Iris Murdoch has worked on a fairly consistent moral philosophy or to put it in her own words, a "kind of moral psychology." Through the different phases of her career as a novelist her basic moral concepts like freedom, goodness and love have not undergone much change. Similarly, her general analysis of the contemporary human condition and the state of the novel along with her recommendations for their improvement have remained almost unaltered. The modifications if any, lie in the shift of emphasis and the enrichment of her moral concepts by an increasing interest in Platonic and Buddhist philosophies. A conspicuous note of pessimism regarding the possibility of moral change and the attainment of freedom marks her maturer vision.

Her general moral stance can be presented as a
refutation of the existential assertion that an undirected freedom based on will and choice is the central human attribute. She considers this notion as morally and psychologically unrealistic. Morally, its focus on the self undercuts the due importance which must be given to others. Psychologically, the undue significance attached to rational choices ignores the contingent factors in human nature, the different layers of man's mind (some of which are totally dark to us), the role of the past and the importance of the general vision in determining man's actions.

Man, as she pictures him, is essentially unfree. The little freedom he can gain is earned in a slow process and is ever liable to regression. Keeping these factors in mind, her definition of freedom as knowing, understanding and respecting others implies the ability to see people as they are. It entails a clarity of perception exercised in interaction with others. This other-centredness requires 'unselfing' and living in the present. It also involves the acceptance of contingency and the real world existing powerfully beyond our control instead of settling for the one created by fantasy. Most of the characters of her novels translate reality into a series of subjective magical devices or forms which they conveniently confer on others obliterating the distinction between fantasy and reality. These artist-figures create aesthetic orderly schemes for what is formless. They devise roles for themselves and others and are entrapped in the artificial network.

The Unicorn is an example where this condition is lucidly
portrayed. In it, the theme of enchantment and enslavement has been worked out successfully. But the novel projects a negative conception of freedom. In the rest of the novels included in this study, the major characters gradually discover the chasm between their structured fantasies and reality which is the positive meaning of freedom.

This discovery of reality is, therefore, the paramount concern of her novels. It is a conventional theme with nothing very remarkable or unusual about it, but the way the discovery is made is unconventional. Although the traditional devices of a sudden contact with death, crisis or suffering are there but these only help in a process that has already begun. The progress is slow and laborious without any startling metamorphosis. As the character interacts and bumps into others he reflects upon the situations. He slowly learns to recognize the roles he had been maneuvered into playing and the forms he had enveloped around others or himself. This realisation forces him to refocus his attention and discard some of the roles and myths of his creation. Most of the major characters by the end of their respective novels come to understand the falsity of their situations and by giving up their subjective visions earn moral freedom to understand others. Jake in Under the Hill comprehends the meaning of impersonal love by giving up the false conceptions he had of Hugo and Anna. Michael Meade in The Bell sees through the artificiality of his neatly ordered world at Imber Court as
well as the hollowness of the religious destiny he had assigned for himself. In *An Unofficial Rose*, Hugh is the one who comes close to reality by discarding the romantic pattern he had desired to impose on his life. John Durante in *The Nice and the Good* abandons his self-devised theoretical ideas on justice and goodness. He gains a just vision by confronting the particular situation objectively. In *Bruno's Dream*, The Sea, The Sea as well as *The Nice and the Good* the emphasis is on the obsessions of the past that act as constricting patterns on the minds of the characters preventing them from living freely in the present. They win freedom by facing them and are eventually released of the tyranny of the past. *The Black Prince* is a study of artistic and moral freedom achieved by giving up theories for real experience.

But Murdoch does not believe in a total or permanent freedom or change because that requires a complete 'unselfing' and considering human nature as it is, this is impossible. Her later novels, from *The Nice and the Good* onwards are characterized by an emphasis on its temporality. Though we know that John Durante, Diana, Bradley and Charles Arrowby have been made wiser by their experiences yet we are not sure how long this improvement will last. Only an extreme situation like death can bring about a complete clarification of vision. Like Plato, she is in favour of the study of death instead of suffering in order to gain self-effacement and freedom. The novels of the 1970s have dwelt frequently on this theme. But she is also
aware that the fact of death is something that is never totally faced by most of us. Freedom in this context is, therefore, both limited and partial. Its limitations are defined by man's narrow vision as well as the indeterminate, unknowable nature of others. It can be achieved only partially because we may 'see' a segment of reality but not the whole. "There are short glimpses of clarity and insight but the single Big Truth is always illusory."² We may discard some forms but can never be entirely bereft of them.

All the while believing that human beings are profoundly unfree, Murdoch has striven to grant greater freedom to her characters. She is frankly conscious of the need of form and its unavoidability in works of art. Her highest aim has been to bring about a Shakespearean combination of magical form and real character by marrying the virtues of the 'open' and 'closed' novels. Over the years the form of her novels has become increasingly more flexible and liberal. The tightly controlling myth of The Unicorn has gradually been replaced by a more discreet, and subtle weaving of ideas and disposable metaphors. Novels like The Elias and the God, Bruno's Dream, The Black Prince and The Sea, The Sea can be read and enjoyed even without the knowledge of various mythical and literary allusions. The truth is strongly delivered to the reader without the elucidation of these references. For example, if the Eros/Manatee mythical scaffolding in Bruno's Dream is to be taken into consideration, it is more for what these mythological figures denote rather than for any stories connected
with them. The same is applicable to her other later novels. But, for the understanding of the early novels like *Under the Net, The Unicorn, A Severed Head,* or *An Unofficial Rose* the knowledge of Wittgenstein, medieval mythology, Freud, Simone Weil and the existential meaning of 'form' are imperative: otherwise much of the essential meaning is lost.

Her artistic development is marked by a greater self-effacement from the surface of the novels. For this distancing effect she has made a masterly use of various technical devices like the point of view, male-first-person and the unreliable narrator, peripheral characters who sound opinions on the actions or events of the novel and give an impression of a "surplus margin of gratuitous life." It has already been seen in *The Black Prince* how the use of forewords, postscripts and intrusive apostrophes lends a quality of unconsolatory realism and objectivity to the novel. It helps in reducing the temptation to sum up the character of Bradley Pearson or the crucial event from a single point of view. The picture of Bradley's multi-dimensional personality is one way of working against the formal control of a patterned type designed by the author. *The Sea, The Sea* exhibits the author's distrust of a definitive ending. It deceives the aesthetic expectations of the readers by not rounding off into a tidy ending. The more sprawling open-endedness of the novel is, however, what Murdoch intends in order to accommodate to the unstructured, formless reality and to express the sense of life.
simply going on. This novel, like many others of the later period, appears not so much to end as to simply stop. She has also introduced larger casts in order to create an impression of a larger, flexible structure and a rich receding background.

But the point is still debatable if this loosening of structure or form has been accompanied by the creation of truly life-like independent characters. Has the novel of character been resurrected by her? It is true, many of her characters such as Charles Arrowby, Bradley, Ducane, Bruno, Dora and Michael Meade do not fall into the category of 'types' and are not merely dull, insipid abstractions. Some of them are indeed contingent, eccentric persons whose eccentricities are irksome at times but quite believable. If we look around us we will find them displayed in the normal habits of many ordinary people. But this is not applicable to her vague, shadowy, uninhabited characters like Jessica, Lefty Todd or Nigel. Such characters either represent some abstract idea or are stringed to the protagonist. The form has undoubtedly become more realistic but her characterization has not been able to attain the ideal she has revered.

Her novels remain basically centred around ideas or rather a group of ideas. Sometimes the titles of the books are revelatory of the presiding thought which governs the themes e.g. Under the Net, A Fairly Honourable Defeat, An Accidental Man.
The Novels and the Good. The Sacred and Profane Love Machine etc. In the novels written in the later phase the ideas are worked out in a subtle way. They are linked with the inter-relationships and the experiential level of the characters who reflect on them and are influenced by the nature of their reflections. This is, of course, something life-like. But no matter how hard she may attempt to gain aloofness from the philosophical background, her novels demonstrate the density with which it has penetrated into her art. This does not in any case imply that they are mere philosophical disquisitions. They display other characteristics of an exceptional artist who possesses an objective, free mind and a clarity of perception. The authoritative stylistic confidence of her later novels, the finely chiselled language subjected to a severe aesthetic discipline and the fecundity of detail in her descriptions of nature, are all products of a relaxed, confident and a skilled artist.

In the long run the failure to create really free characters is perhaps of creative effort itself. Even though Tolstoy, as John Bayley hints, apprehends his characters within a pattern of the 'fictional' (by which he means a moral schema), there is in his works a spaciousness that accommodates difference or even contradiction. To a great extent, such a spaciousness is lacking in Iris Murdoch's world. Her characters are ultimately implicated in the fantasy-reality dialectic which makes them almost predictable and uniform. Bradley Pearson in The Black Prince, perhaps echoing Murdoch, observes that "Art is a vain
and hollow show, a toy of gross illusion unless it points beyond itself...." (p. 392). The failure to point 'beyond itself' is Murdoch's essential weakness.

But if her characters do not acquire the fullness of being she is ambitious to endow them with the fault is not entirely hers. To some extent, the general mechanism of human nature and the impossibility of complete liberation from forms and 'nets' is responsible for it. Or perhaps in the world of today, where the image of man has been rendered threadbare and the social set up cannot give sustenance, where reality itself is no longer a monolithic structure but has dissolved into myriads of interpretations, real, solid characters are inconceivable.

Therefore, in art as well as in morals, freedom is not easy to achieve. In a fight against the form-making fantasy both the author and the central characters of the novels can only hope for a limited and a partial freedom. In fact, a realistic concept of freedom rests on this qualification.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2. Ibid., p.262.
