CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Iris Murdoch (1919-99) British writer, philosopher, university lecturer and a prolific and highly professional novelist born in Dublin, Ireland and educated at the University of Oxford; Iris Murdoch was one of the most acclaimed writers of the twentieth century very prolific, her literary legacy includes twenty six novels, five books of philosophy, five plays, a volume of poetry, a libretto and numerous essays before developing Alzheimer's disease in the mid-1990's. Her novels have won many prizes: The James Tait Black Memorial prize for The Black Prince, The Whitbread Literary Award for the fiction of The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, and The Booker Prize for The Sea, the Sea. She was also the recipient of many esteemed awards: Dame of the Order of the British Empire, the Royal Society of Literature's Companion of Literature award, and The National Arts club's (New York) Medal of Honor for Literature.

Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin, Ireland, on July 15, 1919, the only child of Anglo-Irish parents. Her father was a bookish civil servant who had served as a cavalry officer during World War I; her mother had trained as an opera singer before marrying. The love of both literature and music instilled in her, as her parents proved to be powerful formative influence and she reportedly began writing at the age of nine. The family moved to London in Iris's childhood and she grew up in the western superb of Hammersmith and Chiswick. In 1940s Murdoch received a first class degree in classics from Oxford, briefly became a member of The Communist party (from which she
resigned in disappointment) worked in Belgian and Austrian refugee camps for the United Nations Rehabilitation and relief program. She became the friend of 'Jean Paul - Sartre', on whom she wrote what was to be her first published work, a critical study entitled – *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953). In 1947 she took up a post graduate studentship at Cambridge, studying philosophy under none other than Ludwig Wittgenstein. The fruits of these philosophical encounters went on to form an important part of her fertile talent as a novelist.

With three previous novels unpublished, Murdoch made her fiction writing debut *Under the Net* (1954), producing romance such as *The Sandcastle* (1957), religious tales such as *The Bell* (1958), and fantasies such as *The Unicorn* (1963), she ranged widely across genres and settings. *A Severed Head* (1961)- later made into both a play and a film takes on Jungian archetypes and Frued’s theories about masculine sexuality, while in *The Red and Green* (1965) Murdoch, in her only foray into historical fiction delved into the 1961 Eastern Rising in Dublin. From the 1970s into the 1990s, international acclaim and recognition coincided with the publication of some of her finest work. This particular period includes an experimental novel of love gone mad *The Black Prince* (1973), her popular highly esteemed *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), and a platonic investigation of morality, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) one of her most acclaimed non fiction writings. Her lost novel, *Jackson’s Dilemma* (1995) was published just as Alzheimer’s began to take its toll. She died in Oxford on February 1999, survived by her husband John Bayley.
Murdoch in her novels argues for the necessity of understanding the human subject both a contingent world and a world of essences. Iris Murdoch was deeply influenced by the ideologies of her time. The existentialist were first to come then she drifted towards the realist and then Plato's philosophy and called herself a Platonist idealist, she hence is a neo-Platonist, existentialist and a post modernist. Murdoch often called herself a 'realist' for she probably means that her writing is inevitably concerned objectives. It also concerns existentialist phenomena that underscores on inner crises in and against that very supposedly objective context. It is so because man now finds himself obliged to deal with the existentialist problems. The human existence in these proportions has become the raw material for Murdoch's realism as her novels deals with both the objective contemporary conditions and the existentialist phenomena.

Iris Murdoch's search for tradition takes her to Platonism which is for her an all time model of comprehensive realism. This realism constitutes the common experience around her and Platonism helps understanding the contemporary human situation around the search light of a cosmic reality. Apart from this, man is rational, amenable to education and capable of attaining self knowledge. He is naturally and systematically linked with different currents of life and thought, the operation of this phenomena is acknowledged by Murdoch.

Iris Murdoch is a major contemporary writer is to suggest something of the state of the post war novel in the period since the appearance of her first published novel *Under The Net* (1954). She has emerged not only as one of
the most productive and influential British novelist but equally important 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 about aesthetic discussion. She has emphasized that she aimed to write as a realist, in an identifiably “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, which are supposedly objective. She has indicated the difficulties and at the same time the potential of contemporary fiction particularly in the British tradition and both her views with her practice are deeply revealing about the novel today.

Murdoch does not mean, however that art should be didactic; good art requires that the artist has a realistic vision as well as compassion whereby she will be able to transcend the limit of personality and reveals the — “minute and absolutely random detail of the world”.² Good art is good for people, Murdoch says in an interview with William Slaymaker, “because it takes them away from themselves”.³ It is a place where — “All sorts of free reflection goes”.⁴ According to Murdoch art is the most educational of human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be seen beyond appearance. Novels that meet this major requirement are those of Dicken, Dostovsky, Jane Austen and Proust.

Iris Murdoch's genius as a novelist lies in the ways in which she explored and individualized that peculiarly 20th century fictional form which
might be called a great work of art. The scope and grandeur of the enterprise consists not only in creating and characterizing the present as if it were the past, but framing the one in terms of the other; and, but insulating a prospect or retrospect to establish a continuum in which the novelist's process can cope with the largest issue and the most diverse scenes and people; can distinguish and contemplate them so as to produce a panorama of social process, of case, type and idea.

All great artists have a theme, an idea of life profoundly felt and founded in some personal and compelling experiences. This theme then finds confirmation and development in new intuition. The development of the great writer is the development of his theme – the theme, therefore, is part of him and has become the cost of his mind and character. True to this assertion, Iris Murdoch has a clear and comprehensive idea of the world, a philosophical doctrine, which constitutes her themes and forms the basis of all the twenty six novels she has written. She regards freedom as the fundamental reality of life.

Iris Murdoch's views on freedom are the metaphor of mechanism, especially the machinery of the human ego with its uncontrollable psychical as well as physical/sexual energy. These mechanisms do not mean that there is no human freedom. Rather, they point out the difficulty of attaining to a state of freedom, and how deceptive that state is?. Murdoch is quite skeptical about the possibility of human freedom, but she is not cynical. There are ways out of the labyrinthine human condition, and love and art are two of the most important. Love can be false, egotistical and sadistic, it can spoil as well as
sponsor freedom. Similarly, bad and shallow art spoils freedom. Nonetheless, love and art hold out the best possibilities for escape from the mechanisms that render human freedom impotent and useless.

Iris Murdoch's first published novel was *Under the net*, written through the consciousness of woman. She used here a first person male narrator, Jake, and displayed her gift for writing about things on the whole. Murdoch believed that it does not matter whether the writer is male or female in which case one would better be male, because a male represents ordinary human beings, unfortunately as things stand at the movement, whereas a woman is always a woman. *Under the Net* simply expresses the novelist's preoccupation with the springs of cunningly contrived illusion. That is why it presents a kind of journey from appearance to reality, a kind of discovery about "reality" which is shown in the course of the novel.

*Under The Net* was followed by *The Flight from the Enchanter* (1955), *The Sandcastle* (1957), and *The Bell* (1958). As one reads through them it becomes quite clear that Murdoch has changed a lot after her first novel, because her basic aim as a literary writer was to write something which could stand up as a work of art. All the above-mentioned three novels are somewhat successful attempts at her realistic fiction. The characters are placed in ordinary social relationships rather than in extreme situations. Here too her existentialist and metaphysical position seems to become intensified, even though the ideas are presented by "image" rather than speculative statement. Murdoch's prolific output continued with *A Severed Head* (1961), *An Unofficial Rose* (1962), *The Unicorn* (1963), *The Italian Girl* (1964), *The
Brotherhood (1985), The Message to the Planet (1989), and The Green Knight (1993), are rich and full and strong as Shakespeare's late comedies. They have people like us, real characters whom Murdoch loves. Like most of Shakespeare's plays they explore darkness as well as light and mingle sublimity with pathos, bitterness with joy and peace and love, splendid intellectual subtlety with the cryptic utterances of wisdom. They have fullness and fertility. They are romances in the most positive sense, and show Murdoch at the very height of her narrative powers. Wonderfully readable and felicitously written they are many faceted novels; they have myth, magic, philosophy, psychology, mythology or the power figure, metaphysics, the struggle between the would be artist and the would be saint, themes of human personality and human freedom and love and death and many more.

Iris Murdoch's obsession, in all probability is not a theological doctrine. It is a humanist vision of reality. Her novels reflect the world of man, a world where something is happening and therefore man is changing, Murdoch's obsession is a pointer to the baffling realities of life. Murdoch poses a question, a predicament which we have to define, and It has a poetic intensity and ambiguity. Her obsession is human, it reflects the humanist's predicament, something vital, something more than a horrified sense of a nightmare reality seems to be at the back of her mind. Obviously it can only be explained within a human frame of reference. Iris Murdoch's observation of human nature shows her human realism. Like Shakespeare, Fielding and Tolstoy, like Malraux, Sholokhov and Sartre, the great humanists in the world literature, Murdoch has thought about and discussed the variety of human nature and its perplexity in her novels.
The novels of iris Murdoch are not philosophical in the sense that Sartre's, for instance, are. That is to say they do not set out a philosophical position, using plot, characters and commentary to outline and illustrate that position. On the other hand any good novel is philosophical in the sense that it is exploratory of human life and human problems. The riddle of human life cannot be solved in a novel but it should certainly be discussed in them. Regarding primarily as a novelist, she also wrote a highly acclaimed philosophical book *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals (1992)* and some less effective plays. However, as a great novelist she brought out the pathos and dignity of human life. Her novels elevate a situation that in real life seems low and degrading, by drawing attention, as Tolstoy did to the nobility which is immanent in the most humble circumstances.

Iris Murdoch has never wanted to be called a 'woman writer', preferring to be accepted as a writer in a man's world. This reflects the desire of women of her generation to be accepted as equal, not different. She considers good art should transcend gender difference – she claims that: "*The novel is about facing up to the truth and living with a more realistic view of oneself and other people.*" This moral concern, together with her joyful inventiveness, makes Murdoch a major British novelist. Her twenty-six novels remarkably imagined characters through whom she examines the complexities of relationship and art.

Murdoch assumes that one of the novel's tasks is to create realistically perceived characters and to transmit moral judgments through their relationships. Her respect for character is based on a moral and philosophical view: that we should give full attention to other individuals, in life as in the
novel. "Attention" is a term taken from Simone Weil, the French philosopher whom she admires. The term attention represents to her the important need to see carefully and to read seriously. One ingredient in Murdoch's work that argues for such attention is her capacity for generous amounts of visual details, especially that which is to be found in her later works. Attention is also involved because the duty of the creative realist is to be aware of the reader, of his/her need to be involved in this most important idea play. It suggests the need to forget one's personality in order to look seriously at other people. "Good art can't help teaching you things, but is shouldn't aim at teaching," asserts Murdoch. Murdoch self-consciously combines realistic of people with half-fantastic plots. She is a fabulator in that she takes especial pleasure in design and invention; a theorist in proclaiming that the novel should return to the often questioned idea of character. She pioneers the unfashionable concept of art as knowledge based on humanistic realism.

Falling in Love is central to Murdoch's plots as it is to many women novelists. She uses falling in love to examine character and morality. She has taken the age-old female limitation life circumscribed to caring for and loving those nearest and turned it into a moral guide. Iris Murdoch is eloquent on erotic love, reintroducing some of the richness of nineteenth century prose when she includes elements of romantic worship and idealisation. She tests her characters by the ways they respond, and finds most of them wanting, incapable of giving themselves honestly, or seeing the other clearly for long.

Murdoch exploits falling in love to discover appalling truths. Loving involves lies, hypocrisy, even secrecy, therefore provides a useful tool for
wider social analysis, the 'stuff' of life essential to this type of novel. Through it she can also analyse the secretive parts of our mind, not entirely subconscious, but entirely fantasy. She offers shrewd studies of obsessiveness, such as our urge to lie (as in Tim in Nuns and Soldiers, who hates his lying, only redeemed by his ability to love). Love is the touchstone by which her characters are judged, as in Shakespeare's comedies. She praises Shakespeare for his 'extra-ordinary ability to combine a marvelous pattern or myth with the expansion of characters as absolutely free persons.

Falling in Love is a convenient dramatic device containing suspense, surprise, and theatrical coincidence, even violence. Murdoch derives it from like many women novelists, from the process of falling in love: it provides a variety of patterns in the slow or speedy meeting of two people, their spiritual or erotic or failed union, followed by life together or misery at forced or involuntary partings.

Murdoch is the only contemporary woman novelist to find inspiration in Plato's The Symposium. There he distinguishes between love or high Eros, and sex or low Eros. Both forms are energising, not mutually excluding. Indeed, Michael in The Bell (1958), admits that his religion and his homosexual passion 'both come from the same source' (TB, p.99). Twenty-five years later the priest in The Philosopher's Pupil (1982) dedicates 'his love that is, his sexuality to God. (PP, p. 156) This priest no longer feels the shame, which destroyed Michael's happiness. Murdoch maintains that the structure of good literary work has to do with erotic mysteries. She makes
poetic use of Plato, showing how sexual love of the beautiful can lead to the Good to aesthetic and moral worth.

Freud has also affected her in that she consider libido central to the understanding of human unconscious motivation. Important to her characters inability to understand their true motivations is Murdoch's use of the ideas of Freud. Murdoch's understanding of passion - both sexual and religious marks her realism as dramatically different from that of the nineteenth - century writers whom she admires. Murdoch's view of the human subject as a system of energy aligns her with Freud's determinist views regarding human consciousness. Her knowledge of Freud is, in fact, very much in evidence in her work and she has spoken of him as a "great and wonderful discoverer". "I love reading Freud", She says, "because one gets all sorts of ideas from him". Some of these ideas surface in her satiric treatment of psychoanalysis in A Severed Head, The Unicorn, and The Black Prince but also in her representation of dreamwork, Oedipal struggles and obsessional neuroses. What she sees to value most in Freud is his doctrine of anamnesis, his ideas concerning ego and id - "The unconscious mind, the deep, dark part of the soul which in Freud's view can be good and can be bad, from which ambiguous powers emerge".

Libido, erotic desire, is used symbolically to illustrate the universality of the id and represents aspects of sexual behaviour which are susceptible to generalisation any mythmaking, unfortunately, the rich naturalistic texture of much of her writing makes it hard for many readers to accept the similarity of patterning in these loves. The characters are so distinct one expects their
reactions to passion to be more varied less symmetrical. *The Black Prince* explores libidinal energy as the basis of artistic, erotic and spiritual experiences. Through her male narrator Murdoch represents the uncomfortable links between art, desire and sadomasochism; our two planes, through meditations on literary activity, through parody of popular Freudianism in the explanations of Marloe.

Tolstoy considered that a novel reflects the religious experience of an age. Certainly Murdoch depicts people misusing or neglecting institutionalised religion, but longing for a more spiritual life. She analyses evil as intelligently as she analyses spirituality. Murdoch points out how evil is produced by obsessive faiths (or fantasies), lack of self knowledge, misplaced good intentions. In her novel's evil takes on deceptive guises of greed, sloth, love of power, self-centredness in our morally messy world.

The Divinity school at the university of Chicago sponsored a conference to investigate and celebrate the theological importance of the writings, especially the novels of Iris Murdoch. The attitude expressed by many of the theologians involved was one of object, almost pathetic, gratitude to Murdoch for taking religion seriously – not many noted artists do so, after all, nor, come to think of it, do all of the theologians themselves. Murdoch taught philosophy at St. Anne's college, Oxford, and her fine philosophical books would by themselves add up to a pretty substantial career. Murdoch reputation rests chiefly on her twenty-six novels, which collectively constitute one of them most impressive bodies of fiction produced in English in this century.
In her novels, Murdoch seems to be reaching a culmination of her work and her novel are concerned with a clarification and focus of its key themes. She seems to be expressing her philosophy more directly and forcefully, and connected it with the whole range of her interests. It may seem inappropriate to say so about so expensive a writer, it would seems that her focus is directed chiefly on a single question, one might even say a single letter, the letter “O”: the presence or absence of that letter can determine the ground of our moral lives.

It can be discovered in a sentence near the end of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Moral*: “Good represents the reality of which God is the dream” or we can lose God but not good. Murdoch is a Platonist, to a degree and with a purity almost unknown in modern thought: it is the Good that She seeks, the idea or form of the Good. All else, including God, is an image or a substitute for this utter Good, and may be useful to us as we move toward perfection; but because our human tendency is to substitute the image for the reality, the guidepost for the destination, even the worship of God may distract us from our proper pursuit.

Murdoch is convinced that each of us pursues The Good according to our understanding of it; evil in her thinking is little more than the natural consequence of misinformation about or a misconception of the Good. As such it gets little attention in her writings: a consideration of the view that people are evil and human life miserable takes up but one part of the shortest chapter in *Metaphysics*, and most of the characters in her novels are
basically decent people who are rather puzzled when they come upon what appears to be evil.

Iris Murdoch is not a religious believer in any conventional sense, but she believes in the sovereignty of Good, which she unhesitatingly spells with an initial capital letter:

*I think there is place . . . . for a sort of contemplation of the Good, not just by dedicated experts by the ordinary people: an attention which is not just the planning of particular good actions but an attempt to look right away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection . . . . this attempt which is a turning of attention away from the particular, may be the thing that helps most when difficulties seem insoluble, and especially when feeling of guilt keep distracting the gaze back towards the self.\(^\text{11}\)*

The sympathetic reader of her books comes soon to recognise and even to welcome: that she is a lover of paradox because she herself is to some extent a person of paradox. She may condemn the consolations of self-pity, resentment and so on in her philosophical writings, but she invites our sympathy for the human beings portrayed in her novels who weakly but all too-understandably take refuge in such consolations.

Every novel of Murdoch in other words, is a fresh attempt at getting it just right, but each time, like a mirage, the ideal moves on and the published
book, however fine, does not quite make it. That would explain, in part at least, why she has felt the compulsion to write so many. Perhaps not the least paradox that Iris Murdoch impels us to face up to is what she calls in *The Black Prince* a 'rough magic' – the fact that literature is an essentially imperfect and indeed imperfectable form of art.

As a versatile novelist and artist Murdoch used various techniques in her fiction. Her novels are replete with extraordinary tools depicting the themes and conditions in the novels. Murdoch had wrote various kind of novels such as realistic and fantasy, formal and contingent, open and closed and she has often found herself occupying a problematic place in relation to them. Many early reviewers and critics thought that Murdoch wrote both, she attempted to write open novels, but was, infect, better at writing closed ones. Her novels are dominated by Gothic element and have been described as 'allegories of Power', in which Murdoch's solipsistic hero is demonized and placed at the center of a grouping of characters she has emotionally, spiritually, or physically in slaved. The novels as *The Flight from the enchanter, The Times of the Angels, The Unicorn, The Italian Girl*, and *The Sea, The Sea* are fine examples of gothic landscapes, enchanter figures, and intricately plotted events. Murdoch has used the Gothic element dexterously. These novels succeed both formally and thematically in revealing the tyranny of pattern over contingency in structure, subject matter, and characterization.

One of the remarkable techniques in Murdoch's fiction is the questing nature of the hero, who has been represented as the first person narrator. The
study of Murdoch's narrator should not involve: "a psychological study of the author rather here is a rhetorical strategy; her novels pose their own questions and do not need to be explained with reference to some supposedly more authoritative text". The fictionalised masculine representation is everywhere apparent in her novel. She is a woman writer who likes to assume male masks. In the seven novels where she employs a dramatised narrator from her earliest novel, Under the Net (1954) to her latest but one, The Philosopher's Pupil (1983), the narrator is invariably male. These seven novels which also include A Severed Head (1961), The Italian Girl (1964), The Black Prince (1973), A Word child (1975) and The Sea, the Sea (1978), cover the thirty odd years' span of Iris Murdoch's career to date; they constitute it will readily be agreed, some of her most distinctive and thoughtful work. The connections between the male hero, articulateness, power and the quest have been conveyed with a considerable degree of deliberate irony on Iris Murdoch's part.

The novels of Iris Murdoch are markedly individual she has declared her allegiance to the large realistic tradition of the nineteenth—century novel, specifically English and Russian. She takes great care to place her carefully described character in a precise social setting, to give them a history and family relationships. At the same-time her intricate and extravagant plots, which combine comedy with elements of grotesque and the macabre, are patterned in a manner wholly artificial. They conform habitually to arbitrarily determined symbolic structures. Likewise her dialogue, though both witty and imaginative, in such as never issued from human mouth; it is as if the reader
is beings made privy to what her characters might say if they gave verbal expression to what they feel, rather than to what they would say in a particular situation.

Admirers have compared her novels to the late plays of Shakespeare, and the comparison holds good to this extent; that she is willing to mix comedy with melodrama and to present the improbable and impossible with assurance and without explanation, in order to allow her to explore matters of great importance such as the nature of good and evil, the temptations of religion and magic and the effects of sexuality on individual and social life. She writes novels in which repressions are brought to the surface and made words. She is not afraid to topple into absurdity, as she does at moments in every novel, her prose losing its precision and becoming exaggerated and bombastic, she is also capable of moments of illuminating insight. In her intellectual rigour and her willingness to write about the most intense emotions in a comic mode, she may be seen as the successor to Ivy Compton-Burnett, whom she also resembles in the deliberate melodrama of her plotting. On the other hand, her exact even meticulous, description of the surface of life, of the appearance of her characters, their houses, clothes, furnishing and meals, would seem to make her a realist even in the manner of Arnold Bennett.

Therefore, we can say that Iris Murdoch is a distinguished novelist of a rare kind. She has contributed, as a 'polemicist' to use her own term to the debate about the English novels relations to its own past and to the new novel abroad. Murdoch’s role has been to create significance despite to bare humanism of philosophy after Nietzsche. It does not mean trying to write
fiction like the Victorians, but dealing with what she finds usable in the older novel to create her own imaginative version of our world.

In this research project, the contributions focus on the nature, sources, and the implications of Murdoch's fictional practice. Yet in exploring some important themes and techniques of Murdoch's novels the project also broach many of the ethical, literary – theoretical, and sociocultural issues that exercises this prolific and polymathic fictionalist over the course of her long career.
Reference


(2) Iris Murdoch, *The Sublime and the Good* Chicago Review, 13, Autumn 1959, p. 86

(3) William Slaymaker, 'An Interview with Iris Murdoch', Paper on Language and literature, 21, Fall, 1985, p.427


(5) From a talk given at Morley College, 20th Oct., 1982; Extracts are published in 'Writer Talking' in More (spring 1983)


(7) William Slaymaker, 'An Interview with Iris Murdoch', Paper on Language and literature 21 Fall, 1985, p.431


(12) In her interview with William K. Rose, ‘Iris Murdoch in formally’, *London Magazine*, 8 June 1968, 9-73. Murdoch admits a preference for the Dickenson or Tolstoyan “open” novel. One whose pattern is casual and uncontrolled and whose characters are contingent, independent and free. Her Gothic novels, however, are more “closed” in structure, more patterned, their characters frequently imprisoned within the author’s metaphysical construct.


(15) Ibid – P.2