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The Quiet American: A Critique of American Hegemony

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Abstract:

This paper examines Graham Greene's Novel The Quiet American in the light of post colonialism. Greene went to Indo-China in his capacity as a British intelligence officer and transmuted his experiences; he exposed the various facets of colonialism prevalent in Indo-China at that time. The various political factors and ideologies were working in crushing the human spirit and intellect. The Novel talks of changes, transformation in Indo-China due to the invasions by America which are taken up for study. The Quiet American is an indictment of US foreign policy which dominates the world and traps the young nations in debt, poverty and other diseases

Keywords: *Hegemony, US foreign policy, Indo-China*

This paper discusses Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* which is an outcome of his journalistic assignment in Vietnam during 1950s. In *Ways of escape*, Greene said, "there is more direct reportage in *The Quiet American* than in any other novel.". *The paper highlights the political scenario of Vietnam, American foreign policy, American consumerism, the dying British colonialism and the American imperialism. Indo-China which consisted of three areas – Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia was part of the French empire in southeast Asia. It was the scene of non-stop conflict from the end of the Second World War. In the first phase of the conflict (1946-54), the Vietnamese fought for the independence from France under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, who being a Communist formed an alliance of all political parties and named his party League for Vietnamese Independence (Vietminh). The French were defeated by the Vietminh in May 1954 but the decisive factor was the support from the Chinese Government which supplied the rebels with arms and ammunition. The USA also became involved: seeing the struggle as part of the Cold War and the fight against Communism, she supplied France with military and economic aid. By the Geneva Agreement (1954), Laos and Cambodia were to be independent, Vietnam was temporarily divided into two states at the 17th parallel. Ho Chi Minh's government was recognized in the North Vietnam and the South Vietnam was ruled by President Ngo Dinh Diem, who was backed by the USA. He refused to get the elections conducted which led to the Civil War in South Vietnam and involved the North Vietnam and the US as well. The United States justified her involvement as an important attempt to restrict communist expansion in Vietnam.*

Two important factors in Ho Chi Minh's life attracted Greene: his identity as a man of the land struggling to get it back; his vision of non-violence. Ho Chi Minh combined nationalism and the revolutionary role of the oppressed peasantry with religious freedom. His movement was not an expression of bourgeois nationalism, which would lead to the displacement of one elite by another. *The Quiet American* reveals some of these insights – national struggle, global politics, war fought ideological and war striking death on the innocent. In *The Quiet American*, the situation where confrontation of basic issues moves at several levels is Vietnam. It is a novel set in the context of Vietnam war. Fowler is the English newspaper correspondent and sees Vietnam from a journalist's point of view. The novel opens, and closes with the political assassination of an idealistic young American official, Pyle at the hands of a mysterious Communist 'Committee' led by Mr. Heng. What comes in between is the reconstruction in Fowler's mind of the events leading to the murder of Pyle, the young American.

Pyle has come to the war in Vietnam full of ideological theories about the politics of the situation – in particular, the need for a 'Third Force' in the struggle. He is, however, dangerous innocent stumbling around a political minefield. With his government's backing he finds and finances, this 'Third Force' in an unscrupulous mercenary, General Thé, whose first action is to explode a 'bicycle bomb' in a crowded square, killing and hurting a number of innocent bystanders. It is at this point that Fowler, who until then has been resolutely avoiding any political involvement, feels he must act to prevent Pyle from putting any more of his policies into action, and he cooperates with Heng in the planning of Pyle's murder. Fowler's political motives are confused with his personal feelings as Pyle had robbed him of his Vietnamese mistress, Phuong. The power of *The Quiet American* rests on the innocence and decency of Pyle, the American of the title, who is completely convinced of the morality of what he believes in, he is not devious nor underhand as Fowler is, he is honest and direct; his idealism is manipulated by the system he represents. Greene attacks American foreign policy, "which pretends to protect the 'free world', but wraps materialistic doctrines in the language of spiritual aspiration, and then uses the package to spread its power throughout the world." (Couto 167). Talk of the free world means only one objective: "American interests".

The fact that Greene indicts American hegemony was less to do with his being pro-Communist than with his commitment to ideals of dignity and justice for societies where politics were the realities of hunger, degradation and death – the kind of repressions normally associated with Communist regimes by members of the ‘free world’. In ‘On Genocide’, a proceeding from Bertrand Russell’s 1967 War tribunal in Stockholm, Jean Paul Sartre wrote:

- The real reasons for the US presence there, are to establish bases for containing China and to demonstrate to the Third World that national liberation struggles will be defeated.

In *The Quiet American*, Indo-China has been shown as torn into factions, the Western government at Saigon, underground Communist cells in the South, Chinese Communists on the northern border and General The’. Besides these, the religious groups; Catholics practicing a policy of laissez faire with regard to the Communists and a ‘Third Force’, which breaks the deadlock between the colonialists and the communists. A kind of political unrest is shown in the novel, which conveys the political scenario of Vietnam during 1950s. In this kind of political unrest in America sends her delegation to Vietnam. This delegation includes Alden Pyle, who is imbued with the political doctrine of York Harding; a diplomatic correspondent who exploited the young people with his ideology. Describing York Harding, Greene wrote:

- He’s a superior sort of journalist, they call them diplomatic correspondents. He gets hold of an idea and alters every situation to fit the idea. (QA 67)

York Harding believed that neither communism nor colonialism was an answer in southeastern countries like Vietnam, but rather a ‘Third Force’, usually a combination of traditions works best. The diplomatic correspondents like York Harding play an essential role in hegemony. Gramsci argues that:

- The ruling powers achieve domination by creating subjects who willingly submit to being ruled and ideology is crucial in creating consent, it is the medium through which certain ideas are transmitted and held to be true. (Loomba 25)

Hegemony is achieved by playing upon the common sense of people through ideology which is used as a medium by the power structure to exploit the people for their own benefits and Pyle was intrigued by the bookish ideology of York Harding. He knew nothing about the south-east Asia and became a victim of the books written by York Harding.

- He was young and ignorant and got involved. He had no notion than any of you, what the whole affairs about, and you have him money and York Harding’s books on the East and said, “Go ahead. Win the East for Democracy.” (QA 15)

Pyle is one of the innocents who lend themselves to be exploited by the political powers that seem to be harmless to them, but they are important for the new-empire builders. The American aid to the Vietnamese is stamped with the name of the donor, a symbol of American demand for cooperation in the Cold War. This suggested demand is annoying than the futile gifts themselves – “useless cheese” and the “unlabelled dried milk”, that the villagers thought to be poison. The influence of American products – ‘Coca-Cola, Mc Donald, hamburgers is shown in the novel. The Americans are identified with their products. They are the brand ambassadors of American products who are used to promote certain images and lifestyles. Thus, American products promote Americanism. When Fowler is asked to identify Pyle’s dead body in a police mortuary, he identifies him with the culture that produced him:

- He belonged to the skyscraper and the express-lift, the ice-cream and the dry Martinis, milk at lunch, and chicken sandwiches on the Merchant Limited. (QA 9)

Bernard Bergonzi writes that, “Pyle is presented as a product of his culture, rather than as a character of any complexity or depth” (146). Greene shows his contempt for the glossy and false luxury of the culture, where even the sacrosanct institutions of marriage are commercialized. Greene talks of American marriage in the very derogatory way, calling it ‘dollar love’. The bar at the hotel in Indo-China is crowded with American “Yankees”, whose innocence camouflages their vested interests. *The Quiet American* conveys that America with her private stores of Coca-Cola, portable hospitals, wide cars and latest guns has become a symbol of “Western dominance.”

America represents a substitute of sterile materialism and physical comfort for all real passion and feeling. Fowler went to the American legation after Pyle took Phuong away from him, he sat in the lavatory and cried. It is then Greene’s poignant arrow was directed towards the Americans: “Even their lavatories were air conditioned, and presently the temperate air tempered dried my tears as it dries the spit in your mouth and the seed in your body” (QA 25). Greene stressed that Americans are innocent if they strip off their odious mannerisms, which are an impact of their culture. Displaying the real nature of Americans, the novel through the character of American Journalist Granger reveals:

- He passed his whole hand across his face as though his head ached, but the motion was meant to disguise the fact that he was wiping tears away. (QA 49)

The American policy has devoid her people of their emotions because they cannot exhibit their emotions for the fear of losing their jobs. “I’ve got to cover for him. He’d be sacked if they knew... I don’t dislike you Granger, I’ve been blind to a lot of things (QA 49). *The Quiet American* besides castigating the American foreign policy also brings out the stark reality of Third-World countries expressed through the character of Thomas Fowler, a representative of old world of British imperialism. Fowler knows East better than Pyle because of his experience. He knows the wrongs of colonialism and communism and says that the old colonial powers – England and France could not win Asia and America should also stop her intervention. The Old World of colonialism speaks to the New World as:

- We are the old colonial people, Pyle, but we’ve learned a bit of reality, we’ve learned not to play with matches. This “Third Force’, it comes out of a book, that’s all. General Thés only a bandit with a few thousand men: he’s not a national democracy. (QA 63)

The novel exposes the political reality through the perspective of Fowler’s objectivity as Fowler attempts to educate Pyle in the realities of Vietnam:

- They don't want Communism. They want enough rice... They don't want to be shot at. They want one day to be much the same as another. They don't want our white skins around telling them what they want. (QA 61)

The Quiet American highlights the basic problems of Vietnamese, three quarters of the population in South Vietnam were Buddhist peasants and they demanded land reforms of the type carried out in China and North Vietnam, i.e. the land to be taken away from wealthy landowners and redistributed among the poor peasants. They didn't like colonialism or communism, they only wanted land to be given back to them. The novel makes atrocities and sufferings caused during the war vivid Captain Trouin tells Fowler about a girl in Hanoi: "There was one girl in the mortuary, they had not only cut off her breasts but they had mutilated her lover" (QA 7). Another incident which moved Fowler when he went out with a French patrol and they crossed a canal full of bodies which reminded him of an Irish stew containing the much meat. They found the mother and child caught in the line of fire in a narrow ditch, this incident was touching and it prompted Fowler to take sides.

- They were very clearly dead: a small neat clot of blood on the woman's forehead, and the child might have been sleeping. He was about six years old and he lay like an embryo in the womb like his little bony knees drawn up. There was a gnawed piece of loaf under his body. I thought, 'I hate the war'. (10)

The novel is dominated by death and provokes Fowler's anger. The throwing of napalm bombs on a village by the French, led by Captain Trouin leaves the villages burning. On their way back, Captain Trouin, like a gracious host shows sunset to Fowler.

- The helmeted Martian face looked wistfully out, down the golden groves among the great humps and arches of porous stone, and the wound of murder ceased to bleed. (QA 11)

The ironical contrast between Captain Trouin's civility as a host and the savagery of what he did implies Greene's angry comment on the inhumanity of the civilized world. Fowler is forced into holding opinions by his perception of the platitudes of the visiting idealists, and he is eventually forced into action by the shock of civilian casualties, the death of those who became 'engage' without volition. Fowler's position grows naturally out of Greene's observations of Vietnamese behavior. Sherry reveals that Greene wrote of trishaw drivers who refused to help the wounded; but they were 'indifferent' rather than cruel. Often enough the Vietnamese did not get the aid they wanted; yet one Red Cross representative sat for six months with supplies that no one would accept. In his dispatches "*Indo-China*" and the "*Last Act in Indo-China*", Greene wrote that the politicians, nominally Catholic, often used the name of God to get votes. A political priest told his ignorant parishioners: "God and the Virgin have gone South, only the devil remains in the North". Another politician, Mr. Diem went every where accompanied by his own priest-usually an American Greene's dispatches ranged from report on different warring groups to the Caoist Cathedral. Greene put it in *The Quiet American* and his opinions about Caodaism were that this religion was bogus. Sherry writes that:

- Caodaism was founded in 1926, and it attempted to synthesize the world's great religions; its ethical principals were largely Confucian, its inspiration spiritual, its hierarchic organization Catholic. (404)

The Cao Dai were pacifist, yet they supported an army of 20,000 men, using primitive arsenals, Greene's novel presents General Thé as one of the leaders of the Caodaists whom the Americans try to install in the narrative, as leader of the 'Third Force'. At the time of Greene's visit to Vietnam, Colonel Thé had yet to become important to the Americans. They knew he was a small beer, but in the early days of his revolt from the Cao Dai, his statements expressed his revolt against the French and the Communists. In 1954, when the French were in the process of leaving Vietnam, the Americans decided on their "Third Force" figure, the strong Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem, who had spent much of his time in a monastery in New Jersey. Thé joined Diem, as the French colonialism was replaced by the American Imperialism, "the Americans remained in contact with General Thé, which is the source for Greene's dislike of the Americans in Vietnam" (Sherry 2: 405).

Thé's influence is central to the plot of *The Quiet American*. He is the one who ravel's Pyle's special duties. Greene mentions in the novel that CIA was involved with Thé, providing him the material to carry out the activities in Vietnam. Thé was a difficult enemy and he interested Greene critically because his equal hatred of the French and the communists provided a catalyzing agent in *The Quiet American*, without him there would be no tragedy. In *The Quiet American*, the desperate French struggle to retain their portion of empire is shown as failing, but it is regarded with some sympathy. The dedicated though disillusioned French Officers, commanding native troops and mostly German Foreign Legionaries, are the most impressive than the Americans, who as yet are involved in the war only marginally and covertly, and who are condemned by the French for not sending promised military supplies. Vigot, the French police officer in Saigon is admired for his skill and professionalism, like previous policemen in Greene's novels, he is a cultivated man who reads Pascal in his office. Describing him in *The Quiet American* Greene wrote, "He's a police man who should have been a priest" (QA 52). He seems to know Fowler better than Fowler himself. "You don't follow your own principles. You're engage like the rest of us." (QA 52)

Fowler wants Phuong around him. For Fowler, sex is not so much a problem as old age and death, and he does not want to be alone in his declining years. He says to Pyle:

- 'I wouldn't know what to think about all day long. I'd sooner have a woman in the same room-even one I didn't love. But if Phuong left me, would I have the energy to find another?' (QA 62)

Fowler loves Phuong but it is a defeated love as he cannot expect her to love him in return. Phuong prepares him pipes of opium, he finds the drug a comfort, though he is not addicted. Greene has thus constructed Phuong as a passive, child like entity that can be loved and abused, shaped and contained, managed and consumed. Paul O' Prey observes the character of Phuong in *A Reader's Guide to Graham Greene* (1988):

- Phuong has the thinness and fragility, but she has strength and natural sensuousness which is not immoral, an eroticism which is not immoral but abrupt. She is a natural woman, although her thought processes are straightforward and uncomplicated. To a point which strains credibility Fowler compares her and the other Vietnamese to children. (105)

Greene writes in *The Quiet American*: 'It's a cliché' to call them children, but there's one thing which is childish. They love you in return for kindness, security. They don't know what it's like – walking into a room and loving a stranger. In the political game, natives are used as pawns. Fowler extracts information from Phuong through his conversations with her. He collects information from her daily. He collects information on her daily encounters in shops, on the streets. Fowler relies for inside information on Dominguez, his assistant. The political objectives.

To conclude, *The Quiet American* presents Greene's perception of politics in Indo-China, and describes the world of today in the widest and narrowest sense of the term comprising nation states, power blocs, communities, cultures and individual human beings. Lack of freedom and dignity is explored at an individual level as well as national level, with nations controlled by an unseen iron fist that lends its power to repressive forces which are, in turn mere pawns in global strategies. The American interests that wish to substitute French colonialism with a 'Third Force', is a more designed to stifle Vietnamese nationalism aligned itself to communist leadership for a base. America, the proclaimer of global protector of democracy and national self-determination spreads her imperialism on the pretext of containing 'communism'. In the same way, England had justified establishing its global empire with the pretext of taking up the White Man's Burden to train Africans and Asians in the "art of self-government" and "Christian morals". The twentieth century Pax Americana are proving to be far more brutal than the Pax Britannica under which Third World peoples have suffered for centuries before.

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