INTRODUCTION

Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) was a British novelist and philosopher. Her vital importance as a thinker and writer is evidenced by the sheer volume of literary output and the critical acclaim accorded to her work. This prolific and polymathic fictionalist over the course of her long career has written twenty six novels, a book of short stories, three books on philosophy, a volume of poetry, about half-a-dozen plays and several essays on literary, philosophical, cultural and political issues. It has been a fashionable practice among her critics to call her a philosophical novelist, but Murdoch herself was opposed in principle to the enterprise of writing philosophic novels. In an interview with S.B. Sagare published in 'Iris Murdoch Special Issue' of Modern Fiction Studies in 2001, she reiterates her conviction that philosophy and fiction “are quite different operations [...]. The traditional novel is a place where people live in all kinds of different ways, where different kinds of characters meet, where it's the deep aspects of human life that are being spoken of and not an abstract theory. Philosophy [...] is a very different kind of thought, in an essential sense abstract. Writing a novel involves being plunged into all the details of human life”.

1 S.B. Sagar, ‘An Interview with Iris Murdoch’ in Modern Fiction Studies (Iris Murdoch Special Issue) Vol. 47 No. 3 Fall 2001, p. 697.
In almost all her novels, Murdoch has consistently remained true to the commitment of writing a novel: an exploration of the details of human life. While doing so, she has, in general, avoided what she saw as ‘the obvious danger for a writer’, that of writing autobiographical novels. However, many of the settings in her novels reflect backgrounds familiar to her. The civil servants, university dons, Irish characters and many others belonged to the milieu of her own life, though the narrative plots, the relationships were mainly creations of her own lively imagination. Like the majority of novelists, she identified with a wide range of her characters but, again, she quite often maintained that they were not individual people she had known in her life. Her dictum that the novel is a general picture of human life\(^2\) amply explains this fact. But her biographer Peter Conradi, who knew her well and has authored two books on her, seems to disagree with her disclaimer. He suggests that a number of characters were based on Murdoch’s acquaintances. He states by way of example, [Eduard] Frankel haunts Iris’s novels. The dedicatee of *The Time of the Angels*, he lies behind the magisterial and dying Levquist in *The Book and the Brotherhood* and behind Max Lenoir in the earlier *The Unicorn*\(^3\) This shows that a writer can ill-afford to maintain a computer-like accuracy in trying to exclude the personal details from his/her works.

What informs her novels in a vital way is her experience of life. The London settings of most of her novels corroborate this, in so far

\(^2\) Ibid p. 697.

as she has put into words the detailed and intimate knowledge of the city that was possible only through a long acquaintance during childhood and subsequently in her early working life. As a result, many aspects of her personality like her friendship with dogs, her obsessive love of the sea, or her interest in stones find a space in many of her novels. This inevitably prompts one to look closely at the biographical details of Murdoch's life before taking into account her literary career.

Iris Murdoch was born of Anglo-Irish parents in Dublin on 15 July 1919. She was the only child of an Anglo-Irish mother and her father was an Irish or Scots-Irish. In fact, she was proud of her Irish background and referred to both her parents as Irish. She declared, ‘my Irishness is Anglo-Irishness in a very strict sense. I think this is a very special way of being Irish ... . I am profoundly Irish and I have been conscious of this all my life.’ Although she was born in Ireland, she was brought up in London, in Hammersmith and Chiswick, and only returned to Ireland during childhood for holidays. The landscape of her fiction largely reflects these facts. Her Ango-Irish background has given her a distinct sense of mixed national identity, and it has certainly led the striking topography of her fiction.

While Murdoch was less than a year old, her family moved to London where her father took up a post in the Civil Service. However, her mother was a bright and cheerful young woman who had been training as an opera singer and entered the wedlock at the age of eighteen.

\footnote{J.L. Chevalier (ed.), Recontres avec Irish Murdoch (Caen; Centre de Recherches de Litterature et Linguistique 1, Universite de Caen, 1978)p. 93.}
only to devote herself to her husband and family. Murdoch inherited from her mother her artistic interests, her sense of humour and a delectable voice tuned to music. On the other hand, she inherited from her more serious father her intellectual acumen and interest. About her childhood, Murdoch stresses two things, that she grew up without siblings and that it was happy. The day-to-day intimacy of close-knit relationships was almost absent from her upbringing. In an interview with John Haffenden she remarked that she was able to identify with exiles because she herself was ‘a kind of exile, a displaced person.’

As the only child of her parents Murdoch enjoyed the bliss of her parents’ undivided attention. Her interest in stories began in childhood with Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland, with Kim, with Treasure Island and Kidnapped. These books acted as vital instruments in stimulating her creative faculties in as much as they fired her imagination to wade into the world of excitement, fantasy and magic. She was encouraged by her studious father to read on a large scale which may be seen as a well planned rehearsal for launching on a creative and academic pursuit later. She started giving palpable hints of her creative talent as she began writing fiction at a tender age. She was educated at the Froebel Institute, then at Badminton School near Bath, after which she went to Somerville College, Oxford, a Women’s College. At this College, she read ‘Greats’ (classics, philosophy and ancient history): she was an excellent and keen student, despite her many other interests. She was active in politics and in Oxford amateur theatricals; she wrote poetry for

---

the University magazine. Like many other intellectuals during the 1930s, she became a member of the Communist Party for the fact that it was a convention among the young people at the time. Marxism, for Murdoch and a large many others at the university, represented a rebellion against their upbringing and background. However, she later resigned in disillusion, but remained for a long time close to the Left.

Her studentship at Oxford was a blessing to one and all for she had a rare knack in being amicable to fellow-students, both male and female. Her university contemporaries formed a positively adoring attitude towards her when they described her as a young woman with ‘stunning’ beauty and her photographs of the time second this opinion. Naturally, she was a sought after person, but her first emotional involvement with Frank Thompson - a fellow Oxford student - fizzled out. After graduating in classics, with a First, in 1942, she followed her father into the Civil Service, entering the Treasury as an Assistant Principal, living and working in wartime London. Wishing to play a more active part in the war, Murdoch left the Treasury in 1944 to join the wartime relief operation, UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) first as an organiser in London and then working with refugees in Belgium and Austria. During her stint with this organization, she encountered the several horrors and cruelties which were part of the war-machine. The plight of the people who were displaced and disoriented in their conflict not only moved her sympathies but enriched her experience of life also. Her work with the UNRRA had a lasting impact on her psyche and she felt like identifying herself with exiles. Her
novels depict exiles and refugees, illegal immigrants who have somehow escaped the tragic fate of their own countries, a cross-section of humanity labouring to flee their unhappy past.

Her time in Brussels was of particular importance to her intellectual life and direction; it was here that she first encountered the existentialist movement, which was to have such importance in the redirection of wartime and post-war philosophy both on the continent and in Britain. She was one of the earliest non-Gallic readers of Jean Paul Sartre's L’Être et le N’eant (1943), and met its author in 1945. Significantly, his philosophical theories and literary achievement formed the subject of her own first published book, Sartre: Romantic Rationalist (1953). The book acknowledges Sartre’s deepened portrait of consciousness, the parallelisms between existentialist and British philosophy, and also the importance of novel as a mode of human enquiry:

The novel is a picture of, and a comment upon, the human condition, and a typical product of the era to which belong also the writings of Nietzsche, the psychology of Freud, the philosophy of Sartre. It is also a type of writing which is more important, in the sense of being more influential, than any of the last mentioned.6

As a matter of fact, Sartre's influence on Murdoch is complex; it is primarily philosophical and political, though she has expressed great admiration for the more literary aspects of his writing. Her university

---

studies concentrated her interest in philosophy and the classics and her first publications in the early 1950s concerned themselves with philosophical matters—metaphysics and existentialism. Shortly after the war she was awarded a scholarship to go to the USA in order to study philosophy but on account of her one-time membership of the Communist Party, Murdoch was refused a visa to the United States. Now she decided to study philosophy academically. After she left UNRRA in 1946, a less settled but formative period followed, spent in reading and thinking both in London and Europe. From 1947 to 1948 she held the Sarah Smithson studentship in philosophy at New Law College, Cambridge, and came under new influences. Though she was not formally taught by Ludwig Wittgenstein, she did meet him, and, as she later put it, ‘lived in terms of philosophy, in the aura of his work.’ During this time besides collecting material for her book on Sartre, she was engaged in writing fiction.

In 1948 she returned to Oxford as lecturer in Philosophy and Fellow of St. Anne’s College, where on ceasing tutorial work in 1963, she became an Honorary Fellow. Her engagement with philosophy during this period was marked by the commitment that was to be life-long preoccupation with her. She obviously knew that she wanted to teach philosophy, wanted to be a writer and wanted to be in Oxford. But Oxford did not prove much of vantage point with regard to her personal life. Her return to Oxford got her involved in romantic attachments, reciprocal affairs, eternal triangles and occasional hero-worship. After her sad

---

experience with Frank Thompson, she met Franz Steiner, a displaced Czechoslovakian Jew and very soon she forged an emotional bond with him. Steiner had lost his parents at the hands of Nazi cruelty. He was trained as an anthropologist and was also a poet. What fascinated Murdoch was Steiner’s emotional balance and stability which he was able to keep up despite the horrors of his life. She described him as a ‘delightful, funny, clever, charming creature.’ They met in 1948 when Steiner was already convalescing and a year later he suffered a heart attack but he bravely fought his illness for another three years before he succumbed to it in 1952. Afterwards she allowed her affections to be influenced by such high-minded intellectuals as Eduard Fraenkel, Thomas Balogh and Elias Carneti.

The following year 1953 was to have a momentous significance for the rest of her life for she met John Bayley, the critic and scholar, who found himself shot with cupid's arrow in no time. This friendship came as a blessing in disguise as she found his company a refreshing relief from the dominating influence of older figures. In a particular sense, this relationship eased all her stress and she enjoyed her freedom with joy. She brought out her first book ‘Sartre : Romantic Realist in the same year but she had been busy writing novels before she felt satisfied enough to send one to a publisher. But unluckily even then it earned her only a rejection slip. It was probably her anger and disappointment at such a harsh treatment of her creative genius that prompted her to destroy not only this but the earlier ones also. Under the Net, of course, did not meet such a fate and Chatto & Windus accepted it
for publication. It was published in 1954, as her debut novel in print, which was an auspicious beginning since the amicable link between the author and the publisher persisted till the last moment of her life. In 1956 she married John Bayley whose literary criticism offers some illumination of her work. Murdoch dedicated her third novel The Sand castle (1957) to him. Two decades later she was to dedicate her philosophical treatise The Fire and the Sun (1977) to him again. In fact, Murdoch found in Bayley something that could set the balance right. With his happy, cheerful, slightly childlike character, he offered a most suitable ground for the flowering of her non-serious or comic genius. In his own right, Bayley was a writer of substance, however his reputation rests on his critical works. He followed a busy academic career, finally retiring from the Warton Professorship of English Literature in Oxford in 1992. As a married couple they led quite a happy life, supporting each other. This obviously enabled Murdoch to have a secure and peaceful time to write. Besides, Bayley was an eccentric and skilled cook who prepared the meals. 'His influence in this line may be seen in the interest in food and cooking that surfaces in her novels, particularly, perhaps, in The Sea, The Sea. He is, too, a well-informed polymath and Murdoch at times turned to him for assistance in technical matters, especially anything to do with firearms, but in general she did not discuss her novels with him until they were complete.  

It is worthwhile to note that Murdoch’s work exhibits prodigious labour and dedicated commitment to the act of creative

---

writing. Her final novel, *Jackson’s Dilemma* (1995), was published forty one years after the first. Figured out on the time-scale she produced an average of one novel every eighteen months, to say little of the philosophical books which were sandwiched between the novels.

The period between 1979 and 1999 saw Murdoch bask in the glory of both national and international recognition. She was awarded several prestigious literary prizes and she was also admitted to the Irish Academy, the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Sciences. She was a fellow of St. Anne's College, Oxford, and was given an Honorary D. Litt. from the University of Oxford in 1987. By then she had already accumulated a number of Honorary Doctorates - from Queen's University, Belfast, Trinity College, Dublin, Bristol and East Anglia Universities. These were followed by a quartet of honorary Degrees in 1993 from Ulster, Cambridge, Kingston and the Spanish University Alcalar de Henares. She was awarded a CBE in 1976 and further honoured with a DBE in 1987. The same year she was distinguished with a rare honour for a living novelist by having her portrait (painted by Tom Phillips) hung in the National Portrait Gallery.

Throughout her academic and literary career, Murdoch was an honoured literary personage. She was often invited to speak or read to literary groups and on these occasions she usually preferred a question and answer session, accompanied by her husband who collaborated with her in responses and queries. But the year 1994 came as a nemesis of sorts to her for she went to Israel alongwith Bayley to participate in a
conference at the University of Negev. No doubt, it was at this place that John Bayley had a foreboding that ‘something might be seriously wrong’ with his wife. He goes on to say, ‘I realised it but without any feeling of alarm because I was somehow sure that everything would carry on just as usual’. Apparently, everything did ‘carry on just as usual’ - but Murdoch’s condition gradually deteriorated, though it was not until 1997 that Alzheimer’s Disease was officially diagnosed. The long sad story of loving care, anger and near-despair is neatly catalogued in Bayley’s Memoir, until in the early weeks of 1999, Murdoch was finally placed in a nursing home. Three weeks later, on 9 February 1999, she breathed her last. Her brain was donated to Alzheimer’s Research; her remains were cremated and her ashes were scattered at the Oxford Crematorium.

The foregoing route-map of her life seems to offer little insight into the kind of personality she was in so far as she strictly guarded her private life to the extent that even biographical clues are hard to come by. However, this lack may be satisfactorily made for if her overall academic and creative activities are taken into account. An obvious advantage of this exercise will accrue in the form of her creative and academic trajectory which determined her principal thematic preoccupations in her works, particularly in her fiction.

For over a half century, she led a life that was marked by busy academic schedules, a committed persistence in creative writing in multiple varieties. She pursued a dual career: teaching and writing about

---

philosophy, and her creative work. This duality was seen by some critics as the central problem which Murdoch’s work poses for us. In other words, it begs a question like- Is there a relationship between her novels and her philosophy and if so what is this relationship? This question acquires greater significance in view of the fact that Murdoch’s interest in philosophy persisted all along her creative career. A tangible proof of this can be found in the names and ideas of philosophers, particularly of Sartre and Plato that frequently make their appearance in her novels. Furthermore, many of her characters can be seen to engage in philosophical discussions. One may take exception to this for these discussions are not purely or strictly academic in nature. However, such a consideration requires caution and reservation as any unqualified judgment about the nature of her creative oeuvre is likely to run the risk of being an exercise in oversimplification. It also requires one to consider the difference between a ‘philosophical novel’ and a novel which is concerned with the modes of thought that may be seen as philosophical. She published two philosophical papers in The Listener in March 1950 and sustained this interest by writing scholarly papers and books on philosophy at intervals throughout the rest of her writerly career. She did not entertain the appellation ‘philosopher’ attached to her by her admirers and critics as well. In one of her interviews she stated:

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 real
level of philosophy. One is writing about philosophy.... One is not actually doing the real thing.\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{Sartre: Romantic Realist} (1953), her first published book, bears testimony to her above statement for here she was voicing her views on Sartre and his theory, without postulating any individual theory of philosophy on her part. Though her book on Sartre is a philosophical study in essence, it is more focused on Sartre’s literary output, especially his novels. Murdoch suggested that Sartre’s novels ‘provide more comprehensive material for a study of his thought.’\textsuperscript{11} In fact, the primary focus of the book is her disagreement with Sartre in his treatment of human relationships. As she explained: It is on the lonely awareness of the individual and not on the individual’s integration with his society that his attention centres. In Sartre’s world, rational awareness is in inverse ratio to social integration.\textsuperscript{12}

This question of social integration has theoretical as well as practical implications in the context of her novels because she viewed the contingent as integral to life. In her introduction to the 1957 edition of the book on Sartre, she averred that ‘the world is contingent and infinitely various.’ This obviously explains the locus standi of the individual in the society for the individual is intrinsically isolated and can hardly represent anyone except himself/herself. \textit{Under the Net} (1954) was her first novel which has a solipsistic narrator. Jake, who abhors contingency and

\textsuperscript{10} J.L. Chevalier (ed.) \textit{Recontes avec Iris Murdoch}, op cit. p. 79.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, p. 62.
towards the end of the plot he comes to realize that he is part of a highly complex human world. He also understands that he has got everything wrong all along, that he is guilty of having conceived things as I pleased and not as they were. His solipsism has made him misconstrue the motives and emotions of everyone close to him by viewing them through the filter of self-serving fantasies, which are shattered as the realization dawns upon him. His fantasy of Anna fades ‘like a sorcerer’s apparition’, to be replaced by his apprehension of her singularity and otherness.

It seemed as if, for the first time, Anna really existed now as a separate being and not as part of myself. To experience this was extremely painful. Yes as I tried to keep my eyes fixed upon where she was I felt toward her a sense of initiative which was perhaps after all one of the gestures of love. Anna was something which had to be learnt afresh. When does one ever know a human being? Perhaps only after one has learnt the impossibility of knowledge and renounced the desire for it and finally ceased to feel even the need of it. But then what one achieves is no longer knowledge, it is simply a kind of co-existence, and this too is one of the guises of love.¹³

This is the fundamental wisdom that suffuses Murdoch’s fiction from Under the Net onward. True virtue, true goodness, true love flow from respect for the strangeness and mystery of other people and the world that surrounds it. They flow from the refusal to inflict our own design on them, to deny their innate elusiveness, their impenetrable

quiddity. When Jake reaches this realization, he is ready to write, ready to forge a fable that will look at the world afresh instead of projecting his illusions upon it.

It follows, then, that the focus, here, is on the human condition which is invariably marked by what Murdoch has called ‘contingency’. Jake is intent upon giving free play to his creator’s incorrigible zest for life which subsumes contingent moment. His reflection on the import of what he has undergone completes his metamorphosis which, in turn, becomes an imaginative embodiment of Murdoch's artistic creed. Jake’s epiphanic experience toward the end of the novel is a palpable proof of the contingent nature of human life and of the novel by implication.

Events stream past us like these crowds and the face of each is seen only for a minute. What is urgent is not urgent forever but only ephemerally. All work and all love, the search for wealth and fame, the search for truth, life itself, are made up of moments which pass and become nothing. Yet through this shaft of nothings we drive onward with that miraculous vitality that creates our precarious habitations in the past and the future.\footnote{Ibid, p. 275.}

Unlike her contemporaries, Murdoch embraced the idea of complex growing characters, free action and the rights and capacities of person to mediate with a substantial world. She also emphasized the need to create ‘real’ characters and to view them with ‘love’. Her essay Against Dryness (1961) followed her husband’s influential book The Characters
of Love (1960). Both these works stress the need for the novelist to depict ‘real’ characters and dismiss the primacy of ‘author’s consciousness.’ Bayley explains:

What I understand by an author’s love for his characters is a delight in their independent existence as other people, an attitude towards them which is analogous to our feelings, towards those we love in life; and an interest in their personalities combined with a sort of detached solicitude, a respect for their freedom.\(^{15}\)

Bayley’s arguments relate art to life as opposed to art committed to formalism or aestheticism. He contends, almost in Murdochian terminology, that Tolstoy’s supremacy lies in the way he presents the world not a world. His characters are identifiable from our own experience of life, they are life-like yet they are as opaque and unpredictable as people in real life. On her part, Murdoch praises the nineteenth century novel because it is concerned with real various individuals struggling in society. Her concern for the state of the novel in her time is an index of her immense faith in the novel as an art form. More than any other novelist of her generation she tries to isolate, approach and explore problems concerning art, truth life and reality and also to reflect these in her novels. Murdoch 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.\(^{16}\) She is aware of the difficulties which are involved in any process of formulation when a

\(^{16}\) Iris Murdoch, Sartre: Romantic Rationalist, p. 75.
creative writer makes an attempt to attend to reality. She has termed it as ‘conceptual apparatus.’

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.¹⁷

Murdoch’s 1961 essay Against Dryness may justifiably be taken as a manifesto of her critical pronouncements on the art of novel itself. She pleads, here, for more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being. She is concerned with the effect on literature, of self-consciousness, historically exacerbated by the advent of scientific method, and scientific symbolic languages. The relationship between words and things remains a paramount concern with her. She elaborates these points in her book on Sartre and laments that the referential purpose of the language came to be questioned, which in turn has made men linguistically self-conscious, including the novelist. Commenting on the situation she says.

We fear plurality, diffusion, senseless accident, chaos, we want to transform what we cannot dominate or understand into something reassuring and familiar, into ordinary being, into history, art, religion, science.¹⁸

---

Murdoch has appreciated T.S. Eliot for his continual concern for the referential character of words and his resistance to make a war upon language. She makes Lawrentian claims for the importance of the novelist for she feels that the writer has always been important and is now essential as a truth-teller and a defender of words. There is only one culture and words are its bases. She frankly acknowledges the primitive force of stories since stones preserve the sanctity of culture and language. For her, story is vital to the creation of fiction. The story is as fundamental a human concept as the thing and however much novelists may try, for reasons of fashion or art, to stop telling stories, the story is always likely to break out again in a new form. In fact, everything else may be done by the pictures or by other mediums, but stories about human beings are best told in words and that ‘best’ is a matter of response to a deep and ordinary human need.

It is obvious, then, that she has a passionate belief in the importance of stories and has persistently called for more and better defined moral concepts. It has a dual significance in so far as it sets her apart from her contemporaries and, at the same time, boldly denounces the self-consciousness of many modern writers. It also reflects, a mind aware of the difficulties art poses, and functions it performs, in human life. Murdoch is conscious of the fact that art, in its aspect of standing in some representative relation to reality, must to some extent be false to reality. Since the form which is its way to being recognised as ‘art’ and which it manifestly possesses is at variance with the irrelevance and messiness which characterise experience of life. In aiming to depict life,
art must, therefore, lie to life whenever it imparts a sense of form where none is actually present. In an interview with Michael Bellamy, Murdoch stated:

Art can subtly tamper with truth to a great degree because art is enjoyment. People persist in becoming good artists against every possible discouragement and disappointment because it is marvelous activity, a gratification of the ego; a free omnipotent imposition of form unless this constantly being, as it were, pulled at by the value of truth, the art work itself may be simply using art as a form of self indulgence. So, I think in art itself there is a conflict between the form maker and truthful formless figure.\(^{19}\)

As a creative writer, Murdoch admits the centrality of form since human experience and knowledge crystallise into novel only through its form. But she is averse to using any magical devices in order to enchant the reader. In her philosophical treatise, *The Sovereignty of Good*, she has remarked:

The claim of form and the question of ‘how much form’ to elicit, constitutes one of the chief problems of art. But it is when form is used to isolate, to explore, to display something which is true that we are most highly moved and enlightened.\(^{20}\)

Her non-fictional works evidently embody her concern with the process of artistic creation. In her essay ‘Against Dryness’ as also in

---

\(^{19}\) Interview with Michael Bellamy, Contemporary Literature XVII 1976, 2. Pp. 129-140.

her philosophical study of Sartre she pleads for a co-existence of form and contingency. And in some other essays, she is concerned with the nature of this co-existence which, in her view, reaches its climax in Shakespeare. She believes that Shakespeare managed a kind of plausibility which unites form and contingency by identifying the worlds he created with the real world so closely that his world appears to be the real world. She made a clear distinction between two kinds of novel; ‘journalistic’ and ‘crystalline’. In ‘Against Dryness’ she asserts:

Literature must always represent a battle between real people and images, and what it requires now is a much stronger and more complex conception of the former Literature, in curing its own ills, can give us a new vocabulary of experience and a truer picture of freedom.²¹

Naturally, her concepts of ‘contingency’, ‘reality’, ‘experience’ and freedom relate to her concept of characterization. In other words, these are ‘the novelist’s traditional furnitures. Her theory connecting people, characters, and contingency seems to be summarised in one of her philosophical treatises.

We imagine fictitious characters as concrete individuals and although it is true that the information we have about them is limited, this may be also in the case of real people, and anyway the information is endlessly open to reinterpretation. In fact, we may, in the course of time, alter our assessment of a fictional character.²²

²² Iris Murdoch ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’, Aristolelian Society Supplementary Volume, xxx,
Her idea of ‘contingency’ is inextricably linked to the concept of characterization in the novels. Contingency is, in fact, the central issue in her theoretical formulations. She believes that mystery, chance and opinion - all aspects of the contingent - are not superimposed upon personality but are integrated into it. Consequently, Murdoch cannot conceive of character-creation which excludes these factors. 'If fantasy and realism are visible and separate aspects in a novel, then the novel is likely to be failure', she says and continues, ‘In real life the fantastic and the ordinary, the plain and the symbolic, are often indissolubly joined together, and I think the best novels explore and exhibit life without disjoining them.'

Characters, according to Murdoch, are as vital to the novel as the plot or story itself. The issue of creating characters and the difficulties entailed by it seems to be an overriding issue which is vital to her philosophical and literary formulations as well as to her novels. The issue is bound up with the loss of moral referents and the need for more concepts, with love, freedom, and the contingent. She sees its resolution, if it can be resolved, as resulting in authorial ability to perceive and thereby create character. In the closing lines of Sartre: Romantic Rationalist, Murdoch asserts that Sartre’s ‘inability to write a great novel is a tragic symptom of a situation which afflicts us all’. She then states the issue:

---

1956 (32-56) p. 50.

We know that the real lesson to be taught is that human person is precious and unique; but we seem unable to set it forth except in terms of ideology and abstraction.\textsuperscript{24}

Essentially, her approach both to philosophy and fiction seems to be based on her attempt to demonstrate the above assertion and to teach the lesson in terms of new ideas and concreteness. In an interview given to Ruth Lake Heyd, Murdoch said that she ‘is objective about any flaws that her work may have, and is particularly sensitive to weaknesses in character delineation. She admitted that ‘some of her characters fail to emerge as independent individuals, and are mere extensions of her own moral and philosophical bias’. She goes on to say that she ‘attempts in each new novel to create stranger characters, who will seem realistic and valid.

For the creation of such characters, the writer has to shun the role of an omniscient narrator who takes a God’s eye view of the world. In this process he/she can liberate himself/herself from the egoistic impulses. Murdoch feels that private ego consumes away the real self and ‘the private ego is the bane of art as it is of philosophy... The artist’s worst enemy is his eternal companion, the cosy dreaming ego, the dweller in the vaults of eikasia.\textsuperscript{25}

Fantasy hinders the writer from seeing the reality outside him. It encourages a false sense of the real that is consolatory in nature, for it presents reality as a given whole and endeavours to shrink it into a single

\textsuperscript{24} Ruth Lake Heyd, “An Interview with Iris Murdoch”, University of Windsor Review, 1 (Spring 1965) p. 142.

pattern or a form. Both in her theoretical writings and her novels, she insists that this is wrong. The truth is that reality is incomplete, inexpressible and intransigent to any order or system. Chance, accident and contingency play a vital role in defining it. Only novels that succeed in portraying this can be considered as truly realistic. Contingency, therefore, has to be accepted in the Murdochian concept of reality. The essential part of it is the real impenetrable human person who is substantial, indefinable and valuable. It is important for the novelist to keep in mind the accidental, unlikely and unpredictable aspects of human nature in order to destroy fantasy and open the way for imaginative recognition of the otherness of his characters. These are the factors that help in the creation of convincing characters who are not merely stereotypes or flat. Contingency provides them with elements of mysteriousness.

The highest test of the novelist, in Murdoch’s view, lies in the apprehension of the otherness of his characters with his own will removed from the scene. A good artist must be impersonal. Murdoch has used the word ‘tolerance’ to describe this quality of objectivity involved in the creation of real and independent characters. It is equivalent to love or compassion in her moral theory. It enables a man and an artist to discover the individual particularities of others instead of visualising human nature as unitary.

However, the creation of lifelike characters is not an easy task. The moment comes when the author discovers to his dismay that he does not have sufficient knowledge of the ‘otherness’ of the personages whom
he has set forth to create in his fiction. Murdoch describes this as a spiritual failure or the failure of imperfect love for as the Abbess in The Bell tells Michael: All our failures are ultimately failures in love. In this sense, all works of art are perhaps failures because we are not able to love realistically enough. Knowledge of others is never completely attainable and is always subject to revision in ordinary life. The novelist who balks at a tidy summing up of people as possessing fixed qualities feels frustrated when he reaches this point.

Playing the role of an invisible writer, she believes in teasing her reader into thought by displaying various layers of the reality of her characters, i.e. subconscious, conscious and palpably overt fact. For the overall impact of the novel, Murdoch counts on the reader to fill up gaps and silences in the novel, if there remain any, but this act requires apprehension, sympathy and imaginative power on the part of the reader. In this way, the writing of a novel is a process of collaboration between the author and the reader.

Thus, Murdoch saw herself as a realistic writer, and as one who wanted to write about life. Besides reality, she takes issue with the form of the novel. Form is a great temptation, she agrees but the difference is that life can escape its allurement while art cannot do without it. That is why she is not so much against it in art as in life. ‘It is absurd to say that form in art is in any sense a menace, because form is the absolute essence of art.’ What she is wary of is the tendency to pull a form or a

---

structure out of an idea and rest upon it. The form of good art must resist
the very patterns of fantasy and consolation. Life is a form created by the
fantasy. A good form does not work as a magic nor does it permit the soul
to relax its guard. It is non-consolatory in nature and shows suffering,
death and reality in their drab colours.

Murdoch’s theoretical formulations on literature are not
opposed to her philosophical views. She was equipped with an
exceptional genius to effect a harmonious balance between the two so that
the one supplements the other. The moral vision is the crux of her
philosophy and her novels are coloured by and suffused with it. Her moral
vision rests on the principles of goodness, truth, love, freedom and
religion, but she is interested in these moral virtues as they re-inforce and
offset the reality of life. If she sticks to realism in fiction, it is only a part
of her moral agenda. In fact, it becomes somewhat problematic to situate
Murdoch as a contemporary novelist of considerable worth because critics
quite often confuse her dual career of a novelist and a philosopher. But
she dismisses the appellation of a philosophical novelist for she likes to be
called a novelist and philosopher both. As far as her insistence on realism
is concerned, she makes it clear that her realism is not merely a reportage,
rather it reflects a conviction about the uses of art. She stated in her
Gifford Lectures (1982): In good art we do not ask for realism, we ask for
truth. However, while representing the reality, or an aspect of truth in her
fiction. Murdoch has not permitted her views or thematic preoccupations
to tend towards any political ideology or commitment. Consequently,
there is surprisingly little political commitment in her novels. Richard Todd has observed: And although she admired such commitment in the novels of Sartre and de Beauvoir, she sees it as a central issue in the discussion of their work, a primary challenge which she must redefine. As a result she has, for herself, a very clear sense of restraint about the relationship between politically committed and creative fictional writing.\footnote{Richard Todd, Iris Murdoch, London & New York: Methuen, 1984, p. 22.}

In her philosophical views, Murdoch was influenced by Simon Weil and Plato among others. Apart from her study on Sartre, she wrote several philosophical essays and books but \textit{The Sovereignty of Good} (1970) and \textit{The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artist} particularly stand out among them. Certainly it was with Plato that she was most concerned in her philosophical writings, though she rejected many of his views on Art. ‘Plato never did justice to the unique truth - conveying capacities of art’, she commented in \textit{The Fire and The Sun}. Nevertheless, she embraced his concept of ‘the Good’ as she internalised the concept of freedom from philosophers like Sartre. And this aspect of Platonic philosophy is frequently reflected in her novels. Her mammoth philosophical work ‘Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals (1992) is a much wider ranging discussion. It ‘addresses some of the problems which absorbed so much of her interest in the novels, particularly those from \textit{The Time of the Angels} onwards, that is, how we can approach the idea of morality in human life now that its religious foundations have been largely snatched from us; it is again based on Platonic theories which
serve to underpin Murdoch’s ideas. In 1997 a collection of her philosophical essays, *Existentialists and Mystics*, was published, edited by her biographer, Peter Conradi, since by that time Murdoch herself was too ill to oversee it. It contains most of her published short essays as well as, in the final section, the more significant ones already collected together in book form, such as *The Sovereignty of Good* and *The Fire and The Sun*.

Admittedly, the problem of religion loomed large in her philosophical thought and was a significant influence in her novels. She was brought up as a protestant; as a child she was taught to pray and the doctrine of the Trinity was explained to her at an early age. From her early belief, she moved through Marxism to an agnostic standpoint, believing in nothing super-natural, rejecting God, not accepting the divinity of Christ and having no faith in the idea of a personal God. This view became increasingly significant in the later novels, connecting up with her acceptance of Plato’s idea of Man’s life being a pilgrimage towards reality. However, she was keenly aware of the comfort of religion: To present the idea of God at all, even as myth, is a consolation’.

She also saw art as able to develop imaginative structures to compensate Man for the absence of God. Thus, her active interest in religion and morality is linked up with her views on art and novel in particular. She has, therefore, taken up for analysis the pertinent issue of relationship between art and morality. She argues for the uses and

---

29 Hilda Spear, op cit, p. 11.
supremacy of art over dialectic. She contends:

Art, especially literature, is a great hall of reflection where we can all meet and where everything under the sun can be examined and considered.... Art is far and away the most educational thing we have far more so than its rivals philosophy and theology and science...\(^{31}\)

When Murdoch argues for the value of art, she uses a fundamental Platonic vocabulary. Her sense of the integrity of art reflects Plato’s injunction that art fantasises and is sophistry. She has explained Plato’s contention that artists must be banished from the ideal Republic:

Art is dangerous chiefly because it apes the spiritual and diagnoses it and trivializes it.... Artists obscure the enlightening power of thought and skill by aiming at plausibility rather than truth... The artist cannot represent or celebrate the good, but only what is daemonic and fantastic and extreme, whereas truth is quiet and sober and confined. Art is sophistry, at best an ironic mimesis whose fake ‘truthfulness’ is a subtle enemy of virtue... Art makes us content with appearances and by playing magically with particular images it steals the educational wonder of the world away from philosophy and confuses our sense of direction toward reality and our motives for discerning it.... Art objects are not real unities but pseudo - objects completed by fantasizing mind in its escape from reality.... Enjoyment of art deludes even the decent man by giving him a false self- knowledge based on a healthy egoism: the fire in the cave, which is mistaken for the sun, and where one may comfortably linger,

\(^{31}\) Ibid, p. 86.
imagining oneself to be enlightened. Art thus prevents the salvation of the whole man by offering a pseudo-spirituality and a plausible imitation of direct intuitive knowledge (vision, presence), a defeat of the discursive intelligence at the bottom of the scale of being not at the top. Art is a false presence and a false present.  

While interpreting Plato’s objections to art, she argues that his objections are primarily religious in nature. Plato held the belief that art is an egotistical substitute for and a copy of religious discipline. Art springs from vicarious knowledge. It is the product of the inferior part of the soul and harms by nourishing the passions which should be educated and disciplined. In her analysis of Platonic view of art, she agrees that art is an attempt to achieve through personal fantasy and is abode of wish fulfillment and power-mania. She makes a distinction between the good art and Menippean art. Bad art is a lie, it is a fantasy. But good art can clarify evil and remind us of hardness of truth. It provides work for the spirit.... It has the power to illustrate truth and beauty and lead to the good in a more effective way than philosophical dialect. The brief luminous glimpses of reality art gives are a sort of contemporary substitute for prayer.

White explaining the virtue and value of art, Murdoch insists that great art is lofty and expresses and explains religion to each generation. All art lies but good art pierces its way into truth. Artists through ‘some deeper’ vision of their subject matter may become

---

Plato believes that a philosopher is far superior to an artist in that the philosopher is equipped with the power/ability to see the most minute particulars, whereas artists exhibit the lowest and most irrational kind of awareness - eikasia, a state of vague image ridden illusion. Murdoch’s dispute with Plato starts from this point. She contends:

Art is a special discerning exercise of intelligence in relation to the real, and although aesthetic form has essential elements of trickery and magic, yet form in art, as form in philosophy, is designed to communicate and reveal. In the shock of joy in response to good art an essential ingredient is a sense of revelation of reality of the really real - the world as we were well able so closely to see it before.\(^\text{34}\)

In addition to the above theoretical formulations, Murdoch has expressed her views on art and novel in several of her interviews. She spoke to John Haffenden about novel thus: ‘Well, of course, a novel is a drama and dramas happen when there is trouble. A completely harmonious life might not produce the drama. But the books are full of happiness, I feel they are shining with happiness. In spite of the fact that people have a bad time - this is true of the novel in a general way - the novel is a comic form.\(^\text{35}\)

This comic form of writing receives impetus from the many dramatic moments in her novels. She believes that ‘good writing is full of

\(^{33}\) Ibid, p. 7.
\(^{34}\) Ibid, p. 78.
\(^{35}\) John Haffenden, op cit, p. 204.
surprises and novelties, moving in a direction you don’t expect. Novel for her is a specimen of good art. Bad art is demoralising and disappointing. ‘Good art is a pleasure which is uncontaminated, it’s happiness. One also learns a lot from art: how to look at the world and to understand it; it makes everything far more interesting. It’s a mode of reflection, and this is why it’s a terrible crime for totalitarian states to interfere with artists. .. Artists are essentially free individuals. Art is a great hall of reflection and that’s why it is important from a political point of view that there should be a free art, because art is a place where all sorts of free reflection go on. It is a mode of thought, a mode of knowledge. Good art can’t help teaching you things but it mustn’t aim at teaching. The artist’s task is to make a good work of art. A novel is a mode of explanation, you can’t help explaining characters and scrutinising their motives. The novelist is the judge of these people that can’t help emerging - and it is most difficult for the novelist to be a just judge.

Murdoch’s advice to the novelists is that they should not be afraid of the fact that reality is incomplete and its representation in art would make it incomplete. In fact, literature shows the battle that is going on between the real people and the images. Like Dickens, she advocates the need to preserve the integrity of each individual being in the face of chaotic realities. Murdoch attempts to be a realist because she thinks ‘real people are destructive of myth and that they are ‘far more eccentric than anybody portrayed in the novels’. Real people are terribly odd, but of

---

36 Ibid.
course they keep this secret. They conceal their fantasies. This is a clear and consistent theme in all her novels. Like her husband John Bailey, Murdoch thinks that love is a great subject for novels. Her own novels show the redemptive quality of love which encompasses her thematic concerns like goodness, freedom and morality.

For Murdoch, the novel proper is about people’s treatment of each other and is concerned with human values. She insists that the novel is not a poem. She believes that undue emphasis on formal control has worked against both a multiplicity and the multiple aspects of personality. She affirms that a novel must be a ‘house fit for free characters’. It must combine ‘form’ with a respect for reality with all its odd ‘contingent’ ways ‘in the highest art of prose. For Murdoch, the novel is a comic mode. It is a marvelous form because it explains people to themselves.

As a writer, Murdoch has received considerable critical attention from the readers and critics alike for views regarding the function of art as well as of the artist. Her novels and non-fictional prose have set in motion a critical debate that is still going on. From the mid-1960s onward an academic industry has grown up around Murdoch; it has produced innumerable articles, a fair number of theses, and her own books have been set up as undergraduate texts. Especially notable, perhaps, were the two ‘special numbers’ of Modern Fiction Studies dedicated to her work in 1969 and 2001 respectively. This is significant for the fact that most special numbers upto 1968 were concerned with authors already dead, It thus placed Murdoch among the serious contemporary novelists at a significant central point in her career.
In 1965 the first full-length book on Murdoch’s work appeared. *Degrees of Freedom*, by fellow novelist A.S. Byatt, discusses the first seven novels sensitively, perceptibly and knowledgeably. However, Byatt’s book did much to help enhance Murdoch’s reputation, for not only is it a very balanced assessment of the early novels but it also enables us to put into perspective the relationship between Murdoch’s early fiction and her philosophical thought. This study is a genuine and balanced response to Murdoch’s novels. The significance of the book coming at a time it did was that it acted as an antidote to the adverse criticism that was beginning to appear both in press and in academic journals. Thus, though its scope was necessarily limited, as it was able to encompass only seven of the novels, this was perhaps the most influential book on Murdoch ever to have been written.

Byatt’s study was followed by Peter Wolfe’s *The Disciplined Heart: Iris Murdoch and Her Novels* (1966). The later critical studies include Domna Gerstenberger’s *Iris Murdoch* (1975) and Elizabeth Dipple’s *Work for the Spirit* (1982). Richard Todd and Peter Conradi are the more prominent critics in that both of them wrote more than one book on Murdoch. Todd in his first book, *Iris Murdoch: The Shakespearean Interest* (1979) argues that Murdoch's own admiration for Shakespeare’s ability to create and tolerate real people, should constitute the bases for any analysis of her fiction. Both Todd and Dipole believe that *The Nice and the Good* marks a turning point in Murdoch’s literary career. Todd’s second book *Iris Murdoch* (1984) is more balanced in approach as it attempts to situate the writer in proper perspective. Peter Conradi’s *Iris Murdoch: The
Saint and the Artist (1986) is a celebratory study whose aim is to try to illuminate her best work. In her book Iris Murdoch (1987) in the Key Women Writers Series, Deborah Johnson undertakes the study of her novels in the context of contemporary feminist debate about the nature of women’s writing and analyses Murdoch’s novels in the light of her pronouncements on women’s issues. Hilda Spear in her book Iris Murdoch (1995, 2nd edition 2007) written for Macmillan Modern Novelists Series underlines the way ‘her novels tend towards dramatic.’ Angela Hague’s Iris Murdoch’s Comic Vision (1984) draws on the comic theories of Cornford and Frye, among others, to examine an area of Murdoch’s work that is too often subsumed in other concerns. She especially deals with the ways in which An Accidental Man – ‘a brittle comedy of manners’ - inverts comic convention and moves closer to irony. Saguna Ramanathan’s Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good (1990) focuses on seven novels with characters representing goodness. Likewise, Nirmal Dutta’s Iris Murdoch: Freedom and Form (2000) is an in-depth study of the moral and psychological freedom in the context of some important and representative novels of Murdoch. Dutta argues that the tension between freedom and form is worked out both at the experiential level of the characters as well as that of the author whose constant effort is to create life-like characters who are unobstructed by the form of her novels.

Apart from the above book-length studies of Murdoch’s work, two edited volumes merit special mention here. Harold Bloom in Modern Critical Views on Iris Murdoch (1986) admires her for ‘conceptual

---

originality’ and believes that Iris Murdoch has ‘no serious rival among contemporary British novelists.’ Bloom agrees that Murdoch is a writer who thinks for herself, philosophically and theologically but has not been able to fuse idea and story into a perfect whole. Besides Bloom’s introductory essay on Murdoch, the book contains thirteen essays some of them published earlier. Similarly Critical Essays on Iris Murdoch (1992) edited by Lindsey Tucker includes essays previously published elsewhere. These essays aim to illumine the way Murdoch's creative imagination works. Cheryl Browning Bove’s Character Index and Guide to the Fiction of Iris Murdoch (1986) is a useful source to wade through the complex web of Murdoch’s work. A significant contribution to Murdoch scholarship was made by Gillian Dooley who published A Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch (2003) the volume contains twenty two interviews with Murdoch.

Among her biographers Peter Conradi and John Bayley are more remarkable than others. Conradi’s Iris Murdoch: A Life (2001) is a comprehensive documentation of Murdoch’s personal as well as creative life. But Bayley’s three volume biography of Murdoch is more personal since he may be accepted to have known her more closely by virtue of having lived with her as husband for more than forty years. Iris: A Memoir of Iris Murdoch (1998), the first in a trilogy was, in fact, published about six months before her death. It closely examines her life in two parts. Part I selects and talks about incidents in their life together during the nearly forty years before Alzheimer’s disease took hold of her; Part II is a diary whose entries run throughout 1997, beginning on New Year’s Day and
ending on Christmas Day. It is an emotional catalogue of their joint journey through the year. At times, it is unbearably poignant. The second book of the trilogy, Iris and the Friends (1999), subtitled A Year of Memories, is clearly, in Part I, intended to take John Bayley’s mind off the present by fantasising and recalling events in his own past. Part II, however, is again concerned with the ravages of Alzheimer’s Disease and the final chapter recounts his last week with Iris before she was moved into Vale House, the Care Home where she died three weeks later.

However, the final book of the trilogy is titled as Widower’s House (2001) and adds little to our knowledge of Murdoch’s life and death. Like its predecessors, it was written partly as a therapeutic exercise for Bayley himself, Bayley’s biography derives its significance from the fact that for Bayley himself it helped to keep Iris alive for him after the trauma of her illness and death. Compared to Conradi’s account of Murdoch’s life, it is often lacking in factual details, for Conradi was her official biographer. As a close friend of the Bayleys, Conradi had access to all the material that he needed. His book is careful, conscientious, over-long and inclined to be tedious. Nevertheless, it is a remarkable record of a remarkable writer. He is mostly concerned with facts about Murdoch’s life and background but he also adds to our knowledge of the novels by frequently suggesting how they reflect on Murdoch’s life. A.N. Wilson published his account of Murdoch's life in Iris Murdoch As I knew Her (2003). At one time presumed to be the official biographer, Wilson slipped into the background during the last years of Murdoch’s life. His book is quirky and often slightly malicious account of Murdoch as he
personally saw her.

Recent critical studies of Iris Murdoch’s work include the second edition of Brian Nicol’s *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction* (2004) and a volume of critical essays on Murdoch by Anne Rowe, entitled *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment* (2007). Nicol’s study has a historical value because it was the first full-length study of Murdoch’s work to appear after her death. Nicol concentrates upon the First-Person novels and the way Murdoch looks at the past. He examines Murdoch’s interaction in her novels with various trends of twentieth century literary criticism – ‘postmodernism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis and modernism’ - trends that she herself overtly rejected. However, if we accept D.H. Lawrence’s maxim to trust the tale and not the teller, Nicol’s arguments must be taken into consideration. His book is a useful addition to the canon of Murdoch criticism and has been slightly expanded in the second edition by discussion of several other novels.

Not only critical but also public recognition has been gradually accorded to Murdoch. It began in 1973 when she was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *The Black Prince*. When she received the Whitbread Literary Award for Fiction in the following year for *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, C.P. Snow, who presented her with the award, commented that though *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* was ‘not perhaps her best novel’, the judges ‘wished to acknowledge her

---

achievement as a major contemporary British novelist.\textsuperscript{40} The Whitbread Committee was probably regretting that they had neglected to mark the publication of \textit{The Black Prince}, which was considered by many, if not most, critics at the time to be her best novel to date. In 1978 \textit{The Sea, The Sea} was awarded the Booker Prize, and two of her other novels - \textit{The Good Apprentice} (1985) and \textit{The Book and the Brotherhood} (1987) - were later nominated for it.

A further sign of acclaim occurred in December 1986, when at a meeting of the Modern Language Association of America, the Iris Murdoch Society was inaugurated. It continues to thrive in both Britain and the US, and has members in Europe and in various countries throughout the world, including Japan and Egypt. In Britain it is directed by Dr. Anne Rowe at the Centre for Iris Murdoch studies at Kingston University, Kingston-upon - Thames. It publishes an annual Newsletter and organises conferences on Murdoch’s work.

The foregoing overview of the critical and public recognition goes on to establish her prominence in the canon of contemporary British novelists. These studies, brilliant though they are in focusing attention on one particular dimension of her fictional genius, happen to be limited in scope for majority of them discuss only a limited number of her novels. The present study, however, undertakes a study of all her novels to explore Murdoch’s major thematic preoccupations which often connect her philosophical views with her fictional works. She takes up ethical and

\textsuperscript{40} The Times, 19 April, 1974, p. 17.
spiritual matters for serious examination in her novels. The works examine the nature of goodness and its various forms from a Post-Christian and Post-Existential position. The focal point of her attention is the question of perfection of the nature of truth and the possibility of transcendent good beyond human imperfections and vanities. In her interview with W.K. Rose she said that love is her main subject and she finds it difficult to reconcile the grandiose theme of love to the genre of the novel, which she believes, is essentially comic in nature.  

Undoubtedly, the basics of her conceptual thought form the background to her novels and much of the complexity of her work derives from these. But they do not dominate her fiction, rather they enrich it. She takes a moral position and depicts a world which is confused because of lack of moral virtues. These moral virtues like freedom, love, goodness etc. are very vital. However, she does not use philosophy as a springboard or platform to propagate her ideas. She is a philosopher as an idealist using the novel for more exacting and instructive purposes. The ruminative mode is used to explore the vast and ambiguous areas of human mind. This is an important device which helps her to make a thorough examination of human search for good, a disinterested awareness of the world outside the self. But she is equally conscious of the presence of evil in human life which accords prominence to good as its foil. Human life, she thinks, is a curious interplay of the good and evil, and hence her moral vision in her novels appears to be justified. In her Caen Lecture (1978) she said:

---

The novel itself, of course, the whole world of the novel, is the expression of a world outlook. And one can’t avoid doing this. Any novelist produces a moral world and there’s a kind of world outlook which can be deduced from each of the novels. And of course I have my own philosophy in a very general sense a kind of moral psychology one might call it rather than philosophy.42

Thus, Murdoch’s assertion of her moral vision as moral psychology underlies her principal thematic concerns in her novels. Her novels, therefore, perspective and illustrate her consistent belief in certain fundamental issues confronting mankind. These novels also bring out the various facets of her personality: a thinker, a novelist of ideas, a philosopher, a moral psychologist who infuses her novels with a moral outlook. What is more, she is, at the same time, a myth-maker, a realist, a weaver of stories who is interested in forms as a suitable medium of expression. Through her novels she recreates reality which becomes for her an act of attention that focuses on truth, goodness, freedom, love and morality in a godless world. The thrust of her moral vision which ramifies into thematic concerns would remain only an abstraction and airy talk if it is not studied in the context of her novels. The succeeding chapters will, therefore, concentrate on discussions of her novels in chronological order in the light of her major thematic preoccupations which underlie her novels.

-------------------