Chapter One

Introduction

The aim of the present study is to analyze the moral development that takes place in the lives of the characters in the select novels of Iris Murdoch, a Post-War British writer. The thesis contends that Murdoch as a believer in humanity, has a secular understanding of morality in which human beings are potential for moral growth. However she also insists that morality is not a personal but a social phenomenon and it is essential for an individual to be in harmony with society for survival and happiness. Her individuals are necessarily part of society and those who cut themselves off from society miserably fail.

Literature can be treated as a document in the history of ideas and philosophy, for literary history parallels and reflects intellectual history. According to Wellek and Warren, “literature is thought of as a form of philosophy as ‘ideas’ wrapped in form and it is analysed to yield leading ideas” (110). Philosophy in literature is philosophy consumed by the characters and revealed in their actions. A writer makes his/her own philosophy of life from his/her own apprehension of an ordered universe. Some philosophers undertake to express their thoughts in the form of fiction because the novel has a specialty of its own in the sense that the novelist, “is endowed with greater freedom with a greater scope of talking through his characters” (Myles 2). A great novelist is a thinker and a keen observer of life. He/she interprets life by portraying the real men and women with their sufferings and joys, thoughts and feelings, successes and failures, passions and motives. All these naturally give an ethical, philosophical and moral bias to
his/her novels. Through novels, a writer can paint a realistic picture of the age thus giving information about the life and manners of the time unobtrusively.

Literature provides a unique and valuable contribution to matters of moral concern. Morals are sets of rules that one ought to obey, they also say what is right or wrong. Moral philosophers want to discover how these rules are justified at the logical consequences of moral or ethical beliefs. The formal study of ethics in a serious and analytical sense began with the early Greek and later Romans. Important Greek ethicists like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle developed ethical naturalism. Socrates, one of the first Greek philosophers, encourages both the scholars and the common citizen to turn their attention from the outside world to the condition of humankind. To Socrates, a person must become aware of every fact relevant to his existence, if he wishes to attain self-knowledge. He correlates knowledge with virtue and equates virtue with happiness. He says, “The truly wise man will know what is right, do what is good, and therefore be happy” (qtd. in Sahakian 52).

Through his promotion of philosophy and his denigration of literature, Plato claims repeatedly that his ethical theory is rooted in its concern for and supply of practical wisdom for human living. According to Hall, Plato’s ethical theory “is a techne of detachment from the natural world, a detachment that enables us to be free from anxiety, free from disturbance, free from natural contingency; it is a techne that enables us to master contingency and secure our fragile human lives” (178). For Aristotle, poetry serves its proper function when it works to reinforce the individual’s maintenance of a harmonious relationship to the greater society and to the cosmos. Aristotle remarks:
The function of the poet is not to say what has happened but to say the kind of thing that would happen i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity . . . for this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals . . . . The universal is the kind of speech or action which is consonant with a person of a given kind in accordance with probability or necessity this is what poetry aims at even though it applies individual names. (16)

In dismissing Plato’s ethical theory and subsequently his claims about literature, Aristotle tries to restore poetry to the lofty place. He believes it ought to occupy in the pursuit of wisdom.

The larger function of literature is “to teach morality and to probe philosophical issues” (Guerin 25). A related attitude is that of Matthew Arnold, a Victorian critic, who insists that a great literary work must possess “high seriousness” (164). A writer approaches life, not frivolously but in a mood of high seriousness and absolute sincerity. The work becomes a vehicle of a kind of wisdom, and this necessarily has its proper effect on the responsive reader and herein lies the moral value of the work. Sri Aurobindo explains:

Art is not only technique or form of Beauty not only the discovery or the expression of Beauty- it is a self-expression of Consciousness under the conditions of aesthetic vision and a perfect execution. Or, to put it otherwise, there are not only aesthetic values, but life values, mind values, soul values that enter into Art . . . . Homer makes beauty out of man’s
outer life and action, and stops there. Shakespeare rises one step and reveals to us a life soul and life-forces and life-virtues to which Homer had no access. (22)

Thus art is the rearticulation of the scope of moral inquiry, in which more collaborative conceptions of ethics occur.

Modern Western Philosophy began with the works of great writers like Thomas Hobbes, David Hume and Immanuel Kant. The age of enlightenment saw a questioning of religious and traditional values. Philosophers need to base moral system on justifiable grounds. Kant’s moral system is based on rationality. According to Kant, the will and not reason forms the basis of one’s faculties and of things. He states, “While reason becomes entangled in inevitable antinomies and involves us in doubts, the will is the ally of faith, the source, and, therefore, the natural guardian of our moral and religious beliefs” (qtd. in Thilly 367). Thus he attempts to show how any rational being would agree to universal moral laws. The other great ethical system of the Post-enlightenment era is utilitarianism, proposed by the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham. It aims to give a method of moral judgment based on experience rather than dogma. The principle of utility is based on happiness and is seen as being a scientific approach to morality.

Critical philosophers of the nineteenth century were less certain that universal moral values could be upheld. For Marx, morality and ethics are part of bourgeois ideology. They are sets of ideas that ignored the exploitative economic arrangements of society and contributed to false consciousness. Nietzsche looks at the origin of morality. For him, philosophy, “is a confession, a sort of involuntary and unconscious auto-
biography” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 57). Nietzsche insists that each individual needs to create their own moral system. The point of morality is to enable each individual to sublimate and control their passions, in order to emphasize the creativity inherent in their being. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche states, any moral code is to be condemned which does not promote, “the maximum potentiality of the power and splendor of the human species” (6).

In the twentieth century, there has been growing pessimism about the possibility of a universal moral system. This century presents a rich variety of approaches to central questions about the nature of ethics. It also has seen the development of a number of new philosophical schools including Logical Positivism, Analytic Philosophy, and Existentialism. Logical Positivism or Logical Empiricism is a philosophical movement that arose in Vienna in the 1920s and is characterized by the view that scientific knowledge is the only kind of factual knowledge and all traditional metaphysical doctrines are to be rejected as meaningless. Logical Positivism was brilliantly introduced into England by A.J. Ayer in his *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936). Bertrand Russell, one of the exponents of Logical Positivism believes, “Philosophy should keep in close touch with empirical science and that philosophical theories should be built on a scientific foundation” (qtd. in Copleston 4). The movement dispersed in the late 1930’s because of political upheaval. Logical Positivism is essential to the development of early Analytic Philosophy. Analytic Philosophy or Linguistic Analysis or Ordinary-language Philosophy is a twentieth century philosophical movement inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein. It is marked by close attention paid to the way words are used in order to
clarify concepts and to eliminate confusions arising from mystifying preconceptions about language.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, a number of philosophers and writers had explored existentialist ideas. It “is based on the doctrine that man is alone in a meaningless and indifferent world and he is completely free to choose his actions and is responsible for his own destiny” (Munir 88). His actions determine his nature rather than life by human nature. Following the Second World War, existentialism became a well-known and significant philosophical and cultural movement mainly through the public prominence of two French writers, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Sartre published a philosophical statement *Being and Nothingness* in 1943. A major theme throughout his writings is freedom and responsibility. Like Sartre, Camus has dealt with existential themes in his works like *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus has rejected the existentialist label and considered his works to be concerned with facing the absurd. Thus the major emphasis of existentialism is founded on its doctrine of freedom.

The twentieth century has been a variegated age of ups and downs and of increasing complexity due to fast changing human values. The entire European society underwent a tremendous upheaval in the previous age due to certain socio-economic and religious transformations. Supplementing these were the two world wars which resulted in a new quest for values and identity. The modern man faced a phase of utter disillusionment in which religious and moral values almost ceased to exist and man, the sensitive and intellectual being, lived in a state of void, confusion and absurdity.
The twentieth century novelists made a medley of experiments to come as close to reality as possible. The Post Second World War English novel is peculiarly different in mood and tone. The novelists of this era discard the heritage of modernism and openly and vociferously denounce the experimental novel. William Cooper says, “We meant to write a different kind of novel from that of the thirties and we saw that the thirties novel, the Experimental novel had got to be brushed out of the way before we could get a proper hearing” (14). The novelists of the fifties, popularly known as ‘The Angries’ reached back to the nineteenth century and eighteenth century sources through Bennett, Dickens and George Eliot to Fielding and Sterne and sought to reinstate the social novel.

One notable event of the Post-War period has been the increasing attention given to the novel. The Post-War writers are undoubtedly influenced by a changed social climate, which bred a new aesthetic climate. The moral urgencies of Post-War English culture seem to generate use and value for the novel. The writers of this period are compelled to supply the spiritual absences in a democratically conceived but largely materialist welfare ethos. Most writers are concerned about exploring the gap between the increasing weight of expectation built on to this interpersonal sphere and the irrecoverable loss of those traditional obligations which in the past had ensured some measure of stability and predictability in such human relations. Characters in the novels of Murdoch and Fowles are depicted as heroic in their struggle to renegotiate familial expectations, marital ties and social responsibilities. Their struggle also raises new and often threatening questions about personal responsibility and existential meaning.

Much of the Post Second World War and the Post-modernist fiction has taken its indication from William Golding’s doctrine of viewing man as a creature who exists in a
world of continuous struggle between good and evil and who finally emerges victorious through his good sense and rational mind. The novels of Graham Greene, Golding and Murdoch are equally concerned about the perpetual struggle between good and evil as they are coexistent in the universe. The most recent English novels are steeped in allegorical themes hovering, nearer to religion. Seeking solace and comfort in the folds of religion is a prominent Post- modernist novelistic design. For this trend, the credit ought to be granted to Orwell, Golding and Greene. Some significant twentieth century novelists who have adapted the religious utopian novel tradition are Lawrence Durrell, Colin Wilson, Anthony Powell, Angus Wilson, Iris Murdoch and Evelyn Waugh.

Iris Murdoch is one among those writers who wished to retrieve the sacred or to express the profane. She as a philosopher began her career as a novelist in an attempt to put into practice her theories for the purpose of literature. As a philosopher, she may be classified as a moral-philosopher. Sanders comments, “Murdoch underpinned her novels with arguments derived from a scrupulous investigation of the problems posed by moral philosophy” (597). Murdoch’s works reflect the battles and development of both novel writing and social attitudes to moral issues of the decades since the Second World War. Her broader moral concerns make her work timeless. For Murdoch, the greatest novelists of the nineteenth century, like Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, George Eliot and Dickens, are the moralists of a structured, hierarchical, religious world that has vanished. On the contrary, Post-War British society is known for its disillusionment and absurdity. Affected by the spiritual deterioration in Post-War society, Murdoch and other writers undertake a search for moral values through their literary renderings. In the words of Carr, “The madness of the holocaust, the total breakdown of human society in Europe after the war hurt her
[Murdoch] into moral philosophy” (51). To Murdoch, the collapse of Christian religion is the most important feature of modern Western European history. She fills the void by moral philosophy as a search for the good.

Literature has a powerful and unique role to play in understanding life’s deepest ethical problems. It also has an important but indirect role in moral education by helping readers to develop and practice the central ethical skill of empathizing with other people’s lives and perspectives. Moral philosophy is the area of philosophy concerned with theories of ethics, with how one ought to live one’s life. Eskin comments, both moral philosophy and literature are, “fundamentally concerned with the variegated domain of what could be called . . . the human person in all of its relations, facets and intricacies” (585). Thus the moral philosophers focus upon the nature of the human good and the consequent relationships between virtue and knowledge and between virtue and pleasure.

It is undeniable that Murdoch’s philosophy and her literary works are intrinsically intertwined. Through illustrating the idea of good in the behaviour of characters in her novels, she enables the readers to gain deeper understanding of her philosophy. In an interview with Bryan Magee, Murdoch explicitly reveals her understanding of literature and philosophy. In her words:

Philosophy aims to clarify and to explain, it states and attempts to solve very difficult highly technical problems and the writing must be subservient to this aim . . . . Literature interests us on different levels in different fashions. It is full of tricks and magic and deliberate
mystification . . .  A philosopher must try to explain exactly what he means and avoid rhetoric and idle decoration. Of course this need not exclude wit and occasional interludes; but when the philosopher is as it were in the front line in relation to his problem I think he speaks with a certain cold clear recognizable voice. (qtd. in Magee 264-65)

In a sense, Murdoch is able to give life to her philosophy through literature, changing the common perspective that philosophy is stiff and grimly professionalized.

Murdoch asserts that novels have “become the most important form of moral discourse in a secular society . . . a moral philosophy must be inhabited and the novels are its practical illustration” (qtd. in Rowe 4). Murdoch claims, if a novel has to convey meaning, and moral meaning in particular the characters must be rich, realistic and memorable. The dark and incomprehensible nature of the human mind must be depicted through characters. In order to make moral progress, it is necessary to harden oneself against any embellishment of reality. Her interest in human relationships can be seen in the light of her moral philosophy. The concepts of internal struggle as a moral activity of freedom and of love all share one important pre-requisite, which is attention - attention to the surrounding world and particularly attention to other people.

Philosophical themes are often present in Murdoch’s novels in one way or another, and not infrequently surface in the form of philosophical and ethical discussions between a novel’s characters. In the words of Eriksen, “many of Murdoch’s novels treat the relationship between appearance and reality, and religion and morality” (41). One of the common philosophical themes prevalent in her novels is the search for goodness and
love in a godless world. At the same time, it is not fair to say that her novels are purely philosophical. They are not primarily about ideas, but about the lives of everyday people. The characters’ dilemmas and life stories sometimes force philosophical themes to the surface, but the most important aspect of her novels never ceases to be the complexity of human relations which she draws out in her works.

Murdoch’s philosophical works are referred to in order to illustrate how she uses the ingenuity and intricacy of her plots to reinforce the subtlety and anxiety of the human response to such problems as the nature of reality and of good and evil. Although Plato and Murdoch are centuries apart in time, Murdoch’s idea of the good has been strongly influenced by Plato. She returns to the basics of philosophy by looking at the idea of good itself. As a moral-philosopher, her works reflect her idea about what constitutes the good and what goes against it.

Although Murdoch is a philosophical writer, she is concerned with social morality and her views do not appear as abstract doctrines in her novels but are part of the action and characterization of her works. Her novels, a blend of narrative and moral analysis, are concerned with morals and ethics set in a social milieu. Her approach is intellectual, but this does not curtail a well developed social sense as exhibited in her characterizations. She is concerned with ethical or moral problems confronting man in the world as it exists rather than with the solipsistic man created by existentialists like Sartre. Murdoch’s characters do not avoid or deny the contingent quality of the world. They do acknowledge a prevailing code of ethics which is affected by their behaviour rather than the other way around. It is the combination of theory and social interaction that makes her fiction significant in the development of mid-century English literature.
According to Wellek and Warren, “the most obvious cause of a work of art is its creator, the author, and hence an explanation in terms of the personality and the life of the writer has been one of the oldest and best-established methods of literary study” (75). Hence a biographical study of Murdoch becomes essential for understanding her works. Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin on 15 July 1919, of Anglo-Irish parents. Her father was a bookish, intellectual man. From her father, Murdoch inherited her intellectual ability. Her mother was a cultured woman trained as an opera singer. Murdoch admitted to have inherited her singing and love for music from her mother. When Murdoch was a year old, the family left Ireland and moved to London where her father joined the civil service. About growing up in London, Murdoch comments, “I feel as I grow older that we were wanderers, and I’ve only recently realized that I’m a kind of exile, a displaced person. I identify with exiles” (qtd. in Conradi 10).

Murdoch received her early education at Froebel Educational Institute in London and in Badminton school at Briston. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree with first-class honours in the classical Greats from Oxford University in England. From 1942 to 1944, she worked as temporary war time Civil servant in the Treasury. However, she felt the need to do some social work to help those who had been displaced and disorientated in the conflict, so she went to work for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Her work for UNRRA brought Murdoch into contact with the desperate plight of displaced persons seeking to be rehomed after the war. These experiences also influenced her wish to protect and revere the uniqueness of every individual, both in her life and in her philosophy. After the war, she returned to Oxford and worked in St. Anne’s College as a tutor and fellow for fifteen years. From 1963-1967 she lectured at
the Royal college of art. She had suffered from Alzheimer’s disease since the mid-1990’s and died at a nursing home with her husband John Bayley by her side on February 8, 1999, in Oxford, England.

Murdoch’s interest in stories began in childhood with Lewis Carroll’s ‘Alice Books,’ with Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* and with R. C. Stevenson’s *Treasure Island.* These books fired her imagination and provided her with the excitement and the magic necessary for stimulating her creative faculties. Murdoch is proud that “her father encouraged her to read and to read widely, both children’s books and those for grown-ups” (qtd. in Spear 3). This proves to be an excellent preparation for her later creative and academic endeavours.

Murdoch has always been an avid reader of novels and other literature, both European and Classical. She has read and re-read her favourite Victorians like Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Henry James whose interest in patterns have influenced her own novels. Murdoch is famed for her series of novels that combine rich characterization and compelling plotlines. She has dealt in her works with everyday moral issues, the question of good and bad, and explored the function of myth in the process of making sense in one’s life. Although she writes primarily in a realistic manner on occasion Murdoch introduces ambiguity into her works through symbolism, by mixing elements from different genres, and by subtly manipulating the narrative structure.

Murdoch faithfully echoes the novelists she likes - Jane Austen, George Eliot and Charles Dickens. Her novels remain the most plausible example of continuity with the relative values of the nineteenth century. Like Dickens’s novels, Murdoch’s novels give
detailed descriptions of the characters and the places. The past histories of the characters are intended to make the readers fix them in set patterns. She has synthesized moral seriousness and spirit of fun in a way usually the Victorians could not do. Commenting on Murdoch’s writing, Punja says, Murdoch “reminds us of the world of Meredith” (177).

More than any other novelists of her generation Murdoch tries to isolate, approach and explore problems concerning art, truth, life and reality and also to reflect these in her fictional works. She believes that the main aim of the novel is to depict the complexity of human personality engaged in a living relationship with a recognizable social reality. She is a writer with a powerful sense of the difficulties that man face in his journey towards reality. She states, “Art represents a sort of paradox in human communication. In order to tell the truth, especially about anything complicated we need a conceptual apparatus which partly has the effect of concealing what it attempts to reveal” (“Existentialists” 169).

Murdoch is most widely known for her varied and dazzling twenty six novels. She has made her debut as novelist with Under the Net (1954), which is aesthetically Murdoch’s most satisfying novel. It delineates a young man’s discovery of his true vocation as a creative writer at the backdrop of the rootless bohemianism of London intellectual life. It enables the writer to exploit a marked gift for bizarre comedy. Murdoch’s The Flight from the Enchanter (1956) is the most difficult and the most puzzling of the early novels. Even though it deals with significant social, political and philosophical concepts, it often appears to be rather remote from real life. The theme is social and concerns the proper and improper uses of power, personal and public, playing comic and bitter games with various forms of enslavement and emancipation, sexual,

Murdoch’s fourth novel *The Bell* (1958) is one of her most successful novels. It represents the right balance of philosophical thought, symbolism and realistic characterization. Apart from these, the symbol of the bell also provides a unifying structure to the novel. *A Severed Head* (1961), is a tangled tale of love, adultery, deception, self-deception and jealously. Murdoch’s *An Unofficial Rose* (1962) is aimed at presenting an image of life. This novel is concerned with the relationships between freedom and virtue and also between beauty and truth. Her seventh novel, *The Unicorn* (1963) is unique not just because of its theme, but in the mode and the manner in which it is presented. It is a closed novel in the Gothic tradition, wherein the tyranny of form over freedom and contingency is exhibited in its most pristine manner, both structurally and thematically. Of all Murdoch’s novels, *The Italian Girl* (1964) is a unique work having chapter headings, albeit ironic epigraphs to draw attention to various aspects of the action.

In the next novel *The Red and the Green* (1965), Murdoch draws her subject from history and sets the story on the eve of the Easter Rebellion in Dublin, during the period of World War I. In *The Time of the Angels* (1966), Murdoch deals with the theme of the problem of ethical behaviour as it is influenced by modern and philosophical ideas. It also has all the qualities of a Gothic novel. *The Nice and the Good* (1968), marks a new direction in Murdoch’s career as a novelist. There is a new authoritative, stylistic confidence and a mature philosophical viewpoint in it. *The Bruno’s Dream* (1969) seems
to illustrate Murdoch’s thesis that good is supreme over other concepts. In this novel, she deals for the first time with the subject of death and its relationship with love.

*A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1940) is deeply concerned with the problems of good and evil. In *An Accidental Man* (1971), Murdoch’s view of evil is very clearly demonstrated. The novel *The Black Prince* (1973) is a remarkable intellectual thriller with a superbly involuted plot, and a meditation on the nature of art, of love and of the power of human relationships. *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1944) is one of Murdoch’s most energetically muddled novels. The novel is concerned with love within marriage and love outside the marriage bond. The novels *A World Child* (1975) and *Henry and Cato* (1976) make the protagonist understand more clearly the limits of freedom and recognize the meaning of love.

From *The Sea, The Sea* (1948) to *The Message to the Planet* (1989), Murdoch appears to have moved on a different plane of thought. These novels are deeply philosophical, deeply religious, full of mysticism and imbued with the mystery of personality to a much greater extent than earlier novels. In *The Sea, The Sea*, Murdoch writes about the power of love and loss. *Nuns and Soldiers* (1980) is a stylish and moving novel. In *The Philosopher’s Pupil* (1983) a man’s life is changed by his vision of a flying saucer. *The Good Apprentice* (1985) is an allegory of the battle between good and evil. *The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987) and *The Message to the Planet* (1989) are not essentially about God but they are concerned with morality, with religion, with the concept of Goodness, with truth and with characters who have mystical powers which affect most of the other people with whom they come into contact. Murdoch’s last novel,
*Jackson’s Dilemma* (1995) is a psychologically rich tale of romances thwarted and revived.

These novels of Murdoch have been hailed as a major contribution to English literature of the twentieth century. They are meticulously plotted with sharp characterization and serious themes. They are written under the acknowledged influence of the great nineteenth century novelists like, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Henry James and constitute a sustained meditation upon dense and complex configurations of chaos and contingency, goodness and evil, power, fantasy, enhancement, truth and love.

Murdoch’s novels are lively, exciting and ingenious. They are rich in what might be seen as incidental information about philosophy, drama, art, the classics, old legend and other matters. Her novels usually portray complicated and sophisticated sexual relations among the professional classes. Her portrayal of twentieth century middle class and intelligentsia reveal her acute observation as well as her inventive power. Most of Murdoch’s fiction focuses on ethical and moral topics, partly due to her philosophical training. At the same time she is careful to convey her message through a traditional kind of romance. She has based the plots of many of her novels on a re-working of myth and on intertextuality.

The philosophical works of Murdoch occupy a distinctive place in the field of contemporary moral inquiry. Her main claim is that an adequate understanding of the moral self requires a connection between ethics and aesthetics. The philosophical thought of Murdoch props that no ethical tradition has ever adequately fashioned a picture of
human beings as they truly are. In the course of her career, she wants to illustrate this idea through her works in philosophy and literature. In her works, she textures the personal vision of man’s morality. Her philosophical works begin with *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953) which is a study of the French philosopher, Sartre. In this book, she accepts Sartre the philosopher and Sartre the novelist as one, and thus reveals her own interest in using the novel as a way of developing philosophical ideas. Her main disagreement with him lies in his treatment of human relationships. She explains, “It is on the lonely awareness of the individual and not on the individual’s integration with his society that his attention centres” (*Sartre* 62). The beginning of her future prominent philosophical ideas are traced in this book.

Contingency and myth play an important role in Murdoch’s philosophical vision of the world as well as in her novels. In 1970, Murdoch collected her philosophical papers under the title *The Sovereignty of Good*. She recounts the dilemma between the saint and the artist. The saint is unconsciously good and silent and for him it is action that counts. The artist is consciously, aesthetically creating his life. It is not only a commentary but it contains her own original ideas. Murdoch opposes the modern image of man who is naturally selfish, instead she calls for a new kind of man, a humble man. The next piece *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* is based on the 1976 Romanes Lecture. In this work, she vigorously explicates Plato’s views on the subject, his objections to art, and finally awards a victory to art.

Along with these books on philosophy, Murdoch has written numerous philosophical treatises. As a philosopher, she believes in the importance of both art and abstraction. Besides her prolific flow of novels, she continues to publish essays dealing
with ethical, political and aesthetic theory. “Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals” (1992) is a collection of Murdoch’s Gifford lectures on art, religion, morality and consciousness. In “Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature” (1997), she helps to create a new climate of thought in the Post-War years, by bringing existentialism to British consciousness, and subjecting it to rigorous criticism. “Against Dryness” and “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited” deal with her views and criticism of the novel. She speaks about contingency as a central idea and expects the novels to return to the nineteenth century realism.

Murdoch is a novelist who takes philosophy in her stride and all her novels contain some degree of philosophical discussion and refer to philosophers of both the past and present by name. Her interest in philosophy has been maintained throughout her career. The names and ideas of philosophers, particularly of Sartre and Plato, frequently crop up in her novels. Many of her characters indulge in philosophical discussions. She remarks:

I am a teacher of philosophy and I am trained as a philosopher and I ‘do’ philosophy and I teach philosophy, but philosophy is fantastically difficult and I think those who attempt to write. It would probably agree that there are very few moments when they rise to the level of real philosophy. (qtd. in Spear 8)

Murdoch’s novels, as her philosophy, reveal her perennial preoccupation with goodness and what makes people good and evil, as well as exploring the nature of religion in a secular world. Seeking Murdoch’s philosophy in her novels is a perilous
activity, because she uses her novels to question and explore some of the ideas in her philosophy. Consequently the vision of life found in her novels is from a different perspective from that of her philosophy. Mac Intyre puts it, Murdoch’s novels “are philosophy, but they are philosophy which casts doubt on all philosophy, including her own” (69). Her novels at best provide a tangential exploration of her philosophical ideas and although at times they help to provide examples of how Murdoch envisages the good featuring in the reality of individual lives, they also present a very different, even conflicting, picture to that of her philosophy.

Philosophical and literary discourses are inseparable in Murdoch’s writing as they manifest the principle of going beyond the self. Her characters are not understandable without the knowledge of her philosophy. Her use of philosophy often gives her novels a fragmented style. Her ability to merge philosophy and fiction, however leads to a profound reading experience.

Murdoch has some poetic gift too. She has published a number of poems in Magazines. She published a volume entitled A Year of Birds in 1978. Apart from novels, philosophical works and poems, Murdoch also published plays. The two original plays The Servants and the Snow (1973) and Three Arrows (1973) are substantial and deal with themes like the nature of love and truth and the problems of power. The Servants and the Snow is about love and revenge, about mercy or the lack of mercy, about responsibility and about the power of the past and tradition. The Three Arrows is set in medieval Japan. This play is an investigation into political power and examines the precarious balance achieved between warring factions which wish to become supreme. It also highlights the
problems of loyalty and treachery in a state governed by the uncontrolled emotions of individual power politics.

Murdoch’s novels are by turns intense and bizarre. They are filled with dark humour and unpredictable plot twists, undercutting the civilized surface of the usually upper class milieu in which her characters are observed. Each novel presents a new milieu with new problems in depicting progress towards human consciousness and change. Chakoo avers, “Nearly all her novels by pass the complexity of the world of ordinary human relations which is the world of ordinary moral and social values” (77). The foreground of her novels is concerned with profoundly philosophical themes such as freedom, contingency, magic and love. In her fictional and philosophical work, Murdoch is regarded as a great supporter of the perspective of the ordinary human being. Her novels show her characters in different lights and in various degrees of moral goodness.

Murdoch’s characters are life-like in the sense that they are difficult to understand. They are hardly ever stereotypes, although they can seem to be so at a certain level. Monaski- Punekar explains:

Murdoch’s characters and their actions are twisted, but the twist results not from eccentric invention on Murdoch’s part but rather through the gradual mutation of perfectly logical patterns of thought. Their eccentricity is thus in no sense gratuitous, an implausible trope designed merely to entertain the reader. Rather it is the logical, and ludicrous, outcome of relentless and over-zealous self-analysis. (1)
Murdoch’s characters though they tend to be types, are not mouth pieces for ideas as in philosophic dialogues. They are persons in situations. Gordon points out, “They may not transcend their situations, but the situations are fully and finely detailed, rich in ironies, and the characters as a result are not to be pigeonholed” (573). Their claim on one’s imagination is not based on some wisdom they represent or attain but on their presence in an unfolding action, on one’s interest in their story. The uncommon, unusual and queer eccentricities of her characters are presented in a way so as to substantiate her views that human beings are victims of the magnetic forces of their psyche.

Murdoch stands for continuity and for belonging, for the circumstantial life crowded with personal relationships and personal things. According to Sage, “her plots are those of a moralist and a match-maker” (72). Many of her novels have archetypal plots. They provide to the readers a sophisticated and compassionate journey through a number of lives, tightly intertwined emotionally and sexually. The complexities of Murdoch’s plots usually spring from her ingenious device of surrounding the central action of discovery with a host of variations, comic or serious, in which other characters learn or fail to learn the same lesson. As she matures as a writer, she becomes more and more involved in the intricacies of the plot and though subtleties of the human mind and the details of life engage her, one can feel that her tightly wound plots relentlessly impose a pattern on the characters she creates.

Murdoch is regarded as a great storyteller. Her works show a distinct and a characteristic style peculiarly her own. The style of writing is elegant and the compositions of her novels are fine meshes of long and short storylines woven together in intricate patterns. One aspect of this style is her success in contriving over wrought well -
plotted novels, which contradicts her preference for free and independent characters. She reduces her people to predetermined and predictable roles and submerges them to weighty and unrealizable philosophical concepts and mythic literary allusions. She labels her work as “metaphysical fantasy” (qtd. in Bajaj 17). Her knowledge in many areas is large, but her worldview can sometimes come across as rather narrow. She writes about what she knows, and this is a characteristic of her novels.

Murdoch, a serious thinker and artist, shows continuous development. She employs various techniques in her novels. Her technical brilliance seeks attention in the brilliant way she makes use of the authorial voice and the omniscient viewpoint. When she uses omniscient narration a sense of sympathy, pity and deep understanding flow from the authorial source in a way resembling the nineteenth century style. The objectivity with which she creates and projects the psychological dilemma of her characters is a unique enrichment to the narrative mode for presenting consciousness in fiction.

Murdoch’s technical accomplishments are extraordinary, and through various technical devices she tries to explore different areas of human experience. Symbolism plays an important role in the novels of Murdoch. In an interview with Rose, Murdoch says, she “is not a symbolic writer in any allegorical or incomplete sense . . . I would want them to come in a completely natural way . . . through the characters” (qtd. in Rose 66). In a very subtle manner she contrives to spin and turn the action by the precise casual development her imagination always devises. The result is a greater eloquence, a more consistent success in building characters, a more subtle use of myth and an impressive
growth in the imagery which bind together the substance of the novels. Reflecting on Murdoch’s desire to reach all possible readers, Bayley comments:

She wanted through her novels to reach all possible readers, in different way and by different means by the excitement of her story, its pace and its comedy, through its ideas and its philosophical implications, through the numinous atmosphere of her own original and created world - the world she must have glimpsed as she considered and planned her first steps in the act of fiction. (26)

Thus her artistic development is marked by a greater self-effacement from the surface of the novels.

Murdoch has discussed various themes in her novels like the theme of power, the inability of language to express reality, the theme of responsibility and freedom and the meaning of love. The theme of fantasy versus imagination is a recurrent one in her non-fiction and is a significant index to an understanding of her fiction. At a deeper level there are real people suffering from real human emotions and the apparent superficiality of the plot is subverted by what turns out to be an imaginative presentation of reality. She sees herself as a realistic writer and as one who wants to write about life, as life is very terrible and very funny. Her ideal is to submit the characters to “the test of reality and contingency, to make them act as real people act, to avoid making them unnaturally heroic or saintly, to prevent them being agents of the author’s fantasy or with fulfillment” (Verma 124).
Moral themes in Murdoch’s novels have been analyzed elaborately. Her philosophical sophistication and her attention to moral problems are some of her most distinctive features. She refrains from preaching, but often presents moral and philosophical theories only to subject them to the strain which is inevitable in their practical application. Her moral thoughtfulness and philosophical training give her novels a compelling sense of a broad and inclusive tolerance, says Murdoch, backed by “an assertion of old-fashioned values, of the reality of virtue” (qtd. in Brans 44). However, she combines these qualities with an unembarrassed use of suspense and other narrative techniques which makes her novels compulsively readable.

Many of her novels include supernatural aspects. She also frequently uses gothic imagery such as sinister buildings, overgrown landscapes and experiences of being locked up, of rituals, paranormal visions, scary noises and thunder storms. Her achievement is that she has successfully used the gothic form to tell stories of the present times. She does not use the gothic technique to depict something unusual, but uses it to show the ever present struggle of good and evil. Her gothic novels make evil look powerful but ultimately it gets defeated at the hands of the humble good. By doing so, Murdoch shows her faith in the moral strength of the good.

Murdoch’s novels remain basically centred around ideas or rather a group of ideas. The ideas are worked out in a subtle way. They are linked with the interrelationships and the experiential level of the characters who reflect on them and are influenced by the nature of their reflections. Her novels demonstrate the density with which philosophical background has penetrated into her art. They display characteristics of an exceptional artist who possesses an objective, free mind and a clarity of perception.
The authoritative stylistic confidence of her novels, the chiseled language and the
fecundity of detail in her descriptions of nature are all products of a relaxed, confident
and a skilled artist.

Murdoch writes spell-binding stories in beautiful prose. She knows how to master
paragraphs and sentences and at her best achieves an extraordinary, luminous, lyrical
accuracy. She has an intensely visual imagination and can use it to evoke things, people,
the activity of thinking, feeling and places. Her empirical curiosity and moral energy
seem endless. She can evoke the inner world, the world of fantasies, projections and
demonic illusions too. According to Murdoch, morals must have their starting point in the
concrete and in contextual reality. It is life as it is experienced that provides the
framework for being moral.

A serious appraisal of Murdoch’s canon began with A.S. Byatt’s Degrees of
Freedom. She highlights Murdoch’s preoccupation with freedom in both personal
relationships and in social context through the struggles of her characters to achieve it. In
Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit, Elizabeth Dipple attempts to show the depth of
Murdoch’s massive achievement and throws new light on the novelist’s fictional art
technique. Peter Conradi’s The Saint and the Artist is a celebratory study whose aim is to
try to illuminate her best work. The title of the book points towards the recurrent
character types which form the centre of meaning in Murdoch’s novels.

Hilda Spear in her book Iris Murdoch points out the way Murdoch’s novels tend
towards dramatic. Angela Hague’s Iris Murdoch’s Comic Vision looks at the comic
dimension and ironic tone of Iris Murdoch’s works and argues that these elements are
central for the understanding of her novels as is her use of mythic patterns and philosophical ideas. Maria Antonaccio’s *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* deals with the relation between human identity, ideas of the good and the effect of the modern critique of religion on moral thought. Tammy Grimshaw’s *Sexuality, Gender, and Power in Iris Murdoch’s Fiction* explores the representation of power dynamics in the portrayal of homosexuality and takes a detailed look at the illustration of power-knowledge. *Construction of Good and Evil in Iris Murdoch’s Discourse* by Margaret L. Pachuau seeks to delve into the Post-War European mind and the dilemma between good and evil. Nirmal Datta’s *Iris Murdoch: Freedom and Form* is a study of moral and psychological freedom in the context of some important and representative novels of Iris Murdoch.

The present study “Philosophical and Ethical Explorations in Iris Murdoch’s novels” is an attempt to analyze Murdoch’s vision of moral order in the lives of the individuals. The study is based on the aspects of self discerned through the unselfing process made dissolute in a compromise with reality of life. It also addresses the question concerning the relationship between the values, goodness and beauty and consequently between aesthetics and ethics. It discusses the various ways in which ethical and aesthetic themes intersect in the novels of Murdoch. It also reconceptualizes the possibilities of realism through her interrogation of the relationship between life and art. For the purpose of this study, Murdoch’s fiction has been chosen rather than her philosophy. The fiction is clearly informed by the philosophy because it is in the fictional mode that she tests out and develops her ideas. Murdoch describes fiction as a “hall of reflection, provides the testing ground for her philosophical ideas” (qtd. in Datta 2). As the study is intended to
explore the philosophical and moral issues, no separate chapter is structured to highlight the literary techniques employed by the author in her novels. But the recurrent literary devices employed by her such as, symbolism, allusions and images are examined throughout the study to unveil the philosophical truth.

Murdoch’s novels, Under the Net, The Flight from the Enchanter, The Bell, A Severed Head, An Unofficial Rose, The Unicorn, The Nice and the Good, A Fairly Honourable Defeat and The Black Prince, are analysed to demonstrate a range of different angles from which Murdoch tackles her concerns about philosophical and ethical issues. She links good and the interconnected concept of truth with the idea of attention to the world and with the effort to unself oneself. All these ideas that create Murdoch’s philosophical vision become essential for the understanding of her novels where they appear in various ways, mainly in connection with the personalities of the characters and their development. Her most prominent thoughts can be traced in her novels and in her characters. James Wood calls her philosophy, “a pudding of Plato, Kant and Weil” (176). Murdoch is also interested in Sartre from the beginning and Sartre’s ideas significantly strengthen her central philosophical concepts.

Moral philosophical approach is a traditional approach that attempts to interpret literature “within a context of the philosophical thought of a period or group” (Guerin 25). Since this approach insists on stating what is taught through the text, an attempt has been made to explore the philosophical issues and moral teachings in Murdoch’s novels.

Through critical analysis and close textual reading the study proposes to examine Murdoch’s quest for freedom, moral order and philosophical and psychological
truth which are essential for perfection as presented in the select novels. References are made to her philosophical works. The thesis comprises of five chapters: Introduction, Ordinary Language Man Vs. Totalitarian Man, Coexistence at Crossroads, From Illusion to Reality and Summation.

The second chapter, “Ordinary Language Man Vs. Totalitarian Man” deals with Murdoch’s presentation of the two types of men. The first category relies on conventions and the second category consists of neurotic figures. Her conventional characters are good characters who trust in a gospel of love and sacrifice and are seldom rewarded for their goodness. They are self-sacrificing and dedicate their energy to the happiness of others. As they surrender themselves to conventions, they fail to recognize reality. Most of the Murdochian characters belong to the group of neurosis. It refers to the human tendency to construct self-absorbed myths or fantasies that increase the self’s importance and obscure the reality of others. These characters are self-centered and self-interested persons. Murdoch considers both these images of the human self to be insufficient. According to her, convention and neurosis are enemies of love. The individual, the self and the inner life are all concepts which are essential to Murdoch’s philosophy. She views that the most difficult and important part of a man’s life is the relationship between himself and others. Attention plays a significant role in building up relationships.

The third chapter, “Coexistence at Crossroads” depicts the decline of morality in the modern society. Murdoch believes that the disorder and confusion exist in the present materialistic and existential world can be remedied only by supplying a moral outlook and vision. In the present scientific age, dogmas, images and percepts of religion have lost much of their influence. Murdoch, in her novels, tries to explain the direct or indirect
impact of these things in the lives of human beings. She is greatly interested in the moral side of life. Her characters indulge themselves in adultery, power-mongering, homosexuality, incest, suicide and abortion. These erotic and sexual entanglements hinder the spiritual development of the individuals. Murdoch points out how evil is produced by obsessive faith or fantasies, lack of self-knowledge and mislaid good intentions. Murdochian self-knowledge is the knowledge of what lies afar self. This kind of knowledge is achieved by unselfing, a process through which a solipsistic self identifies its solipsism and challenges it by means of love and art.

The fourth chapter, “From Illusion to Reality” presents the characters’ journey towards self-discovery. In her novels, Murdoch shows the main characters succeeding from a stage of moral ignorance to an accepting of reality. The discovery of reality is the principal purpose of her novels. Murdoch makes the major characters achieve some degree of self-knowledge and freedom from forms and illusions. She wants the human beings to be free from self-centered notions and arrive at transformation. Through her characters, Murdoch displays that vision of goodness is possible and can be gained by the loss of self. Goodness is the focus of attention that gives men the ability to identify the truth. Murdoch thus pleads for a change of inner evolution and understanding. When the characters discard their illusions and egoistic notions, their selves get transformed and gain the capability to see others.

The fifth chapter, “Summation” recounts the findings of the analysis. Murdoch’s novels insist the importance of mutual love and understanding among human beings. Though she deals with existential issues in her novels, she urges the individuals to find out a meaning in their lives. Murdoch blends philosophical and ethical issues in order to
reveal man's inner life, his fondness to cross the barriers of the moral codes and finally
towards moral perfection. The findings of the study and further research
possibilities are also discussed.

The study attempts to explore the inner life of human beings and their dealings
with the surroundings. Murdoch is aware of man’s consciousness of self and his lack of
interest towards others. Lack of attention leads one to live a self-centred life. The study
tries to explore Murdoch’s concern for self-knowledge and moral evolution which are
necessary for the process of self-rejuvenation. Self-realization and self-renewal pave way
for the attainment of moral perfection.

The documentation in the thesis is in accordance with the *MLA Handbook for
Writers of Research Papers* (Seventh Edition).