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AFRICA AND GREENE: THE COLONIZERS AND THE COLONIZED IN „THE HEART OF THE MATTER“ (1948)

Summary: *Graham Greene's novel, The Heart of the Matter (1948), set in West Africa's Sierra Leone, a then British colony during WWII, summons rethinking of its presentation of the White, the non-White people and the land of Africa. The novel deals with the themes of espionage, love, adultery, betrayal and deception. In addition, at its core this is a novel of moral dilemmas. However, this paper would like to take the focus away from the dominating themes in this piece of fiction to assess its underlying colonial issues which often go unnoticed. The process of "othering" and marginalization underlines the operation of an underlying Eurocentric attitude in the representation of the Europeans and non-Europeans in Greene's fiction. Using the postcolonial theory as a framework, this study mainly focus on Greene's view on Africa through his main character Scobie with all his misfortunes and the desperate search for a hint of beauty and justice knowing the worst side of human beings and natural forces.*

Key words: *postcolonial theory, others, Africa, the colonizers, the colonized.*

Introduction

The British writer Graham Greene fell in love with West Africa during his trip through Liberia with his cousin Barbara in 1935, which he described in his travelogue *Journey Without Maps* (1936). His sister Elizabeth worked for the British Foreign Office and helped him get a job in the Intelligence Service in 1941. He was entrusted with duty in Sierra Leone and the experience he gained there during the war years inspired him to write one of the most important novels of his career, *The Heart of the Matter* (1948). Many critics consider it his most traditional novel both in content and form. (Hynes, 1973: 69) He described his re-encounter with

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the African continent at the beginning of 1942, when he returned as a civil servant, as follows:

„It felt odd and poetic and encouraging coming back after so many years. It was like seeing a place you’ve dreamed of. Even the sweet hot smell from the land – is it the starved greenery and the red soil, the bougainvillea, the smoke from the huts in Kru town, or the fires in the bush clearing the ground for planting? – was strangely familiar. It will always be to me the smell of Africa, and Africa will always be the Africa of the Victorian atlas, the blank unexplored continent the shape of the human heart.“ (Adamson, 1990: 71)

He spent three months in Lagos, where, during the day, he underwent decryption training, while at night he hunted cockroaches with his colleagues and turned it into a game in which they won points for each cockroach caught. He then took over an office in Freetown where he was affiliated with the police force. He lived in a house built on land that used to turn into a swamp during the rainy season. Across the street from the house, there was a Nigerian transport camp, and behind it was a grove that the Africans, otherwise residents of the nearby slum, used as a toilet. However, despite everything, Green was happy there. Every morning he would drive to Freetown to buy groceries and collect telegrams, after which he would work on decrypting them. After lunch and an afternoon rest, which was necessarily interrupted by vultures hitting the roof, he would drink tea and go for a walk lasting until dusk. During the walk, he watched the ships in the bay, and when the rats came, he went to bathe. He would end the evening with a whiskey or a glass of wine. He returned to London only in 1943, and worked for the Intelligence Service until the beginning of the following year, 1944. All this helped him to credibly present the different and discordant elements of a multi-ethnic society, to evoke the atmosphere of a coastal town in West Africa, and to carefully portray the main character of the novel, Sergeant Scobie.

The theoretical framework of this paper is the postcolonial theory, the exploration of ‘*others*’ with all stereotypes and prejudices connected to that term. As Edward Said claims in his book, *Orientalism* (1978), for centuries Eurocentrism pervades Western literary pieces; they somehow justify European values and perspectives as superior ones while portraying lands, people and cultures of the colonized nations elsewhere. Sometimes, it may become more oblique as the apparent issues dominating the text seem to be something very different, but the writing, however, in the

undercurrent, portrays things in a Eurocentric way, often by “othering” the non-Europeans. Said famously terms, this process of creation of an alter ego of the West in the East as “Orientalism”. (Said: 2003)

Postcolonial theory is a body of thought that emerged in the 1960s and is primarily concerned with accounting for the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonial rule around the world in the 18th through the 20th century. The field started to emerge as scholars from previously colonized countries began publishing on the lingering effects of colonialism, developing a critical theory analysis of the history, culture, literature, and discourse of (usually European) imperial power .

Postcolonial theory holds that decolonized people develop a postcolonial identity that is based on cultural interactions between different identities (cultural, national, and ethnic as well as gender and class based) which are assigned varying degrees of social power by the colonial society . The field of postcolonialism addresses the matters that constitute the postcolonial identity of a decolonized people, which derives from:

- The colonizer’s generation of cultural knowledge about the colonized people;
- How that Western cultural knowledge was applied to subjugate a non-European people into a colony of the European mother country;
- How this was effected by means of the cultural identities of ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’ . (O’Reilly, 2001: 107)

The Other in the postcolonial theory is a concept that refers to the non-Western, colonized peoples and lands that are seen as inferior, irrational, feminine and evil by the Western, imperial Self. *The Other* is often displaced to the margins of society and deprived of human agency. Postcolonial theory critiques the eurocentrism and oppression of the Other by the Self. (Ashcroft, Griffiths: 2000)

Graham Greene’s novel, *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), set in West Africa’s Sierra Leone, a then British colony during WWII, summons rethinking of its presentation of the non-White people and the land of Africa. This paper would like to take the focus away from the dominating themes of religion, sin, pity, mercy, responsibility and love in this piece of fiction to assess its underlying colonial issues which often go unnoticed. The novel portrays a variety of characters- both the British colonizers and the colonial subjects- though the roles and space occupied by the non-British characters

are mostly marginal. This process of “othering” and marginalization underlines the operation of an underlying Eurocentric attitude in the representation of the Europeans and non-Europeans in Greene’s fiction. However, this study mainly focus on Greene’s view on Africa through his main character Scobie with all his misfortunes and the desperate search for a hint of beauty and justice knowing the worst side of human beings and natural forces.

The Heart of the Matter (1948)

Greene’s experience from Africa is shown most strongly in the novel *The Heart of the Matter*. The fifteen months he spent in Sierra Leone working as an intelligence officer provided the basis for the novel’s graphic details such as letters from German agents and the smuggling of industrial diamonds. The novel deals with the themes of espionage, love, adultery, betrayal and deception. In addition, at its core this is a novel of moral dilemmas. Its plot, its psychological and spiritual depth, and even the political intrigues that take place in it, point to two key moral questions: *Is it possible to make others happy?* and *Is suicide ever a solution or a good choice?*

The main character Scobie, a policeman and deputy commander of the police station, wonders even, at one point, if Christ’s death can be considered suicide, given that he allowed himself to be sacrificed. But before he makes the final decision for his moral crises and commits suicide, Scobie struggles to make his deeply unhappy wife Louise happy. Permanently wounded by the loss of her daughter, tired of the climate that does not please her, the distance and the lack of friends and companionship, Luiza cannot hide the magnitude of her unhappiness from her husband. Henry Scobie, or Tiki as she calls him, is not a man who successfully deals with the thought that his fellow men are suffering because of him. When he is also transferred over for the post of police station commander, Louisa feels humiliated in the eyes of the other British officers and their wives, so that her dissatisfaction takes the form of a fever. She decides that she must leave this place and gets Scobie to make what turns out to be a fatal promise to send her to South Africa, even though she herself knows that he doesn’t have enough money to do so.

Thus started a series of decisions and dubious dealings that pushed Scobie to find himself on an unknown terrain of terrible moral dilemmas.

Although order and the satisfaction of justice are the main guidelines in Scobie's behavior, his inner incertitude is so great that he cannot properly perform his duties even on a personal level. Scobie is particularly sensitive to the suffering of the innocent. However, Judith Adamson, in her analysis of Scobie's character entitled '*Scobie's War*', comes to the conclusion that the enormous vulnerability due to the suffering of innocents is not the result of his goodness alone, but primarily of his vanity and, as Greene himself says, absurd pride. (Adamson, 1990: 80) So although he questions whether any human being can bring happiness to another and even believes that the desire for happiness in the world is so filled with pain and suffering that it is completely meaningless, Scobie does his best to make Louisa happy. In order to provide money for her trip, Scobie takes a loan from the merchant Yusef and thereby falls into a tangle of corruption after many years of honest service. As if that wasn't enough of a problem, Scobie, soon after Louise's departure, begins a relationship with the young widow Helen and finds himself in a role where he is responsible for the happiness of not only one but two women. When Louise returns, she is already aware of Scobie's deception and wishes to save the marriage, but in order to force her husband to confess, she suggests that they take communion together, which includes confession. In this way, Scobie is backed into a corner, and he will have to admit his fraud himself. He has only one way out, that last step which he is convinced will bring him eternal damnation. However, Scobie convinces himself that by sacrificing his life, he can save and spare both his wife and his lover from further misfortune. It is here that the key question in the novel resonates the loudest: to what extent can we sacrifice ourselves for the happiness of others? Police Commissioner Henry Scobie answers this question in his own way, but the novel as a whole leaves the reader with the possibility of different interpretations. However, Greene makes it clear that there are limits to people's ability to understand each other.

The colonizers and the colonized in Africa

From the point of view of prejudices and stereotypes of *the other* it is important that the months of working and living in Freetown, as well as the time spent in Liberia in 1935, enabled Greene to become thoroughly familiar with the social structure on the coast. The hostility between the native black population and the white immigrants is discernible on almost every page of the novel. White people are portrayed in the novel as neurotic

and ambitious. They move and socialize only in closed circles, they are petty and detestable, in short. The Syrians are manipulative, flattering and vile, while the native black population is presented by Greene, on the one hand, as naive because both whites and Syrians take advantage of them. They all have servants they call 'boys' and address them with half-hearted and commanding sentences. However, Scobie, although white and serving in the police, deviates from that stereotype, starting with his attitude towards servants, through getting along with the natives, and ending with avoiding white people's restrained parties and intolerance towards other English officers. Already on the first pages of the novel, in the conversation between the two English officials, Wilson and Harris, we see that they do not really have friendly feelings towards the place they came to on their own initiative. Harris complains to Wilson that he has been there for a very long time, or in his words „*eighteen bloody months*“ (Greene, 1971: 13). While introducing the newcomer Wilson to the situation in this African town, he does not spare its inhabitants either. „*I hate the place. I hate the people. I hate the bloody niggers. Mustn't call 'em that you know.*“ (Greene, 1971: 13) Scobie is also on Harris's blacklist. Just because he politely greets blacks and tries to act fairly in their disputes, there are already rumors circulating in the city that he sleeps with black women, which was not unusual for whites in better positions, and they didn't hold a grudge either. On the other hand, no matter how oppressed the native population was in the colony, they kept the desire for freedom, the aversion to the newcomers who occupied them, as well as the natural resistance to everything imposed by the English colonizers. Thus, even in the procedures for resolving cases of petty theft, Scobie will encounter all possible ways of avoiding confession and hiding the truth. Of the six witnesses, he could not believe a single word that any of them said. He believed that in European cases there are words that one believes and words that one doubts, i.e. that it is possible to theoretically draw a line between truth and lies... But here such assumptions could not be made, no line could be drawn. This led many police officers who were trying to extract at least one grain of truth to a complete breakdown, they lost their minds and would hit the witness. Because of this, they were subjected to public ridicule in the local Creole newspapers and sent home as invalids or transferred to serve elsewhere. For most English people, this was reason enough to arouse a vicious hatred for black skin. However, Scobie has long since passed through all those stages, during fifteen years. „*Now lost in the tangle of lies he felt an extraordinary affection for these people who*

paralyzed an alien form of justice by so simple a method.“ (Greene, 1971: 141)

The action of the novel takes place on the edge of openness and concealment, and Green analyzes the tension created at the touch of honesty and deception. This is exactly the subject of the main plot about interpersonal relationships, but the side plot about spying and smuggling diamonds fits perfectly into the central theme. And the above example of intolerance between the colonized and the colonizer rests on the same foundation. The English introduce a civilized judicial system, forgetting that the innate and natural instincts for self-preservation can override any imposed system and not assuming that the black soul, balancing on the border of truth and lies, will tackle it so cunningly.

Scobie is also on good terms with the Syrians, so there are rumors that they bribed him, because they own most of the shops in the city and they also smuggle diamonds. Scobie has been in Africa for more than fifteen years, and although he seems to know all its faces very well, he gets drawn into a tangle of fraud and corruption. Both Syrians and whites are corrupt, but in a different way. British officials and managers are part of an exploitation machine headquartered in London. It is easy to bribe them, they are prone to adultery and ready to do anything to advance at work. The only man among them who can be trusted is Scobie, but unfortunately in that environment such qualities are not appreciated. Because of this, he will also be bypassed by advancement at work, and because of his sense of responsibility towards his slightly neurotic and narrow-minded wife, he will fall into the intrigues of the Syrian merchant and manipulator Yusef. Syrians, just like the English, crave status and money, but their desires are not so clear and they are not guided by the rules that apply in the English middle class. Colonial merchant Yusef brazenly exploits the situation, even misquoting the Bible and Shakespeare with scathing ineptitude. Scobie is aware of what he is getting into and that any deal with the Syrians is far from fair. That's why when the guards meet Yusef during their regular rounds, they will say: *„To give help to a Syrian was only a degree less dangerous than to receive help.*“ (Greene, 1971: 33) And later when it becomes clear that he is a victim of Yusef's blackmail because of the loan Scobie will not hesitate to tell him to his face that one needs a long spoon to soup with him.

A minor character in the novel, the English officer Harris, otherwise employed as a cable censor, will provide us with a realistic picture of the city in which they are in the first chapter.

„This is the original Tower of Babel, Harris said. West Indians, Africans, real Indians, Syrians, Englishmen, Scotsmen in the Office of Works, Irish priests, French priests, Alsatian priests.“ (Greene, 1971: 14)

So it is not surprising that in that *‘Tower of Babel’*, due to the misunderstanding of other cultures, stereotypes and prejudices about *‘others’*, disagreements, conflicts, intrigues and gossip reign, and that everything leads to a real tragedy with murders and suicides. On the other hand, despite all the differences, there are moments in which a man’s color had no value: he couldn’t bluster as a white man could elsewhere. One of such situations is Wilson’s visit to a brothel. Wilson is a new officer just arrived in the colony, who will later turn out to be an undercover agent sent to investigate smuggling on the coast. He is socially awkward, haughty and in constant fear that someone will discover his love for poetry. He will misinterpret the attention given to him by Scobie’s wife Louise and fall in love with her. When despair overcomes him, he decides to go to a brothel. Already at the entrance, it is clear to him how low he has sunk, but it is too late to change his mind. The old lady won’t let him go until he has done the job he came for. Filled with disgust, he realizes that he is trapped and that the *‘white man’s authority’* that he could use elsewhere will not save him this time. *„By entering this narrow plaster passage, he had shed every racial, social and individual trait, he had reduced himself to human nature.“* (Greene, 1971: 174)

It seems that for other Englishmen, besides Scobie’s righteousness, his insight into the beauty of the country and the continent they are on is a thorn in their side. Despite the poor living conditions, the rainy season, high heat, vultures and rats, Scobie finds in all this one short period of true beauty during the day.

„In the evening the port became beautiful for perhaps five minutes. The laterite roads that were so ugly and clay-heavy by day became a delicate flower-like pink. It was the hour of content. Men who had left the port for ever would sometimes remember on a grey wet London evening the bloom and glow that faded as soon as it was seen: they would wonder why they had hated the coast and for a space of a drink they would long to return.“ (Greene, 1971: 26)

Conclusion

In these words, all Greene's nostalgia for the months spent in Africa is reflected. Nevertheless, Greene shows the meanness and depravity that reigns in the colony with his descriptions of nature and environment. Vultures pouncing on thin roofs, rats and cockroaches polluting houses, dampness destroying books and wounds festering from dampness are part of their everyday life. At times, Africa seems to be the place where the English have come to lose their roots and where their lives will fall to pieces. Moisture not only destroys their books, but also their personalities. Discussions of poetry become painfully trivial and insignificant. Scobie notices that their voices are changing as well. The intonation changes after a few months so that everyone sounds shrill and insincere or indifferent and cautious. Roger Sharrok, in his analysis of Graham Greene's novel, states that life on the African continent completely changes the newly arrived Englishmen and, most noticeably, influences them to become completely distant from each other. (Sharrok 1984: 130) The first scene between Scobie and his wife in the novel *The Heart of the Matter* takes place as Louise is separated from him by a mosquito net under which she lies with closed eyes and matted hair, resembling a completely languishing and emaciated dog or cat. Heat and sweat are present throughout the novel as an obstacle. While lying in the same bed with Louise Scobie, he avoids touching her at all costs because any touch, even the slightest touch of his fingers, would create sweat. The heat is not the only burden that the whites in the colony have a hard time bearing. Greene's depiction of the black porter bending under the burden takes on a deeper meaning when applied to Scobie, who lives by trying to take on other people's burdens, with the false hope of helping them by doing so. He sees Louise sleeping next to him only as a burden that he must be prepared to bear. Sharrok then rightly claims that this metaphor hangs over the entire story, which can be considered, on the one hand, as a record of the burden on Scobie's back that increases day by day until the day when he in his goodness can no longer bear it. The life of English officials in the colony is also shown in the light of the metaphor of illness. (Sharrok 1984: 139) Greene even uses the word patients when referring to the English who came and went from the colony during Scobie's long tenure. Very often, at the end of the eighteen-month period, certain patients would be sent home, yellow with agony and completely distracted, and others would come in their place.

Despite this, it is clear that Scobie is enjoying his life in the colony in his own way, and that is what separates him from the other whites and becomes the target of their gossips and hatred. At one point he wonders why he likes this place so much in the first place.

„Is it because here human nature hasn't had time to disguise itself?" Nobody here could ever talk about a heaven on earth. Heaven remained rigidly in its proper place on the other side of death, and on this side flourished the injustice, the cruelties, the meanness that elsewhere people so cleverly hushed up. Here you could love human beings nearly as God loved them, knowing the worst.“ (Greene, 1971: 35)

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АФРИКА И ГРИН: КОЛОНИЗАТОРИ И КОЛОНИЗОВАНИ У РОМАНУ “СУШТИНА СТВАРИ” (1948)

Сажетак: Роман Грејама Грина *Суштина ствари* (1948) чија се радња дешава у Сијера Леонеу у Западној Африци, британској колонији за вријеме Другог свјетског рата, омогућава нам да се упознамо са начином како су представљани бијелци, људи друге боје коже и сама Африка у то вријеме. Роман се примарно бави темама шпијунске, љубави, преваре, издаје, као и кључним моралним дилемама. Међутим, овај рад ће се фокусирати на теме из романа које се углавном заобилазе а тичу се колонијалних питања. Постколонијална теорија, концепт другог и маргинализације, ће и послужити као оквир самог рада. Фокус ће првенствено бити ма Гриновом виђењу Африке кроз лик наредника Скобија, јунака који упркос свим недаћама очајнички тражи трачак доброте и правде знајући најгору страну људске природе и суровост природних сила.

Кључне ријечи: постколонијална теорија, други, Африка, колонизовани, колонизатори.

