

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
Volume 10 : 11 November 2010
ISSN 1930-2940

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**Aligning the Connotations of Love and Freedom in
the Novels of Iris Murdoch**

Tanu Kashyap, M.Phil., Ph.D.

Women Writers in English

Women have been writing in English since the 18th century. Some of the most famous novelists have been Jane Austen, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte and Virginia Woolf, to name a few.

Iris Murdoch

Iris Murdoch is a contemporary woman novelist who has given a new meaning to the existence of women novelists with a new connotation to the meaning of love and freedom in her novels. Iris Murdoch's novels have deep impressions of French Existentialist Movement. She read Jean Paul Sartre's *La Nause* in 1945. She had a close encounter with war and devastations during her stint as UNRRA volunteer working for the refugees in Belgium and Austria. In the back drop of bloodshed and depravation love and freedom acquired a new dimension in the Murdoch's literature.

To assert Iris Murdoch as a major contemporary writer is to suggest something of the post-war novel in Britain. With the publication of her first novel *UNDER THE NET* (1954), she emerged not only as one of the most productive and influential British novelists of her generation but also as a powerful intellectual and original theorist of fiction. The increasingly evident liveliness and variety of British fiction since the war has contrasted very curiously with a sense of restraint

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about aesthetic discussion of the novel. She has emphasized that she aimed to write as a realist, in an identifiable “nineteenth century tradition of English and European fiction”. ¹ When Murdoch says that she is a realist, she probably means that her writing is inevitably concerned with the contemporary conditions.

Iris Murdoch has indicated the difficulties and the potential of contemporary fiction, especially in the British tradition. Both her view and her practice reflect the novel today. To some critics, it seems as though her writing career enacts a retreat into the safety of an anti-modernist position. Such people find it hard to accept the claim that she advances in an age of aesthetic and epistemological uncertainty. She has very strong admiration for nineteenth century ‘great’ writers (Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Dickens) and what lay behind their achievements - Shakespeare, whom she has described more than once as a ‘patron saint.’

Bernard Bergonzi quotes Iris Murdoch in his book *Situation of the Novel*:

I think it's true that the patterns which keeps up the structure in my work- I think this is true of a lot novelists writing today- are sexual, mythological, psychological patterns, and not the great rub of society which a nineteenth century writers relied on. Of course, in the writers like Dickens and many others one could think of, both sorts of structure obviously exists together. I regard my difference from then as a short coming – this is something I wish I could solve or get over in my own work. But the whole question of structure is harder – there are probably other reasons we've discussed, the nature of society having changed and one's confidence in it having so largely evaporated.

Character in Contemporary Novel

Murdoch's theoretical position owes much to not her ‘other’ career as one of Britain's leading moral philosophers but to her habit of reading and thinking which displays a carefully cultivated, historically aware and genuinely international literary sensibility. It arises from strong conceptions of the role of art in the society as an instrument of human knowledge. We have to grant her convictions about the humanistic value of the nineteenth century realism and the importance of realizing ‘character’ in the contemporary novel. At the same time, she was acquainted with the currents in the intellectual life of post-war France and works of Elias Canetti and admired the contemporary exponents of ‘Fantasy realism’ such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

A normative note emerges in Iris Murdoch's essay:

Real people are destructive of myth; contingency is destructive of fantasy, and opens the way for the imagination. Think of the Russians the great masters of the contingency of course may turn art into journalism. But since reality is incomplete, art must not be too much afraid of incompleteness. Literature must always present a battle between real people and images; and what it requires is a much stronger and more complex conception than the former. ²

Love and Freedom

‘Love’ and ‘Freedom’ are among the most essential features of Iris Murdoch’s ethical cannons. Love for Murdoch means realization on the part of the lover, of the otherness of the other. In her essay ‘The Sublime and the good’ she wrote –

Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. **3**

‘Love’ comprises the fundamental functional principle of art and morality, ‘Freedom’ is another idea to which she was deeply committed. In her essay ‘The darkness of practical reason’ published in the 1966 July issue of *Encounter*, Murdoch expressed the view that freedom is ‘to exist safely without fear and to perceive what is real’ and that ‘one who perceives what is real will also act rightly.’ **4**

Thus, in Murdoch’s scheme for aesthetic and ethical values ‘Love’ and ‘Freedom’ constitute the central concerns underpinned by a revolt against conviction and fantasy, defiance of the neurotic ego on the one hand, and assertion of sanity, fearlessness, perception of reality and righteousness of action, on the other.

Love constitutes the basic focal point of Murdoch’s aesthetic conception. Her thesis of Love is not selfish but it regards the otherness of the other and leads towards the directions of realization. Critics have more often struck blows at her for they felt that there has been forceful projection of sex in her novels. Iris Murdoch very forcefully replied to such allegations that sex is a great mistier and the struggle between love and sex is part of the drama of her most important novels. She goes to the extent of saying that virtue in the artist and the good man is the product of a selfless attention to nature, something easy to name and hard to achieve.

Iris Murdoch further says

The essence of both (art and morality) is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is extremely difficult realization that someone other than one’s self is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. **5**

She further says-

Art comes from the deeper soul where a great force lives, and this force is sex and love and desire-desire for power, desire for possession, desire for knowledge, desire for God- what makes us good or bad –without this force there is no art and no science either. **6**

Originality of Murdoch’s Novels

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‘Freedom’, which again is a forceful device, leads towards reality and makes one, see through illusions. The originality of Murdoch’s novels is that they are full of a sense of what it means to come from one of the luckier, stable societies, or sections within that society, in an unlucky century, but avoids false piety about either that luck or misfortune. The make-believe of ordinary life and the painful destruction of ordinary human illusions serve as the basic theme of Murdoch’s novels.

The open novel contains a lot of characters who rush about independently, each one eccentric and self centered; the plot to some extent situates them in a pattern but does not integrates them into a single system. The closed novel has a fewer characters and tends to draw them, as it were, towards a single point. UNDER THE NET and THE FLIGHT FROM THE ENCHANTER were, I think closed, THE SAND CASTLE and THE BELL were open. The advantage of the open novel is that it is bright and airy and the characters move about freely; it is more like life as it is normally lived. Its disadvantage is that it may become loose in the texture and it is more difficult to make the structure evident. A closed novel more intensely integrated but may be none. Claustrophobic in atmosphere and the characters may lose their sense of freedom has attacked both ‘self knowledge’ and ‘sincerity’.

The flip-flop between open and closed works is that it clearly reflects a conflict between Murdoch’s desire to set her characters ‘free’ and her beliefs that human beings are profoundly un-free. Her exploration of such matters is interesting. Her work presents a curious fact about us as far as shedding of illusions is concerned but as discard them, there always seems the need to shed a few more.

Under the Net

UNDER THE NET gave Iris Murdoch entry into the literary arena. Throughout the novel the protagonist, Jake lives in the world of convention and fantasy, deeply stressed as he is in the state of neurotic egotism and insanity. It is only in the end that Jake is freed of his illusions when he enters the world of love and freedom which brings him the state of true self realization.

The novel charts out the various ups and downs in the life of Jake Donahue, a writer in his thirties. The philosophical burden of the novel’s argument and its compressed aesthetic dimension has defined the contours of spiritual odyssey. For the epitaph of her novel Iris Murdoch chose a quotation from Dryden’s “THE SECULAR MASQUE” which aptly defines the parameters and framework within which the novel’s themes operates-

All, all of a piece throughout
Thy chase has a beast in view
Thy wars brought nothing about
Thy Lovers were untrue.

‘Tis well an old Age is, out
And time to begin a New;

Jake is always chasing someone or something, or some dream, idea or person. All the girls that come in his life are mere illusions and he realizes that if he has to realize his true being he has to come out of his world of make belief and see his true being. His idea of love shatters for he could not realize the otherness of his beloved; he was not prepared to acknowledge the existence of her perceptions and her space. The over possessiveness on Jake's part cost him a relationship. Both the themes of 'Love' and 'freedom' are intermingling and go hand in hand in the Murdoch's scheme of things.

Bruno's Dream

BRUNO'S DREAM (1969) tells the story of Bruno Greensleave who has failed in life, professionally as an archeologist, personally as a husband and as a stamp collector. He is bed ridden and cannot do anything without the help of the maids. He is living in his past and cannot come out of his dreams of being a successful person which in actuality he could never become. There are undertones of the Buddhist philosophy too. Bruno is depicted to be a God fearing man and through him Murdoch gives us the message that had Bruno given space to his wife, his relationship would not have suffered. He failed to show his acceptance to the otherness of the other hence the relation failed. He is not able to free himself from the yesterday and is a thinking of those moments and chasing those illusions. It is only when his box of stamps is swept in the water that he feels that his connection with his past ends and he is free from his make beliefs. This novel has abundance of symbolism.

The Sea, The Sea

THE SEA, THE SEA (1978) is narrated in first person and Charles Arrowby is the protagonist of the novel. He is an ex- theatrical director. He starts residing near the sea in the lonely house called Shroff End. The word *shroff* means black. It is said to be haunted by Mrs. Chorney. But he is not bothered by this fact. He enjoys himself by taking bath in the sea. He is busy writing his diary cum autobiography and starts registering all events of his life, his love affairs, his career, his plays, his uncle, his aunt.

There is no trace of civilization in the place where Charles lives. There is no electricity, or any traces of modernity. The juxtaposed situation is present in London, a place with theatre, parties, people, pomp and show. He had inclination towards theatre and it seemed to him as place to deceive people. Theatre to Charles seems to be a place of obsession and a place where actors very easily deceive the spectators. Charles had a number of affairs but none qualified to be called Love. The reason was his obsessive nature and he could not understand the need to give her space. Iris Murdoch says "Real Love is free and sane" (p. 89)

A Thin Line of Demarcation

Love and Freedom which are the centripetal concept of Murdoch's scheme of things have a thin line of demarcation. Love for Iris Murdoch is devoid of possessiveness and gives a chance to realize the otherness. It should not constitute of a feeling of superiority or of giving the highest place to a lover besides God but should lead towards the human weakness and follies besides advantages. Freedom in Murdoch's value system is a path towards realization of the otherness of other through fearlessness.

The Role of Self-knowledge and Sincerity

Murdoch has attacked both 'self knowledge' and 'sincerity' as second rate and delusive virtues. She has argued that both French existential and English linguistic philosophy are heirs of Romanticism and share a common voluntarism, a romantic over emphasis on the will. Both separate the moral agent from all that surrounds him (hero) and in the will as if it was or could easily be free, wholly ignored the personality and huge daunting power of its secrets, fragmentary, opaque and obsessive inner self. The unenlightened self is mechanical and escape from it is hard. Self examination strengthens its power.

In 1970, Murdoch attacked the contemporary hero -

The lonely brave man: defiant without pretensions, always an explorer of shams, whose mode of being is a deep criticism of society. He is an adventurer. He is Godless. He does not suffer from guilt. He thinks of himself as free. He may be self- assertive or even violent, but he has sincerity and courage, and for this we forgive him. ⁷

Success both as a Novelist and Philosopher

It is rare to find someone who has excelled, as has Murdoch both as a novelist and as a philosopher. The precedent at which she looks up to at various points is the founder of European philosophy, Plato. In 1968, Murdoch called herself a Platonist. She depicted Plato in 'The sovereignty of the Good'. She has described would-be saints and would-be artists. The saint is unconsciously good and, for him, it is the actions that count. The artist is consciously and aesthetically creating his life.

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