

**The Modern World through the Luminous Path of Prose Fiction -
A Reading of Graham Greene's *A Burnt-out Case* and *The Confidential Agent* as Dystopian Novels**

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*What an absurd thing it was to expect happiness in a world so full of misery.... Point me out the happy man and I will point you out either egotisms, evil - or else an absolute ignorance (Graham Greene, *The Heart of the Matter*, 1948: 117)*

Graham Greene was undoubtedly one of the most gifted and acclaimed novelists of the War/Post-war era in Britain. His novels reflect a constant search for new novelistic modes of expression capable of visualizing the disillusionment and malaise of the modern world. According to Waldo Clarke (1976), an enduring trait of Greene's fiction is the willingness to look at the repulsive face of the twentieth century. Since literature mostly reflects the mood of its age and enabling contexts, Greene's fiction dwells on the conflicts and pains of the modern world. The central burden of this discourse is to prove that Greene's novels steadily progressed in his bold use of the convention of dystopian fiction. It has been proved elsewhere that Greene's *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter* are quintessential existential dystopian novels (See: Ayo Kehinde, 2004). However, in this present paper, an attempt is made to study more closely the dystopian features and political and ideological implications of the deployment of this convention in Greene's *The Confidential Agent* and *A Burnt-out Case*. But first we must look closely at the concept of dystopian fiction and its role in fictional discourse.

Western imaginative literature took a decidedly dystopian turn in the twentieth century; this was with a view to reflecting the problems of the Western world in that century of wars and agonies. In fact, actual experiences of the modern world have been dystopian. This called for strong dystopian features in the literary texts produced in that period. According to Keith Booker (1995), "in many ways, dystopian fiction has become a paradigmatic expression of the Western imagination in the twentieth century" (58). Dystopian fiction is a generic term for a work that is skeptical about ideal states and is fearful of totalitarian thought control. In such fictional work, the future is depicted as a nightmare world of state or corporate control and of dehumanized mechanization (Edward Quinn, 2006). In dystopian fiction, the novelist is always blunt; he or she uses the text to interrogate the idyllic posture of the pre-

twentieth century utopianism. This is due to certain sad and unexpected events in the contemporary world – cold and violent wars, revolutions, totalitarianism like Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia, and the like. In such a bleak world, the powerful are capable of destroying themselves and all of mankind; governments can also bend people to any kind of purpose. Barbara Foley (1993) sums up the features of the cosmos of a dystopian work in the following words: “oppositional confrontation between the desires of a presumably unique individual and demands of an oppressive society that insists on total obedience and conformity in its subjects” (21). Thus, the world of dystopian fiction offers a stifling threat to the freedom and integrity of the individual.

It is against the backdrop of the foregoing that the world of Greene’s novels should be considered. Like most of Greene’s novels, *The Confidential Agent* and *A Burn-out Case* raise questions about the modern world, its predicaments and destination. Predictably, the image of humanity that the novels offer is negative. Nothing can better testify to Greene’s talent than his artistic holding up of a fictional mirror to the existential pangs of the modern world; that is, his ingenious depiction of life under siege, a world bereft of fulfillment and joy. In fact, Greene’s treatment of the dissonant and painful realities of humanity in the modern world is both remarkable and unique. His fiction shows a shift in the belief in Robert Browning’s comforting refrain: “God’s in his Heaven/All’s right with the world!” (From: “Pippa’s Passes”, 1841). The characters are out of step with their societies because the values of the societies are seen as warped or misguided. Those characters might be considered evil or psychoanalytically troubled, but they should also be seen as products of their societies, as personalities shaped by the problems of those societies and by the warped values the societies have come to represent. The characters rebel against the pressure and stress of the modern world, but, according to a seemingly ineluctable strategy of containment, they pay for their temporary emancipation with some significant loss of lives and of social respectability.

The Confidential Agent is classified by Greene himself as an “Entertainment”. However, a close reading of it reveals that it is a serious and highly accomplished work of art that dwells on some issues which bother on the existential problems of man in the modern world. Although the “entertainment” essence is there (actually, it is a good story that gives pleasure), it still possesses the quality which any good novel must have – topicality, in terms of serious issues, neat plot and structure, ability to create suspense, and abiding didactic overtones. Thus, although the novel can pass for an adventure tale, it is yet a subtle and double-edged criticism of the social ills and malaise of the modern world. As a dystopian novel, there is a background story of war, revolution, uprising,

natural disaster and some other painful events which result in dramatic changes to the societies.

Set in England, during a civil war in a neighboring country (Holland), *The Confidential Agent* traces the gradual dehumanization and brutalization of a spy (D). It shows how a person can degenerate into crime and violence in such a situation. In line with a tenet of dystopian fiction, D is a protagonist who questions his society, because he often feels intuitively that something is terribly wrong with it. In the novel, Greene presents the problems of humanity in the modern world by a most skilful manipulation of plot and structure, depicting each stage of brutalization and frustration processes, proceeding very logically and inevitably from the preceding. D goes to England hopefully to get the coal which he is bound to miss getting. We witness a rather static world, where to struggle is to grope towards doom and failure. The search of D and L (two rival confidential agents) for coal is doomed to failure because of Greene's vision of an end to the pervading crises plaguing the world. Since neither D nor L could get the consignment of coal, it is pertinent for both warring groups to cease fire. He also proffers a linguistic solution to the problem of global crises. Dr. Bellows' project on 'Entrenationo', a hybrid language, aims at giving a linguistic solution to world tension.

The reader's first impression of D is of innocence. Greene does not fail to capture the initial thrill of the moment – the garrulity and exuberance of Rose do not go unnoticed. However, Greene still carefully suggests that behind the façade of the thrill and innocence, there are sinister omens waiting to blight the nearest future. The reader is introduced to quite a lot of ravaging dystopian images, including gulls, mourning, death, half-speed, fog, coffin and heat. War, a ubiquitous fact of the modern world, is a common motif in dystopian fiction. A civil war is going on in D's country (Holland); another one is going on half a mile outside Dover Breakwater. D is obsessed with war: "He carried the war with him; wherever D was, there was a war" (9). A dystopian society glorifies and justifies violence, therefore bringing upon itself violence. Hence, the modern world is also portrayed in *The Confidential Agent* as fraught with danger and interpersonal dissonance, which is a product of distrust: "The one person you trusted was yourself" (10). It is a world of anonymity. We keep on reading about D, K, L, the other man, etc. It is also a world of extreme individualism where there is a breakdown of communication as a result of the dissonant relationships among people. For instance, D and the other man "had nothing to say" (11). There is no phatic communion between them; D thinks "the other man" may rob or murder him.

The Confidential Agent is also a literary comment on the problem of disillusionment in the modern world. It is quasi-historical in the sense

that it is about a civil war and the First World War. The novel dwells especially on the psychological effects of war on individuals. These include paranoia, distrust, and fear of the unknown. To reveal the painful and dissonant realities of the world, Greene makes use of setting as a constitutive element in the novel. It is a society plagued with the problem of espionage; it is a landscape of horror, victimization, treachery and lust. Ironically, a hotel, which is supposed to be a place of rest and relaxation, is depicted in the novel as a centre of horror, a hell of crimes, a violent place that encourages the brutal murder of innocent people like the attendant, Else. The world of the novel is also that of unhappiness, irrespective of sex, age, status, and race. This type of seedy setting is very realistic of the modern world where people engage one another in cut-throat competitions. The sub-titles of the novel also signify the problems of dissonance and pain – Part One is titled “The Hunted”; Part Three is “The Last Shot”. It could be said, therefore, that the novelist conceives of the modern world as a jungle in which one either kills or gets killed.

Greene, in the novel, does not hide his feeling that struggle is an existential reality of the modern man. D keeps on referring to his country as a place marked with “pain and violence” (127). It is a land where cases of murder are very rampant. Apart from the case of Else’s murder, fifty children are brutally killed on the same day. ‘Gun’, a central image in the novel, is an index of destruction. What makes the gun, in the text, most striking is its sudden change of function. It actually belongs to the security agents; but since it has been confiscated by D to torment his assumed enemies and foment jungle justice; it has then become an object of terror.

The novel also comments on what a war can turn a normal person into. Thus, in the text, Greene seems to be declaring that nobody is permanently sane in the modern world. The problems of the age are personified by D and other characters he encounters in his tedious struggles with fate and life. He is depicted as a pariah due to his circumstantial obsession with crime and violence. An originally sane person suddenly becomes a rogue due to the situations in his society; he is a victim of circumstances. He even becomes a thief, a murderer and a saboteur. This is a sort of Machiavellian tendency and an index of the tension in the society. To signify the profundity of Man’s pain in the modern world, a police cell is shown to be a better and more comfortable place than the outside world which is marked with starvation and hunger, symbolically shown in the struggle over a coconut between a man and a bird. The reader is informed of the peace in the police cell: “He had not experienced such peace for a long time” (180). This is similar to the experience of Meja and Maina and their cohorts in Mwangi’s *Kill Me Quick*. D “would rather stay in a cell than a hotel room” (190). There

is no port of rest for him; he is alone in his excited and violent transactions. He is estranged by all, due to his political affiliation. His masters do not have faith in him; he is also in dissonance with those he deals with in England.

D's ready predisposition to violence, most especially his torture and subsequent murder of Mr. K, like the predisposition of Maina to armed robbery in Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick*, can be justified. D throws overboard the conventional morality of home and England. The latent antagonism between him and the rival party (led by L) becomes apparent when D reaches the Strand Palace and commences his struggle to buy the coal. The hotel does not have the basic necessities of life; this absence makes D's stay there uncomfortable. His movements and deeds are also spied by his antagonists; worse still, the credentials for purchasing the coal mysteriously disappear from him. This marks a turning-point in his life. The loss of the credentials, as well as the sudden death of Else (his only friend), toughens him. Violence begets violence; he gets hold of the detective's gun and declares; "I've had a gang of traitors after me ever since I came across. Now I'm going to do the shooting" (106).

Thus, destructive vices and dissonant temper of human beings are revealed in some of the characters who initially strike the reader as innocent. Examples of such characters are the manageress of Strand Palace, D and the youths. This suggests that violence is an inalienable part of human nature; it is only kept in check by the taboos of civilization. This is akin to the ideology of William Golding in his *Lord of the Flies*. In a society replete with instances of brutalization, class discrimination, and victimization, violence, in man, is likely to break out soon, as we witness in D. D, 'the hunted', suddenly becomes 'the hunter'.

Through the character of D, Greene depicts the modern man as impoverished and disturbingly alone with himself. D's lack of food and fine possessions, and at a later stage, any amount of money, mirrors the physical, spiritual and economic conditions of man. He is bereft of any reassuring social status and of helpful social relationships. He travels light, with nothing but a leather wallet containing a brush and a comb, a toothbrush, and a few oddments. His condition is very disquieting. The hitherto important man, an erudite professor and famous author, is now reduced to the status of a beggar, petty thief and animal. Mr. K also belongs to the ravaged world of D. He is also anonymous, shabby, ink-stained and underpaid. He wears a ragged suit and, and his eyes were tired and evasive. Else, the fourteen-year-old hotel maid, is also a member of the suffering masses. She is described as having a peaky haggard face (22).

Indeed, *The Confidential Agent* is a parody of the modern world and man's lot in it. D can thus be described as Everyman, who personifies

the human adventure on earth. His adventure has been a quest ending in nothing. The novel is thus one long cry of metaphysical despair. The capture of D and the court scene reveal that the supposed inevitable, known by D himself and the reader from the first moments of the story, has come about. He is now in the hands of the law agents, and pain, suffering and injustice are no longer inevitable but at hand. The brutality of the police, as well as its sadistic efficiency, is made vivid. To the police, power means the capacity to make people suffer. In *The Confidential Agent*, Greene also critically interrogates the Victorian sense of unity, integrity, identity and a shared destiny in the light of the new realities of the modern age. Greene, in the novel, explores the fragmented and unsettling condition of modern life. He probes into the destructive and primitive nature that lies behind the civilized exterior of the individual. The dissonant relationships between D and his antagonists (L, K, the chauffeur and the manageress) reveal that modern civilization is unpredictable, excessive, uncontrollable and destructive. The reader is made to believe that the only period when man does not experience violence is in his sleep and dream. D's only opportunity of conjecturing peace is only in his dreams where he cogitates some romantic images of the idyllic past – compensation, wish fulfilment, his deceased wife, wine, flowers and food.

The effects of war on humans are also represented in the personality of D. We identify many differences between his life during the pre-war era and the post-war era. The former life was slightly idyllic, while the new one is plagued with pain and dissonance. He is an iconic representation of the plight of humanity in the modern world. Before the war, he was much younger in outlook and much happier. War, in fact, has telling effects on ageing, beauty, mood and physique. D has undergone a number of painful experiences. He has tasted imprisonment (six months in a military prison); he has lost his wife to the war; he has experienced air raid, his house is also burnt. His life has indeed been a labyrinth of pains; he is in dissonance with life and fate. War has killed his emotion; he feels nothing but fear. Thus, the previously handsome young professor now has a grey moustache, with heavy lines around his mouth. There is a scar on his chin. He tells the detective who contends the genuineness of his photograph: "You know war changes people" (13). The plight of L is not significantly different from that of D. His own property has also been confiscated; his manuscript and pictures have been burnt. He comments bitterly that horrible things do happen to the things one loves. Even the rich in the society do not know peace and happiness. For instance, Forbes, who is rich, influential and famous, is still unhappy because of unrequited love. The historical sense of the novelist does not elude our observation. He attempts a diachronic survey

of “life then” and ‘life now’, with a view to contrasting and comparing the idyllic Victorian period and the painful war-ravaged modern world.

The world of the novel is also that of deceit and betrayal of trust. Mr. Forbes lacks sexual fidelity; he covets another girl (Sally) whom he subsequently marries. Rose is also an unfaithful partner to Forbes. She prefers D to Forbes. To pay Forbes back in his own coin, Rose decides to marry D. This, by inference, depicts an instance of the endemic domestic dissonance in the modern world. Domestic dissonance is also observed in the relationship between Mr. Benditch and his daughter, Rose. An archetype of the modern man, Benditch prioritizes his business over his domestic affairs. He has little or no respect for his family: “What my daughter may say is not evidence in this house” (92). Rose herself confirms the schism between her and her father in the following words: “Do you think father and I are on speaking terms?” (52). The psychological effects of this father-daughter conflict on Rose are disastrous. She has lost her mother and is also deprived of love and affection from her father. The agonies of bereavement and deprivation of love make her psychologically disturbed and create serious emotional turmoil and imbalance in her. This affects her general disposition to life and her own personality. Her home background and the relative peace in her own country, notwithstanding, Rose decides to elope with a nonentity (D), “of no account at all” (14). This suggests how painful it is to have an uncaring father. This is what the modern world has turned human beings into. It is a world of unceasing struggles for wealth, with no time for God and family.

The home is the first environment with which the child interacts after birth, and it plays a very significant role in shaping the personality pattern of the individual. Childhood experiences and training are very decisive determinants of personality in later life. A low-morale family setting cannot be a good training ground for a child to imitate and form an acceptable personality in society. This accounts for the problem which Rose has with her father.

Classism, social dissonance, is also portrayed in the novel. Indeed, the society is one riven by a hidden class war. The dissonant relationship between Else and the manageress of Strand Palace Hotel bears testimony to the claim that there exists class dissonance in the world of the novel. Fed up with the frustration and stress she suffers at the hand of her employer, Else commits suicide. Her death confirms the fact that the poor, in the modern world, are amenable to all forms of mistreatment; they can be brutally murdered at will.

Quite a number of psychological observations also abound on the dissonant relationships among the peoples of ‘Greenland’. Sigmund Freud (1953) believes that human behaviour is determined by unconscious motivations, irrational forces, biological, and instinctual

drives and certain psychosexual events. The society is full of competitions, and some people are bound to win, while others are destined to lose. D's desires are not gratified as a result of some entangling obstacles. The failure of D to accomplish his goal (getting the needed consignment of coal for his region) depersonalizes him and leads him to violence. The losses are traumatic (credentials, coal and Else), and he does not ever recover from them. He therefore becomes a behaviour deviant. Also, he lacks meaningful relations. The effect of feeling lonely and isolated is disintegrating to him. He feels alone in an alien world. This feeling of being hated and unappreciated is indeed stressful. Since he lives in a violent environment, he becomes obsessed with settling scores in violent ways. Another psychological source of D's stress is pressure, a kind of force which compels him to achieve his goal. The pressure on D arises from both an external source and from within D himself. He is under severe pressure to save his sect from the impending doom of the civil war. This compels him to engage in a cut-throat competition with the rival group, symbolized by L, to get the coal. This is community pressure. His community places high premium on victory in the ongoing civil war.

D's sudden degeneration into violence is also a case of ego-defence mechanism. His aggressive reactions are directed towards some innocent stimuli rather than the ones that actually cause his aggression. He is not able to direct his attack on the hostility-producing stimuli (L, Benditch, Forbes, etc) because he finds them rather impregnable and stressful. Since relief is desired by him, he has to direct his aggression towards the less impregnable person (K), who is a wrong but relatively safe target. After his bid to purchase the coal fails, frustration, which subsequently elicits anger, creeps in. This leads D to engage in aggressive actions against his antagonists, with a view to ridding himself of obstacles. When the frustration continues, and he is confronted with a succession of other excruciating situations, stemming from the same source, anger gradually blends with hostility, with a tendency to destroy, damage, hurt and kill. Human beings jealously guard their self-esteem, self-love and pride. D experiences serious and inexplicable threats to his self-esteem. This is reflected in his feeling of intense insecurity and hatred. In order to circumvent the discomfort and anxiety that arise from the threats, D develops and uses ego-defence mechanism to protect himself.

Actually, in *The Confidential Agents*, Greene has raised some vital questions on the helplessness and restlessness of the various kinds of people in the modern world. It seems he proselytizes in the novel. To him, no human being, however intellectual he or she might be, can solve the problems of dissonance and pain in the world. That is why Dr. Bellows' Entrenationo project fails, a victim of the problem of distrust.

Greene's *A Burnt-out Case* is also perceived in this paper as a dystopian novel that dwells on a universe of terror, a society where there is subversion of utopian ideals. It explores the enduring conflict between human affection and moral imperatives and its accompanying metaphysical suffering, human limitations and failures. Indeed, the thematic foci of Greene in the novel revolve around the dissonance in a world of free-will, the disruptive chaos of a continuously changing world and the injustice that people visit on another. One of the central tenets of dystopian fiction that recurs in the novel is intentional miscarriage of justice. Greene insists, throughout the novel that the human beings in the modern world are encumbered with problems of dissonance and pain. These issues dominate the novel, whether the characters are the incurable leprous Africans, like Deo Gratias, or the careless and jealous English men like Querry and Rycker respectively, or the spiritually barren people like Doctor Colin and Parkinson, or the temptress figures like Marie.

The pains, in the novel, arise mostly from the conflict between the ideal spirituality (as entrenched in the Holy Bible, John 13: 34 – “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another...”) and the observed patterns of Christians' acts. This is a textual depiction of the realism of the modern world that is characterized by atheism, passive piety, anarchy and fanaticism. There is a significant difference between expectation and observed tendencies in Christian life; what is observed falls short of the spiritual ideal. In the novel, the characters (most especially Querry) are mostly extremists who doggedly prefer loving their neighbours more than themselves. They mostly insist on self damnation for the sake of salvation of others.

The ideal Christian virtues are entrenched in the creed of God. However, the ideal are not achievable in the modern world due to the existential realities of the period – erosion of old orders. It is a world which T.S. Eliot aptly tags “a wasteland”, populated by some “hollow men”. Anybody who attempts to live above board (like Querry in *A Burnt-Out Case* and Baako in Armah's *Fragments*) is mistaken for an eccentric, an iconoclast. This image of the Biblical Noah recurs in Greene's fiction.

Undoubtedly, *A Burnt-out Case* is a very dark tale because it is filled with images of horror, destruction, dirt and disease. The world of the novel is also replete with images of solitude, plague and violent death. These include vultures and tsetse flies, which populate the usual ‘Greenland’ – a disturbing and brutal world, a world full of enormous shadows – setting sun, night, dark alley and the like. The only illumination occurs in the glare of Querry's benevolent deeds which are soon terminated.

Against the foregoing background, *A Burnt-out Case* lends itself to modernist critical probing because it foregrounds confusion,

disillusionment and despair. The novel is Greene's stock-taking of the problems of the post-world war era. Like the features of the period, the story deconstructs every established convention in society and critiques the rationale behind social institutions such as marriage, economy, politics, religion and education. The setting of the novel, a mimesis of the modern world, signposts confusion, bleakness of horizon, excessiveness of freedom, liberality in doing things and the collapse of human civilisation – all are a result of the aftermath of the world war. However, in the novel, Greene is not absolutely pessimistic; rather, he maintains a tolerable outlook on life.

The socio-economic and political realities of the period make the novelist take some painful and dissonant issues as his thematic preoccupations in the novel. The modern man, like the average Greeneman, tends to keep on asking the question: "Who am I?" This is with a view to reflecting the crisis and conflict between self-identity and society, through which Greene lays bare the strains and tensions of the modern world. Discomfort is the pervading metaphor he uses to depict the pains of man in the modern world. Anybody who does not feel the pain of discomfort is dead; the feeling of discomfort is the measure of man's existence – hence, the parody of the famous Cartesian philosophical postulation, "Cogito Ergo Sum" ("I think, therefore, I am) by the Cabin-passenger in the novel: "I feel discomfort, therefore, I am alive" (9). Apart from pain and discomfort, there is "no more to record" (9). Therefore, in consonance with the character of dystopian fiction, the world of *A Burnt-out Case* is indubitably filled with pains and agonies.

Querry, the protagonist of the novel, is an ambiguous character. Ward (1989) gives an insight into the multifarious ironies and polysemic nature of the name 'Querry'. Indeed, the name is an allegorical one because the man is as ambiguous as the semantic significations of his name, which literally translates 'interrogation' or 'doubting the truth of'. A famous French Catholic architect, who visits a French Leprosy run by monks in Africa (Belgian Congo), Querry is a man who has undergone a lot of negative metamorphoses. He attempts to expunge from his life everything that he has got and meant; he seems to be in a state of emptiness. This signifies the meaninglessness of life in the modern world. He has lost his sense and capacity for creativity, imagination, sexuality, hope and belief. He is completely bare of symbols, of indeed everything. His room is devoid of photographs of a community or a parent; it is "like a grave without a cross" (77). He has forsaken both pleasure (sex) and job (designing a building). Also, he has abandoned his family, like Mwangi's and Wright's characters. He comments: "I once had, but they disappeared into the world a long time ago. We haven't kept in touch" (47). He is arrogant, culturally blind and infinitely weary in the ways of the world like Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. He is a

run-away paterfamilias due to the burden and socio-economic encumbrances of the modern world. He declares: "I feel no pity" (79) for abandoning the family. The modern world has really turned him into a tramp and an irresponsible parent.

The character of Querry is therefore used to portray the frightening state of the modern world. He wants to enjoy a truce from the hurly burly of life, which continuously proves abortive. His nervous expectation of a rest from his reputation and the uneasy departure towards an unnamed place reflect the seedy feeling of the modern world, which is very sinister. He thinks he has run away from his problems, but man is like a fly in the hands of God. Fate keeps on pursuing him. Father Thomas comments on this issue of inevitability of human fate: "For a good man, fame is always a problem" (142). He initially thinks that he has come to an end of all pains and conflicts; he does not know that he has only drifted towards his death in a quiet region. *A Burn-out Case* gives a vivid picture of the mood of the contemporary world and the plight of people living in it. W.B. Yeats, in his famous poem "The Second Coming", captures the dissonant and painful realities of the world. It is a world where old and supposedly exhausted unities have been fractured and dissolved. The disorderliness and dislocation of the world do not spare anybody. There is total breakdown of order in the previously organised world (Patricia Waugh, 1992). This recalls the Hobbesian "State of Nature" which centres on individuals without any moral sense or social obligation. In such an atavistic society, everybody is a boss and a sadist. Therefore, in *A Burnt-Out Case*, the individuals, most especially Rycker, display bestial tendencies. Indeed, the contemporary world, as portrayed in the novel, does not illustrate a society but a drastic return to the crude and raw state of nature where there is no respect for law and orderliness. The scars left behind by the two world wars and other minor wars have turned human beings in the modern world into destroyers and murderers. The traditional loyalties, ties, and associations have become lax or entirely dissolved. This erosion of human relationships informs the portrayal of a theatre of organised slaughter, dislocation, 'militarism' and revolution in the novel. It is a world of arduous tasks with little success: "A lot of effort it seemed for so slow a progress" (10).

Also, the novel portrays a restless life, a world where nature is actually in dissonance with human beings. Heat, mosquito, storm, and flying ants constitute a lot of agonies for the people of Greenland: "The mosquito has no pity for the thin man" (10-11). If the pains from tsetse flies and mosquitoes subside, there is not yet a respite for the people, because yellow butterflies will appear to torment them. Although leprosy alone is enough an illness for a person to bear, many other diseases still afflict the lepers, a complex situation that makes death a welcome phenomenon in the society. An old man with blood disorders informs Dr.

Colin: "... and in any case, there is no time because I am going to die tomorrow" (49). The world is depicted as one that encourages suicide. An old Greek Shopkeeper, in his late seventies, living in LUC is said to have taken "a gun from under the cushion and shot himself through the head" (108). The reason for this suicide is marital frustration resulting from the infidelity of his young illiterate African wife. There are other cases of suicide in the novel. It is stated that "there used to be a high suicide-rate among leprologists" (128). A man is also reported to have injected himself with a dose of snake venom; while another is said to have poured petrol over his furniture and his clothes and then set himself alight. Why do they prefer to commit suicide? The problems of the world have overwhelmed them. They prefer death to continuing living in a hell of dissonance and pain.

The novel is also replete with instances of domestic dissonance. This is mostly realised in the dissonant relationship between Rycker and his wife (Marie). In the family, we witness a very faulty husband-wife relationship. Both of them are spouse rejecting, and their dissonant relationship manifests rejection in a number of ways - physical neglect, denial of affection, lack of mutual respect, understanding and trust, abusive treatment and flogging. Actually, the world of the novel is one where wives can be terrified by the iron hands of their husbands. Thus, Rycker asserts his masculine prowess and invincibility by victimising his wife. In the novel, Greene dwells on the problem of "malignant sexism" (Ali Mazrui, 1993) in human society. Rycker subjects his wife to economic manipulation, sexual exploitation and political marginalisation. Marie is depicted with some female stereotypes; she is signified with traits like docility, submissiveness, subjectivity, monstrosity and powerlessness. She is an archetype of the biblical Eve (evil), who destroyed Adam and human folk, in her destruction of Querry. This woman-as-devil image betrays Greene as a sexist in the novel. By so doing, Greene, the dystopian novelist, deconstructs the idea of the existence of a terrestrial paradise of harmony, contentment and peace. Through the dissonant relationship between Rycker and Marie, Greene is able to foreground the social and domestic order in the universe. He seems to be suggesting that woman is not so recognised in the scheme of things in the world.

The genesis of the domestic dissonance in the world can be traced to the post-Lapsarian Eden woman's progenitor (Eve), who is labelled a temptress (Chioma Opara, 1989). Marie, in the text, is a temptress who is responsible for the problem of her society and the world at large. It may be safe, therefore, to classify *A Burnt-Out Case* under the chauvinistic literary canon in which women are put in the fetters of patriarchy, in a world riddled with sexism. Marie is also depicted as a revolutionary figure against the male society (symbolized by Querry and

Rycker) that has oppressed her. She is, in that sense, a prime woman who strives to attain autonomy by moving physically and psychologically from immanence to transcendence. Like an average Lawrentian woman (most especially in the Brangwen's family), she is antithetical to her husband.

The main cause of the domestic dissonance in Rycker's family is the disparity in ages. The woman is too young for her husband: "She said miserably 'perhaps it was a mistake... marrying me. I was too young'" (69). Worse still, Rycker is patriarchal; thus the couple lead a cat-and-dog life for about two years. Rycker sees his wife as a child to be trained and retrained to his 'taste': "You can see I've trained her to know what a man needs" (37). This statement betrays the sense of male chauvinism in Rycker. Woman is portrayed as a malleable object of patriarchal control, with no will. To Rycker, Marie should be kept under constant control and guidance: "And now, my dear, you'll change into a proper dress" (38). Also, marital satisfaction for Rycker is sexual gratification; but Marie does not like that because she believes it may not be the kind of love that the Saints feel. Therefore, although Marie wants another child, Rycker does not.

It is against the background of the cut-throat domestic dissonance that Marie abandons her sick husband and elopes with Querry who does not understand her intention. She despises her husband because of a new 'lover'. She is thus a devil-figure, an irresponsible wife, a traitor, who is prepared to do anything to escape her despicable husband. She therefore sticks to her apparent lie that it is Querry, not Rycker, who is the father of the baby in her womb. She sees this as the only way of escaping the patriarchal home of Rycker. This is what the modern world has done to love and family life. Marriage has become a very fragile association that breaks very easily.

The conflict between Rycker and Marie is also ideological – between the fixed world of the adult and the flexible and kaleidoscopic world of the youth. It is in this sense a generational conflict. Marie's (and extensively the youths') sensitivity is in dissonance with the insensitivity of Rycker (the adult world). Therefore, their dissonance is not only due to gender disparity, or lack of affection and compassion, but also because of lack of understanding and knowledge of each other's motives and social pressures.

The failure of one generation to understand another generation, as well as the absence of a common moral purpose in the family, is a metaphor for the crisis in the modern world. The inflexibility of the characters at the domestic level is an index of the virulent and menacing feature of the modern world. The young are shown to be corrupt and violent because the old fail to hold them in check. That is, the moral order of the young is perverted because of the differences in moral

precepts. Therefore, the domestic conflict in Rycker's family signifies Greene's insistent irony that reconciliation in the modern world is simply impossible in the marriage of incompatibles. Instead of domestic consonance, what we experience in the family is elapsing dissonance (S.H. Kanu, 1974). The domestic, ideological and interpersonal dissonance in the family is brought into a painful tragic resolution. It is settled in the only possible way in this age of disillusionment and alienation – through violence.

However, the dissonant relationship between Rycker and Query partly stems from class snobbery, and this reflects the problems of man in a philistine world, where interpersonal dissonance is always settled with arms. Greene's primitivistic temper does not elude our observation. With the conflictual relationship between Rycker and Query, Greene seems to be suggesting that civilisation has divorced people from their natural state. It is a period of wanton disregard for civilised values of the past and the present, of loss of faith in religion. Since conflict is the inescapable condition of man in the modern world, due to opposing philosophies and divergent personalities, Rycker brutally terminates the life of Query to assert the supremacy of the order of the individual in the modern world over the conventional social order. This also exposes the tragic dilemma of freedom.

Query is despised by Rycker and his host community because of his queer nature; Rycker inflicts injury on him without a malicious intent. Although both have a common creed (reciprocal affection), their dissonance arises out of differences in background, temperament and life goals. It is a conflict between the self-respecting Rycker and self-surrendering Query. Therefore, in dissonance are the passions of the two volatile and impatient men, Query who wants to use his sense of pity for the benefit of others, and Rycker, who does not understand the motives of Query. To the inflammable passions of love and jealousy is added another very exasperating source of dissonance – that of class difference. Query is unable to read human motives. He does not know Marie can pose a threat to his living: "He thought rashly: poor frightened beast – this one was too young to be a great danger" (156). He has meddled too much in the domestic affairs of the Ryckers. He has a case to answer for playing into the devilish hand of Marie. One expects him to be more careful not to deprive his friend (Rycker) of his own conjugal bliss. Marie abandons her husband at a critical moment: "She went and left me ill with a high fever" (176). The only possession he values most (his wife) is 'stolen' from him. This leads him to become mentally dissonant. He suffers from excessive jealousy: "spent the night with Query and say nothing" (177). Worse still, he does not receive any mollification from both Marie and Query. They ironically compound his

psychological problem with their laughter and jests. There is, therefore, the possibility of attenuation for his crime.

Querry's involvement in the domestic affairs of the Ryckers stirs not only the wrath of the husband but also the anger and suspicion of the church (Father Thomas, Mother Agnes, Doctor Colin, etc.). The experiences the reader gets from the interpersonal conflict give him or her an awareness of the social and metaphysical evil in the modern world. The reader is better informed of how to play safe in the dissonant society. Querry's conflict with the society stems from a variety of factors, which include the untamed goodwill in him, his unique but opaque temperament, complication in human affairs, and most especially the place of evil in human society. The once considerate and loving Rycker suddenly develops into a hardened and cruel blood-monger. Thus, through the help of Satan and psychological imbalance, Rycker takes the law into his hands and follows an aggressive path to the resolution of his mental and domestic dissonance. His experiences and expectations brutalize him, and in turn make him so brutally callous that he murders Querry in cold blood.

Rycker's narcissism stands out luridly in the scene where he murders Querry. It is against the decorum of human society. In the modern world, science and technology are the household words for human development. In spite of the advantages of the technological breakthrough, Greene directs the reader's attention to the ambivalent result of man's progress in science and technology. This is a dystopian warning that the advantages derivable from technological feats could be submerged by the catastrophes that arise from the same feats. Therefore, the problem of the use of 'gun' by people of the modern world to kill one another is artistically depicted and pungently exemplified in Greene's novels. Rycker is unreflective and precipitated. He is guided more by his feelings which are easily aroused. He feels lonely and miserable because of the burden of his domestic affairs and his inability to adjust to the new situation caused by the dishonest and recalcitrant behaviour of his wife. In fact, the dystopian society depicted in the novel is undesirable and horrifying.

A few psychological causes of Rycker's mental and interpersonal conflicts spring to mind. He lacks some visceral needs, including those of safety, avoidance of pains, stimulation, and sexual gratification. He lacks the basic necessities of life to survive and meet adjustive demands. Because of domestic agonies, he is unable to renew himself through rest; and by not having the chance to refresh himself, his ability to cope with normal adjustive demands is weakened. These painful stimuli predispose him to stress. Obviously, again, his marital dissatisfaction engenders frustration. His reaction to this is typically one of anger which leads to attack and aggression in a bid to rid himself of the causative agents of

the frustration. He, therefore, beats his wife severely, venting his anger on her. When the frustrating situations, which stem from the same source (his wife's elopement) continue unabated, his anger suddenly dovetails into hostility, with a tendency to hurt and destroy Querry.

The domestic dissonance also leads to paranoia on the part of Rycker which makes him misconstrue Querry's personal habit (constant laughter) as being directly aimed at him. He feels that he is being mocked. Therefore, he is in mortal danger of attack; he jettisons moral, ethical and social restraints and becomes a psychopath. That is, his avalanche of misfortunes leads him into violence. Rather than committing suicide like his literary cousin, Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter*, he becomes hostile and seeks vengeance on his wife and his assumed antagonist, Querry. His thought-processes become rather too chaotic; he is therefore out of contact with reality when he brutally murders Querry for adultery which he has actually not committed.

The disaster of Querry can be located within the modernist perspective of tragedy. Schopenhauer, cited by Raymond Williams (1966), describes modern tragedy thus: "the true sense of tragedy is the deeper insight that it is not his own individual sins that the hero atones for, but original sin, that is the crime of existence itself" (37). Thus in *A Burnt-Out Case*, the tragedy of Querry is not solely because of his tragic flaw; rather it is due to a combination of the existential realities of his milieu and his inherent flaw, the inability to perceive human motives. Actually, his tragedy bears some traits of the classical concept of tragedy – obsession with pity. He allows himself to be used as a scapegoat, and he has a bloated ego. Like the Master-builder (Solness) in Henrik Ibsen's play entitled *The Masterbuilder* and Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter*, Querry's tragic end is a result of his pride. The flaws, coupled with the pangs of the modern period, subject him to a lot of pains of the type described by Raymond Williams: "The unspeakable pain, the wail of humanity, the triumph of evil, the scornful mastery of chance, the irretrievable fall of the just and innocent". (1966:37).

Finally, it might be worth pointing out from the above observations that, in Greene's fiction, the convention of dystopian fiction is used for aesthetic, thematic and ideological purposes. It is revealed that Greene's corpus of dystopian novels is a confirmation of the popularly-held view that textual production and reception cannot be conveniently separated from the socio-political, economic and cultural contexts in which the creative artist operates. Greene's novels have, therefore, been proved to be concerned with problems of the modern world. His dystopian novels extrapolate elements of the modern societies and are replete with images of dystopianism, including totalitarian powers, distortion of leisure, nightmarish world, subversion of utopian ideals, and the like. What Greene has offered in the two novels is a warning against some trends in

the modern world, most especially the threat of oppressive regime, in one form or another.

It has therefore been proved that Greene's *The Confidential Agents* and *A Burnt-out Case* fulfil the dystopian model of fictional creation. This claim is premised on the fact that the cosmos of each of the novels is very bad indeed; it is a world that is undesirable for many reasons. Also, in the dystopian contexts of the novels, current socio-political and interpersonal events are taken to nightmarish extremes. It is a frightening and provocative world, where a majority of people would fear to live in. It is a world that is incredibly imperfect, and it lacks the harmonious and egalitarian qualities of life depicted in utopian novels.

However, it should be concluded that Greene's novels refract the problems of the modern world; they do not just reflect what is wrong with the modern world. They therefore offer an alternative view of socio-political potentials of the world, where there would be social harmony, economic prosperity and political stability. In fact, Greene's *The Confidential Agents* and *A Burnt-out Case* offer some kind of implicit warning on what would happen should present trends in the modern world continue.

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