The irony of Life is that it begins only to meet its end; it ends where it begins. The journey of life is not a linear movement where we begin at a certain point and reach another. It is, perhaps, a circle where the beginning and the end arrive at the same point. We begin life to meet life. There is neither failure nor achievement at the end of life. There is only awareness, a growing which is a product of experience. Experience is the accumulated knowledge derived from impressions and situations which are, at the same time, erratic, magical, bizarre, refined, joyous, instinctual and impulsive. The complex network of these contradictory phenomena turns life into something incomprehensible. The result is a surging angst – a blankness that envelops the modern and post-modern psyche – which makes one ponder over the PURPOSE of life.

Man embarks upon the journey of life in search of the elusive goal called PURPOSE or MEANING. His eagerness to find the path sets him on the quest of a master who can show him the way. The pressing need for a master unconsciously creates the ‘idea’ of a master. Murdoch’s novels prove this by portraying the ‘master’ characters as extremely obscure and enigmatic. The protagonists merely stand as
symbols. The novels also suggest that both the master and the message which the pupil seeks are fashioned by his own imagination. So, instead of being led, man is actually leading. But, he chooses to be blind to this truth due to the propensity to project his need for meaning on something external to himself, believing that he has an exclusive accessibility to the key that can unlock the mystery of life. A close reading of the novels suggests, or proves, that there is no such thing that man imagines, and which he is after. Hence, Murdoch’s novels highlight the futility of following this self-created idea of the master.

However, on the other hand, the novels also give the readers an insight into the importance of creating this idea. In fact, by persistently following the master, in order to ‘discover’ him, the characters end up ‘discover’ing themselves. The journey with the obsessive and illusory idea of the master becomes meaningful because it helps man discover if not ‘sight,’ perhaps, then certainly ‘blindness’! The implication is that, by following the master, what one discovers is the illusion that was mistaken for reality. It is this shift in perspective which the present study has attempted to discuss and examine.

A master is generally perceived as one who leads man to reality but the novels suggest otherwise. Viewed from a different perspective, a master is the one who actually pulls man outward, leading him to discover the illusion that is his life. Needless to say, the path and meaning that he offers are both illusory. But a movement in that direction is of utmost necessity because, the only way out of illusion is ‘through’ it.

Incidentally, the damaging factor of this journey is that man begins to get accustomed to illusion and deceives himself that it is the truth. Thus, the journey
becomes complex as man stands in the way of realisation of truth. The irony is that he cannot access the truth or his inner self if he continues to hold on to illusion.

The journey with the master culminates in his tryst with the ‘dark brother’ inside him, the ‘devil,’ who helps break this cycle of deceit. Since he looks upon this ‘devil’ as a dreaded and undesirable entity, man is constantly engaged in finding ways of running away from him, instead of facing him. The novels delineate the futility of such escape and the importance of facing the devil. The ‘enchanter figures’ in the novels help the characters understand that what they have been trying to escape from is the existence of the ‘devil/ dark brother’ within. The actual role of the devil can thus be delineated, when man understands that acceptance of the existence of evil within, ultimately enables him in outgrowing the evil itself. Acknowledging the Shadow/ the dark brother, will consequently lead him inwards to understand his true nature, which is not darkness, but something beyond it. Fundamentally, man’s fear of the within, and his inability to acknowledge the Shadow gives rise to a growing tendency to understand evil as being external or independent of him. This highlights the fact that, like the master, even the devil is a product of one’s own creation.

It is important to note here that while the second chapter questions the reality of the master, the third chapter delves deeper and questions the real nature of the man who creates the idea of the master. In a way, the journey with the devil breaks man’s misconceptions about his own self, and drives him to perceive himself as nothing, which is his reality. The novels vividly portray how man is apprehensive of nothingness, of a life devoid of imagination, because he feels stripped of significance. Hence, he willingly falls prey to vicious fantasies which propel him into a torrent of reactions. And, then, it becomes very difficult for him to dissociate himself from the incessant chain of reactions. It is when the characters are caught in this whirlpool that
they, unwittingly, walk into the ‘devil.’ The ‘devil’ helps to break the spell. By aggravating the sense of pain in the journey with the devil, life assists man in reducing his appetite for illusion. Conversely, since this entire process of dissociation from the perception of oneself is painful, the devil is considered undesirable. The third chapter, however, shifts this perspective and highlights the benefit of a tryst with the devil who thrusts man back ‘inside,’ back to reality.

While examining the importance of the idea of the master and the devil, the thesis also draws attention to the dangers of reading too much significance into the motives of such ideas. The study suggests that the master and the devil exist only as impassive components of the machinery which life employs as part of its mysterious design. In this light, they cease to exist as entities that possess motives independent of this process. Man, at this point, is forced to understand that neither the master (desirable) nor the devil (undesirable) is the reality. Within the purview of these two extremes lies the crown of life, the awareness of what ‘is’ (reality).

Resolving these opposites then becomes imperative if one has to understand life in its completeness, where extremes cease to exist. Such is, perhaps, the state of real freedom where one is not bound by anything, including one’s own perceptions. In The Bell, in one of his haunting visions of the metamorphosed Imber, Michael realises what freedom means:

At one moment, somehow connected with this, he had a vision, which had at one time haunted him but which he rarely had now, of the Long Room at Imber, carpeted, filled, furnished, its walls embellished with gilt mirrors and the glow of old pictures, the grand piano back again in its corner, the cheerful tray of drinks upon the side table. But even this did not diminish his enjoyment: to know clearly what you surrender, what you gain, and to have no regrets; to revisit without envy the scenes of a surrendered joy, and to taste it ephemerally once more, with a delight undimmed by the knowledge that it is momentary, that is happiness, that surely is freedom. (155)
The awareness of reality is in itself true freedom, as Michael believes and experiences. But, till such knowledge is attained, man is impelled to wage the inevitable and eternal battle, in which life presents the case of the opposites within the paradigm of desirability and undesirability, as in the case of the ‘master’ and ‘devil’ (the symbols of ‘good’ and ‘evil’). Oscillating between the excesses offered by opposites, disenchanted, man seeks succour in the midpoint of clarity. Surprisingly, this point of equilibrium is viewed by him as a spot of discomfort because the midpoint is a point of nothingness, existing beyond the extremes, and hence, is incomprehensible.

The fourth chapter studies the lives of certain characters, analyses their motives and, to an extent, arrives at the reason why man clings to extremes instead of the midpoint. The characters’ repeated complaint that they do not know what else to cling to provides evidence of their repetitive behaviour. Nevertheless, the novels suggest that even this intense engagement with extremes is not an altogether futile attempt. The frequency of oscillations not only enhances man’s ability to attach and subsequently detach, but also helps him to ease his sight to accustom it to where the centre might lie. Clearly, in our effort to nurture clarity, charting the centre point of oscillation is a prerequisite. Bill Tammeus, a columnist and reporter, puts this insight in a beautiful image:

There is a special moment as the waves foam in. It occurs just at the instant that one wave has spent itself on the sand, but, suspended, has not yet begun to be pulled back out to the sea. For less than a second the waters stop churning and, through their clearness, I can see the ground beneath, see the rocks, the shells, the sand.

Sometimes I think that’s how much of a glimpse we are ever given of what is really going on in this life. We get a small clip of time as the forces that buffet us reach an occasional uneasy equilibrium. Then they retreat and the next wave smashes in and we lose that special momentary clarity.
But while the clarity is there, while the action is suspended, calm, we should
gather it in and store it deep within us so that when the next wave hits – and
inevitably it will – we can keep our balance. (The Wow of Now 41)

Indeed, though the experience of such moments of clarity is shortlived, its power is so
unique that it colours and impacts the whole being. In that moment, nothing matters,
because, perhaps, nothing exists.

In novel after novel, Murdoch posits the idea of beauty and tranquility in a
state of nothingness. When life is cut off from the images and perceptions that we
attach to it and its purpose, life begins to reveal to us the beauty of ‘being’. In a quest
to find the purpose of life, the study infers the possibility that, perhaps, life exists for
nothing, just as, in the words of Angelus Silesius, the rose exists for nothing.

The characters’ earnest efforts to find meaning and purpose invariably fail till they realise this very truth. Against all its definitions and descriptions, life just is. So, the purpose of life is simply to ‘be’ – a state where nothing exists. This nothingness could be viewed as a void or hollowness which is the cause of anxiety and anguish in the post-modern psyche. But the thesis propounds, through its chapters, that, when this nothingness, which is the reality of life, is accepted willingly, it brings not anguish but balance and tranquility. This congenial acceptance of the void is not only inclusive of the initial understanding of it as having no meaning, as the majority of us understand, but rather a greater realisation, that it is, perhaps, consumed with excessive meaning which is simply beyond our comprehension. Any attempt to draw it within our realm of understanding is, thus, futile and useless, suggesting a much greater and redeeming power of such emptiness. This shift in perspective transforms the sense of purposelessness into a sense of purpose and meaning. Therefore, as the novels suggest – no ultimate purpose or meaning or solution exists, at least not in a sense that man may understand. The happiness which man looks forward to and the
terrible pain which he fears are both illusory. Perhaps, the end or object of the quest is not even happiness, but a greater awareness of ‘life’ as opposed to ‘living’. The study, thus, focuses on the only thing that is worthwhile, and that is the quest itself.

What is important is the ‘act’ or the process of the journey itself. Though one may end where one began, it is important to embark on the journey from reality to illusion, and back. It would seem like one is reverting to the beginning. And, indeed one is. But, this time round, one has returned to the beginning where it all began, but with a better understanding and awareness of the starting point, and of his plight and predicament. In fact, what man seeks is with him when the journey begins. But he has to go through the entire journey to realise that it has been with him all the while.

Therefore, by being patient and persistent, struggling through grim paths, following the benevolent master, facing the fierce devil, and battling with the odds, man finally finishes the game of life. The reference of Life to a game is intended, partly because, as the present thesis identifies, life is fictional, unreal, a dream and a play. Flowing with life, in complete awareness of its truth and essence, is what makes life ‘LIFE.’

It is evident that, to Iris Murdoch and many other modern novelists, life means total participation, not abstention. Undoubtedly, these novelists are almost like ‘sages’ who articulate universal truths. They believe that evil and suffering are part of the soul-making process. The truth of life is unintelligible, and has to be continually investigated. The fact of the matter is that the protagonist is engaged in a constant struggle to know the indefinable and incomprehensible variable in his life.

The essential detail that we notice in the work of all modern writers is that transitory happenings, trapped in vague moments, become verifiable truths in the
formulation of the new man. Out of the sharp conflicts, tensions, and dilemmas that they face, a new world is in the process of being made. And, in this world, the characters continually strive to revive the totality of their person. Thus, modern novelists have expanded the parameters of the novel by making the inner worlds of their characters all-inclusive. They believe that the only way out is the way in. Murdoch’s work, in particular, shows not only the development of such ideas, novel after novel, but also the evolution of the author’s consciousness in the process of comprehending the complexities of life.

In a world devoid of God and goodness, literature is increasingly being seen as the one place where the idea of God, as the idea of goodness, entirely human, is reflected. Even the idea of the devil as the idea of evil is perceived in a very different and human context. As a result, despite the projection of the intensity and magnetism of evil, Murdoch considered her novels as works ‘full of happiness.’ She believed that life’s fulfillment can be attained neither by goodness nor by evil, but by an understanding that both co-exist. In fact, her novels prove that even an intense erotic love can be a source of enlightenment if it achieves ‘unselfing’.

Each of Murdoch’s novels is singular and original, a condensed version of human experience. What makes her one of the finest writers of fiction is her greater realism, and a deeper awareness of the human condition. Murdoch, thus, devoted herself to the process of life in her fiction. All in all, given her formidable gifts – intellectual ideas, storytelling exuberance, philosophical bent and a driving passion to portray the real – it is only right that Harold Bloom remarked about Murdoch that she ‘has the style of the age’ (Bloom 7). Truly, with her immense intellectual range and
moral vigour, she recovered and revitalised the ethical dimensions of art and, subsequently, promoted the well-being of the human condition as well.

Quite unknowingly, and rather intuitively, Murdoch’s fictional graph retraces the timeless curve charted by Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, who, commenting on the signposts and landmarks in the journey of life, said, “Follow the Master; Face the Devil; Fight to the End; and Finish the Game” (qtd. in Thomas 107).