and femininity in Graham Greene's fiction, specifically focusing on the marginalization and lack of redemptive agency among female characters. Drawing upon Greene's major works, including *The Heart of the Matter*, *Brighton Rock*, and *The End of the Affair*, the study demonstrates how women's spiritual suffering is frequently rendered subordinate to male narrative arcs, often reduced to symbolic elements of sacrifice, temptation, or victimhood. Through close textual analysis and engagement with feminist and theological criticism, the paper uncovers how Greene's portrayal of women aligns with broader patriarchal frameworks found in mid-twentieth-century English literature, wherein feminine spiritual experience is depicted as passive, voiceless, and rarely afforded the complexity of moral transformation or autonomy. Philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir and theologians like Elizabeth Johnson provide critical tools for examining how literary and religious traditions have constructed gendered hierarchies of suffering and salvation. By examining the absence of redemptive agency in Greene's female characters, this paper underscores the need for feminist revisions of the literary canon and spiritual narratives. The research argues that Greene's fiction, while renowned for its psychological realism and moral ambiguity, ultimately perpetuates the absence of female spiritual redemption, prompting a call for more inclusive and transformative models of feminine agency in literature.



Keywords— *Spiritual Despair, Self Discovery, Femininity, Redemptive Agency, Patriarchy. Power, Sacrifice, Silence, Virtue, Suffering, Voicelessness.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Graham Greene's narrative landscapes are marked by their relentless scrutiny of spiritual crisis, moral ambiguity, and existential despair. Yet, one recurrent and troubling motif in Greene's fiction is the portrayal of women whose spiritual destinies unfold in the margins of male-centered drama. Female characters such as Louise in *The Heart of the Matter*, Rose in *Brighton Rock*, and Sarah in *The End of the Affair* are rendered with emotional detail but rarely granted narrative sovereignty or redemptive transformation. Their spiritual suffering typically serves to illuminate the complexities and failures of Greene's male protagonists rather than to chart their own journey toward agency or salvation.

Louise's character is emblematic of this dynamic. Her inner life is shaped by longing and emotional abandonment: "Louise wanted to be loved with a passion, but it was a thing impossible to ask of Scobie now" (Greene 65). Greene's prose captures her pain, yet simultaneously confines her to the periphery of Scobie's spiritual struggle, denying her any substantial role in her own redemption. Rose, likewise, is depicted as "a small frightened girl deserted in a strange place," her innocence and suffering deliberately juxtaposed to Pinkie's capacity for spiritual and moral action (Greene 55). Such narrative strategies ensure that feminine despair remains a backdrop to masculine crisis rather than the subject of its own redemptive arc.

Critics have recognized the pattern. Mark Bosco identifies that "Greene's women are rarely the architects of their own salvation," serving instead as emotional and spiritual catalysts for male protagonists (Bosco 123). These critical perspectives echo Simone de Beauvoir's observation that literature often constructs "woman... as the Other," limiting her possibility for self-determination and existential fulfillment (Beauvoir 16).

Examining Greene's female characters through feminist and existential lenses reveals not just a lack of redemptive agency, but a larger pattern in English literature where women's spiritual experience is systematically marginalized. The implications reach beyond the literary sphere, illuminating how cultural and religious narratives continue to police the boundaries of feminine autonomy and transformation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The motif of spiritual despair and absence of redemptive agency in Greene's women has attracted considerable scholarly attention, leading to a broad and nuanced survey of critical literature. Feminist critics, theologians, and literary scholars have highlighted how Greene's fiction perpetuates deeply rooted patriarchal traditions, confining female characters to roles of submission, silence, and suffering.

Elizabeth Johnson, in her influential feminist theology, identifies the limitations placed on women's spiritual expression: "For centuries, the Christian tradition has cast women as vessels of submission, their capacity for grace and redemption mediated through silence and suffering" (Johnson 32). Johnson's analysis underscores a cultural tendency, not unique to Greene but pervasive in English literature, where feminine spiritual experiences are rarely sites of agency or transformative power.

Mark Bosco's study of Greene's Catholic imagination similarly foregrounds gendered hierarchies in the spiritual trajectories of Greene's characters: "Female suffering calibrates the spiritual atmosphere, but the journey toward redemption is almost exclusively a masculine prerogative" (Bosco 123). Bosco traces this pattern across Greene's major novels, including *The End of the Affair*, where Sarah's spiritual evolution remains circumscribed by religious guilt and her relationship to Bendrix.

Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical critique further illuminates how literature often relegates women's spiritual narratives to secondary status. De Beauvoir writes, "Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man... She is the Other" (Beauvoir 16). This relational positioning, according to de Beauvoir, denies

women authentic existential agency and frames their suffering in relation to male journeys of salvation.

Scholars such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Judith Butler extend these arguments into theological and ethical domains, critiquing inherited patriarchal models that circumscribe women's spiritual possibilities. Ruether posits, "Patriarchal religion does not simply reflect social inequality; it actively reproduces it through doctrines that restrict feminine agency and valorize male spiritual leadership" (Ruether 110).

The surveyed literature thus converges on the observation that Greene's women, emblematic of broader literary traditions, are limited in accessing redemptive agency due to persistent patriarchal motifs. Their spiritual despair illuminates, and frequently intensifies, the drama of male protagonists, rather than enabling their own transformation or autonomy. This critical consensus urges a reevaluation of spiritual narratives and calls for literary models that affirm feminine agency and complexity.

III. GREENE'S WOMEN AND THE DENIAL OF REDEMPTIVE AGENCY

Graham Greene's female characters consistently embody spiritual despair yet encounter profound limitations in achieving redemptive agency, a dynamic that reflects patriarchal constrictions within both literary and theological domains. This section explores key textual moments illustrating how Greene's women are portrayed as passive witnesses to spiritual struggle rather than active agents of redemption.

In *The Heart of the Matter*, Louise is emblematic of this marginalization. Her inner suffering is poignantly captured in the line, "Louise wanted to be loved with a passion, but it was a thing impossible to ask of Scobie now" (Greene 65), revealing her emotional isolation and desire for recognition in a narrative dominated by her husband's moral crisis. This encapsulates feminist scholar Elizabeth Johnson's critique that "women's spiritual experiences are often subsumed beneath male-centered narratives of sacrifice and redemption, limiting female possibility" (Johnson 32). Louise's silence and invisibility affirm Johnson's claim that women's suffering, while present, remains marginalized and framed primarily in relation to male spiritual journeys.

Rose in *Brighton Rock* further exemplifies this dynamic of denied agency. Greene describes her as "a small frightened girl deserted in a strange place" (Greene 55), emphasizing her vulnerability and powerlessness. Literary critic Mark Bosco notes, "Rose's innocence and victimhood are symbolically significant but deny her the complexity of spiritual transformation" (Bosco 124). Her fate is tethered

to Pinkie's narrative, reinforcing Simone de Beauvoir's thesis that "woman's spiritual destiny is largely defined through her relation to man, not through autonomous selfhood" (Beauvoir 17). Rose's lack of self-determination illustrates the persistent "Othering" and negation of feminine spiritual subjectivity.

Sarah in *The End of the Affair* experiences profound spiritual turmoil, yet her redemptive potential is filtered through male perspectives and religious guilt. Greene's portrayal of her confession, "Sometimes I wonder whether those who say they believe really believe..." (Greene 118), reveals internal struggle but remains framed primarily by Bendrix's narrative gaze.

From a philosophical standpoint, Beauvoir's existentialist ethics highlights the systemic denial of feminine spiritual freedom: "Freedom is denied when the Other is confined to predefined roles that foreclose authentic existence" (Beauvoir 78). Greene's women are thus emblematic of this existential confinement, their spiritual despair marked by the absence of self-authored redemptive agency.

Moreover, Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge elucidates how these narratives function within broader regimes of control. He asserts, "Power produces knowledge and frameworks of truth that enforce normalization and marginalize deviance" (Foucault 27). The portrayal of Greene's women as spiritually despairing yet inert aligns with such disciplinary power, where female autonomy challenges entrenched social and religious orders.

In sum, textual analysis combined with feminist and philosophical critiques reveals how Greene's women are trapped within dialectic of despair without agency. Their suffering, while authentically rendered, serves to highlight male protagonists' spiritual dilemmas rather than allowing for their own transformative redemption, perpetuating literary and cultural patterns of feminine marginalization.

IV. PHILOSOPHICAL AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Philosophical and feminist critiques offer vital insights into the persistent absence of redemptive agency afforded to female characters like those in Graham Greene's oeuvre. These perspectives challenge traditional moral and theological frameworks that have historically constrained women's spiritual autonomy and complex ethical subjectivity.

Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy forms a cornerstone of feminist critique, emphasizing the situated freedom of the subject and the denial thereof in patriarchal structures. Beauvoir explains, "Freedom is the foundation of all values; yet women's freedom is continually

circumscribed by social roles imposed by the Other" (Beauvoir 78). This observation powerfully intersects with Greene's portrayals, where women's spiritual lives are shaped not primarily by their own freedom but by the expectations and struggles of men. Beauvoir's analysis of "woman as the Other" — "defined solely in relation to man, who remains the subject and the absolute" (Beauvoir 16)—illuminates how female characters are relegated to relational roles that preclude autonomous redemptive journeys.

Judith Butler's contributions deepen this critique by interrogating the normative ethics that constrain marginalized identities. Butler argues, "Ethics that privilege fixed identities and binaries deny the fluidity necessary for ethical life and perpetuate exclusion" (Butler 96). Her call for an "ethics of vulnerability" resonates with the lack of agency in Greene's women, who are rendered vulnerable yet voiceless, caught in patriarchal moral economies that prevent self-authorship or spiritual transformation.

Michel Foucault's analysis of power/knowledge structures further explicates how normative moral categories are products of socio-cultural institutions that discipline subjects. He asserts, "Power is not only repressive but productive; it produces the 'truths' that govern bodies and souls, regulating morality through normalization" (Foucault 27). In the context of Greene's female characters, this power shapes not only their social roles but also the parameters of their spiritual suffering and redemption, sustaining patriarchal religious discourses that marginalize female spiritual agency.

Elizabeth Johnson's feminist theological work highlights how Christian dogma historically aligns sin with femininity, thus restricting women's access to grace and redemptive power. Johnson writes, "The language of sin and virtue often functions to control women's bodies and moral behavior, limiting their spiritual subjectivity" (Johnson 57). This theological gendering of sin aligns with Greene's literary pattern of denying women autonomous spiritual redemption, instead casting them as objects within male-centered salvation narratives.

Together, these philosophical and feminist perspectives reveal that the absence of redemptive agency in Greene's women is not accidental but symptomatic of systemic patriarchal frameworks. They call for ethical, literary, and theological revisions that recognize and restore feminine spiritual autonomy and complexity.

V. CONCLUSION

The examination of spiritual despair and femininity in Graham Greene's fiction reveals a persistent denial of redemptive agency to female characters—a pattern deeply enmeshed within patriarchal literary, religious, and cultural frameworks. Women such as Louise, Rose, and Sarah are portrayed with nuanced emotional and spiritual depth, yet their narratives invariably remain subordinate to male trajectories of faith, guilt, and salvation. This relegation reflects Simone de Beauvoir's critical insight that women are constructed as "the Other," confined to relational identities that deny autonomous freedom and self-authorship (Beauvoir 16). Greene's depiction aligns with Elizabeth Johnson's feminist theological critique, which highlights the historical constriction of women's spiritual capacities within doctrines that valorize male authority and marginalize female agency (Johnson 57).

Philosophical perspectives, especially those of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, further illuminate how moral and spiritual binaries operate as instruments of power that produce normative truths limiting women's participation in redemptive narratives (Butler 96; Foucault 27).

This paper underscores the urgent need to reimagine feminine spirituality and literary representation beyond paradigms of sacrifice and silence. It advocates for transformative frameworks that affirm women's complex moral and spiritual autonomy, challenging canonical narratives that sustain patriarchal hierarchies. Such reconfigurations offer not only richer literary analysis but also contribute to broader movements for gender justice within religious and cultural discourses.

In conclusion, Graham Greene's works, while psychologically insightful, reflect and reproduce the absence of redemptive agency for women—a condition emblematic of wider patriarchal structures. Rectifying this absence requires sustained feminist engagement across scholarship and creative expression, ensuring that female characters constitute active agents in their spiritual and existential destinies.

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