

# GENDER CONTROVERSY IN GRAHAM GREENE'S 'THE QUIET AMERICAN'

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**ABSTRACT :** Graham Greene is a prolific writer of the twentieth century literature. *'The Quiet American'* was published in the year 1955. The novel is set in Indo China against the backdrop of Vietnam War. "The novel has received much attention due to its prediction of the outcome of the Vietnam War and subsequent American foreign policy since the 1950's. The novel was adapted as two different movies, one in 1958 and another in 2002". ([www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com)). The plot concentrates on the triangular love story between Thomas Fowler, Phuong and Alden Pyle. Phuong is loved by both the British War Correspondent and American Alden Pyle. The novel *'The Quiet American'* gives least importance to the 'women' characters. They merely exhibit themselves as 'objects' to be utilized by men. Phuong the main character upon whom the plot circulates is submissive and docile. She allows herself to be utilized. Helen the wife of Thomas Fowler has been deserted by him. Fowler has illicit relationship with Phuong. Helen becomes a constant sufferer of loneliness.

**KEY WORDS :** Marriage, Voiceless, Commodity, gender

## I. INTRODUCTION

Greene's novels are concerned with various forms of injustice-the injustice inherent in the patriarchal order in which men enjoy a natural precedence and power over women who are seen as mere objects or the body or the "other" ..... His novels are cluttered with conventional images of women. As a direct consequence the man-woman relationship in Greene is usually battered into non-win situation leading to sexual disgust, emotional betrayal and broken homes. (8, Malik, Meena)

Gender equality is a human right but our world faces a persistent gap in access to opportunities and decision making power for women and men. Globally women have fewer opportunities for economic participation than men, less access to basic and higher education, greater health and safety risks and less political representation. Guaranteeing the rights of women and giving them opportunities to reach their full potential is critical not only for attaining gender equality but also for meeting a wide range of international development goals. Empowered women and girls contribute to the health and productivity of their families, communities and countries creating a ripple effect that benefits everyone. ([www.peacecorps.gov.com](http://www.peacecorps.gov.com))

*'The Quiet American'* is based on Green's four year stay in Indo- China (1952-55) during the Indo-China War in which the French and their allies-Britain and the US-fought various factions for supremacy in the region. *'The Quiet American'* is a triangular love story set against the backdrop of Vietnam War. It involves the cynical foreign correspondent Thomas Fowler the naive American Alden Pyle and a local woman, the passive Phuong for whose affections both of them vie. Woven into this are the events in Saigon that entrap both Fowler and Pyle with Phuong as a mute spectator until at the end she shows a spark of life when she rushes in her excitement to her sister to inform the latter that she is going to become the second Mrs. Fowlair. (84, Batra Sakthi)

Phuong is 'content' and 'happy'. She never displays her emotions. She becomes the mistress of Thomas Fowler for two years. She never thinks of her 'future'. Though she knew very well that Fowler is already married, she is least bothered. She willingly accepts her 'present' life inspite of knowing that Fowler is 'too' old for her. She seems to be child-like. Her diversions are little. She visits her sister Miss Hei, goes to movie and drinks Chocolate Malt at the mid-day.

"Phuong a native Vietnamese woman is noticeably voiceless in the novel but becomes a number of archetypes. She symbolizes the common Vietnamese populace caught in the cross fire of foreign interests. "You and your like are typing to make a war with people who aren't interested" (Greene, 94). Importantly Phuong also represents indigenous woman as thinking, Cognizant female human beings not as colonial inspired stereotypes." ([www.gradenet.de](http://www.gradenet.de))

"There was no scene, no tears just thought-the long private thought of somebody who has to alter the whole course of life" (Greene, 22)

Phuong's sister Miss Hei is actively involved in the decisions. She alters the decisions for which Phuong never opposes. She is always 'Voiceless'. Miss Hei finds Alden Pyle as the right partner for her sister. Her sister dreamt of Phuong's future. She wanted Phuong to be settled well under the institution of 'marriage'. Since Alden Pyle is a bachelor and a gentleman who behaves decently and offers financial security Miss Hei decides to marry off Phuong to Alden Pyle. But Phuong never has hopes and dreams. She does not fill her hearts with expectations of Pyle and the 'future life' which he has promised.

Gayathri Chakroborti Spivak says:

"Marx's formulation value is calculated by subtracting the use value of an object from its exchange value. At a first glance this definition may appear to be perfectly rational fair. Yet Marx emphasizes the subtraction of use value from the exchange value of a commodity simultaneously strips the commodity of human labour and natural resources that went into its production. As a consequence the value of a commodity is nothing except a false representation of alienated human labour"(115,Feminism and Critical Theory ).

This is very evident with the woman characters like Phuong and Helen, the wife of Thomas Fowler. "Fowler's mistress, Phuong in *'The Quiet American'* does not have identity of her own. She is seen most of the times looking after Fowler's physical comforts like a faithful slave preparing his opium pipes. She lies at his feet "like a dog on a crusader's tomb, preparing the opium" (Greene, 120).Phuong is shown as a willing slave catering to Fowler's needs. During the whole course of the novel Phuong appears to have deliberately chosen the path of subordination and self denial."(Malik,Meena,167).Phuong is least bothered about the politics. She is unaware of the worldly affairs. She is highly ignorant that the skyscrapers and the Statue of Liberty are present in America. It is a pity that women are brought up to look after the house alone. They are always told to please everybody by hiding their emotions. It is a pity that Phuong becomes a mistress for both Fowler and Pyle. Pyle treats Phuong as a flower to be tended carefully and protected: "Do you know how she seems to me? She seems fresh like a flower" (Greene, 93). Alden Pyle is always gentle towards 'women'. He never crosses his limits. He believes in the goodness of marriage. He feels that 'marriage' will ultimately bring happiness. Though he loves Phuong his ultimate desire is to "offer her security". But Thomas Fowler never offers Phuong a secured life. Fowler looks upon her as a capable woman who does not suffer from obsessions of love. Although he is terribly afraid of losing her he says: "She will never suffer like we do from thoughts, obsessions – she won't scratch, she'll only decay". (Greene, 124)

Another disastrous description given by Greene is about the brothel which is 'The House of Five Hundred Girls'. The three men namely Fowler, Pyle, and Granger visited the brothel along with Phuong. Fowler is unconcerned while Pyle feels terrible and Granger settles comfortably with a girl of his choice. The description about the 'brothel' is painful. It reflects the gender controversy. Women who are financially insecure fall into the pit of prostitution. It depicts those women who do not get easy access to education and job when compared to men. They fall under the evil traps of prostitution. Ultimately women degrade themselves by doing so.

On the surface *'The Quiet American'* is again like a game of chess with few winners because "nothing nowadays is fabulous and nothing rises from the ashes" (Greene, 11). As metaphors however they successfully convey Greene's various messages; one of the most subtle yet strongest is female liberation from stereotype. Greene's treatment of Phuong, mistress to both Fowler and Pyle is ironic. Having been given almost no voice of her own Greene has her defined by her lovers. (www.gradenet.de)

"The burden of marriage weighs upon much more heavily upon woman than upon man. In *'The Quiet American'* Greene allows Fowler's male perspective prevail over his wife and mistress. (83.Malik,Meena). "To take an Annamite to bed with you is like taking a bird: they twitter and sing on your pillow. There had been a time when none of their voices sang like Phuong's. I put on my hand and their bones too were as fragile as a bird's. (Greene,5) .Fowler says very casually that "Marriages break. Often they break quicker than an affair....." (Greene, 69). He boldly admits to Alden Pyle that he had illicit affairs with many women. "Not more than four women have had any importance to me or me to them. The other forty odd wonders why one does it. A notion of hygiene, of one's social obligations, both mistaken" (Greene, 94).But the wife of Fowler who had been deserted by him, waits for him patiently. When Fowler seeks a divorce acceptance letter from his wife, she does not give it. She tells the name of religion and delays it. Later the wife writes a letter filled with anguish and disgust:

You pick up women like your coats picks up dust..... I always believed you loved Anne more than the rest of us until you packed up and went.....I feel lonely myself sometimes.....Marriage does not prevent you leaving a woman, does it? It only delays the process.....I don't believe in divorce: my religion forbids it, and so the answer, Thomas is no-no (Greene,109-110)

It is a sense of shame when Phuong chooses to live with Fowler after the death of Alden Pyle. It is as if women willingly live with a man older in age, and a husband of 'another women'. She never regrets for missing a proper marriage to Pyle. She resumes living with Thomas Fowler in the hope of becoming his second wife. She never bothers whether he got divorced or not. Thus the novel '*The Quiet American*' emphasizes upon the gender controversy that exists in the twentieth Century. By portraying 'Phuong' as submissive and passive, the novel pleads for the liberation of 'women'. The novel awakens us through the voicelessness of Phuong.

## II. REFERENCE

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