Chapter 1

Introduction

Iris Murdoch's canvas of literary contribution was of twenty six novels, a handful of plays and poems, a number of thought provoking articles, a book on Sartre, books of her own moral philosophy and the book on Plato's theory of art. Her novels offered a vast world of characters and plots capable of "multiple interpretations." A "prodigiously inventive and idiosyncratic" writer, she was born on 15th July 1919 in Dublin. A voracious reader, her favourite books in her childhood was Alice in Wonderland, Through the Looking Glass, Treasure Island, Kidnapped and Kim. Her interest for adventure stories was not limited to her childhood. While at school Iris wrote "A Pleasant Melodrama in which Sir John blows a lighthouse to pieces and years later is aptly killed, driven on to the rocks where the lighthouse might have saved him" (Conradi,61). Again Peter J. Conradi was of the view that it shaped and influenced her entire corpus of novels: "The childlike, visceral excitements of these works travelled with Iris through adulthood." Murdoch went on to study Classics, Ancient History and Philosophy at Somerville
College, Oxford. For a short period she went on to become a member of the Communist Party but became disillusioned and soon left the party.

Murdoch was also a member of the theatre group at Oxford, She acted in a parody. In July 1942, Murdoch left Oxford for London to work as Assistant Principal in the Treasury. Her second assignment was with UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) in 1944. She visited Austria and Brussels in connection with her work and had firsthand experience of the refugees’ wretched conditions. Murdoch believed she might either become an art historian or an archaeologist, but a chance exposure to Sartre’s *Lettre et le Neant* in a Brussels workshop drew her to philosophy. She resigned from UNRRA on 1st July 1946 to enter into academics. Murdoch was influenced by Plato, Kant, Raymond Queneau, Sartre, Elias Canetti, Simone Weil, Wittgenstein etc. In 1948, she was elected Fellow at St. Anne’s College, Oxford where she worked as a tutor of Philosophy until 1963. She lectured at the Royal College of Arts from 1963 to 1967. In 1965 she married John Bayley,
Professor of English at Oxford and lived for over thirty years at Cedar Lodge and then moved to the suburbs of Oxford.

In 1974 she was awarded Whitbread Prize for *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* and Booker Prize in 1978 for *The Sea, The Sea*. In addition, she won CBE award in 1976 and was conferred Dame Iris Murdoch in 1987. Unfortunately, she contracted Alzheimer's disease. First diagnosed in the mid nineties, she described Alzheimer as 'being in a very, very bad quiet place, a dark place.' She died on February 8, 1999.

Iris Murdoch was a prominent voice in English fiction since 1954. Her works like *Metaphysics as a guide to Morals* (1992) and *Existentialists and Mystics* (1977) got her recognition as a Philosopher. Although most critics acknowledge her intellectual prowess and potential, her fiction left readers often shocked and even confused. Hilda D. Spears aptly voices this opinion when she asserts that Murdoch defies classification:

- she is not a modernist: she is not a
- post modernist: she is not, like many
- of her female contemporaries, a
feminist writer; yet despite the fact that she employs many Victorian devices in her novels, no serious reader of her fiction could place her among the traditionalists. She is a thinker, a novelist of ideas, a philosopher who dares to introduce philosophic discussions into her novels (Pg. 121).

There was no unanimity among critics regarding the value and major drive of the fiction of Murdoch. While Paul Edward Gray in ‘Yale Reviews’ calls Iris Murdoch “one of the most impressive of the post-war novelists,” others accuse her of “dipping into sensationalism” and “Harlequin romances for highbrows.” However, most critics oftentimes proclaim that “no one writes better today about the urgencies and illusions of the moral life” (Conradi, 5).

An important feature of the prose writers of the sixties and the seventies, an era of social, political and ideological
contradictions was the growing desire of many writers to pose philosophical questions, and an attempt to resolve them. Bradbury and Palmer in the preface to *The Contemporary English* novel remarked that during the 1960s “the confident provincialism of some writers began to collapse in an era of uneasy internationalism, in a world of hard materialism and liberal disorientation” (Pg. 13). The novels of Murdoch had a very obvious link with existentialism and Sartre until about 1968. In her early novels written in the 1950s, she followed the path laid out by the early Sartre, but her philosophical orientation, offered no way out for her. John Cruikshank, distinguishing between a literary form – the novel – and philosophy pointed out:

Novels have traditionally been concerned with individual characters in relation to specific events. Particularity and action have been essential features of the world the novel discloses. A philosophical treatise, on the other hand, reveals a much more generalized and static
world, a world of universality and contemplation (Pg. 8).

The fact remains that, the methods by which the philosopher and the novelist examine existence differ from one another; the interrelationship between the two was an exploration of philosophical ideas through imaginative writing, not their direct illustration in fiction. The achievement of a novelist must finally be judged in terms of literature, yet an evaluation of his/her art must rest, at some point, on an understanding of his/her philosophical ideas. Thus Murdoch was often categorized as a philosophical novelist.

In Murdoch’s spectrum of writing, there were two recognizable zones – one that was focused on philosophy and the other on the melodramatic subject matter in her novels. Between these two poles of critical opinion came the psychological reading of characters, their moral dilemmas and relationships within the “degree of freedom.” A. S. Byatt in her study Degrees of Freedom: The early novels of Iris Murdoch laid stress on the characters of Murdoch’s early novels especially of those characters who were free or enslaved in personal relationships
and society in varying degrees. This freedom according to her “contributes to the opacity of persons, to the mystery of freedom in relation to reality” (Pg. 8). Since the publication of her first novel, *Under the Net* (1954) Murdoch emerged not only as the most productive and influential British novelist of her time, but also as a powerful intellectual and original theorist of fiction. In one sense Murdoch aimed to write as a realist, in an identifiably nineteenth century tradition of English and European fiction. However, Murdoch had maintained in her interviews and non-fictional writings that it was practically impossible for novelists to do so, for good philosophical reasons.

Between 1958 & 1968 Murdoch had published one major philosophical essay nearly every year and pronounced some closely argued views on what novels, should attempt to be. However, critics were of the view that illustration of these views were apparently absent in her novels. As mentioned earlier, Sartre’s philosophical theories and literary achievement formed for the subject of Murdoch’s first published book, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalists* (1953). The book acknowledged Sartre’s portraits of consciousness, the parallelisms between Existentialist
and British Philosophy and the importance of the novel as a mode of human inquiry. Sartre’s influence on Murdoch was complex. Although she had expressed great admiration for his literary aspects of writing, his novels did not influence her fiction as was widely speculated. However, the novels of the fifties reverberate with Sartrean themes. In the concluding chapters of her book on Sartre, she had stated the difficulties inherent in the contemporary novel, and referred to how Sartre was “the novelist as rationalist.” She stated his inability to write a great novel was a tragic symptom of a situation which afflicted all writers at some point of their career. We know that the real lesson to be taught was that every human being was precious and unique. Murdoch understood the difficulties to do so and therefore it existed in terms of “ideology and abstraction.” Murdoch’s arguments about literature, realism and art undoubtedly had their origins in many of those issues, and her reinterpretation was distinct, yet there was an increasing detachment from Sartre in her views and this became part of her maturing process.

In *Existentialists and Mystics* (1970) Murdoch’s most important and passionately argued essays, she asked two
questions which would be considered as looming large over her work, both fictional and non-fictional, throughout her career, urging her on:

Has literature always depended on a sort of implicit moral philosophy which has been unobtrusively supported by religious belief and which is now with frightful rapidity disappearing? And if this is so, what is the future of literature and indeed of art as we have known it? (Pg. 221-34).

Both the questions were rhetorical. The first may have implied her efforts in her philosophical and literary – critical writings, such as, to point to ways post-war society which may reconstruct a more valid moral framework in a post-religious world. The second question might imply that, for Murdoch writing and reading literature are by itself moral activities and she pointed out that if religious belief were to disappear then the very future of the novel would be under serious threat. *Existentialists and*
Mystics continued the argument in previous literary – critical essays such as *The Sublime and The Beautiful* and *Against Dryness* in asserting that the way to preserve the implicit moral philosophy of the novel was to write in the nineteenth century tradition of realism as practiced by great novelists of that age, Tolstoy and George Eliot. According to Murdoch, the key to their achievement was, their ability to create characters that existed “independently” of their author and plot. Murdoch’s own ethics always was the ability of attending to the world more as a spectator rather than trying to perceive it through the prism of individual fantasy.

Gradually one experiences a pattern unfolding in Murdoch’s development as a novelist. With the novels beginning with *The Nice And The Good* (1968) she left behind her earlier Gothic, melodramatic fictional world. The earlier group of her novels (1954-1967) was quiet obviously influenced by Sartre, Simon Weil, Kierkegaard etc. In those novels, Murdoch intended to present the stark realities of life; she also wanted to convey that evil was so rampant and so very all-pervading that unless one knew it in its uncovered naked form, it was extremely difficult to
understand the presence of ‘the good.’ Murdoch’s reflections on the state of the novel especially in her writings Against Dryness and The Sublime and The Beautiful Revisited were powerful distillations of her aesthetic thought and held great importance for the way in which novels were understood. In Against Dryness she criticized the ‘dryness’ and the ‘self contentedness’ of modern literature, and defined the 20th century novel either as ‘Crystalline’ portraying the human condition and not containing characters in the 19th century sense, or as ‘journalistic’ a large shapeless quasi-documentary object. She further pointed out that we ought to see man against a background of values and of realities, which transcends him. “We need to be enabled to think in terms of degrees of freedom, and to picture in a non-metaphysical, non-totalitarian and non-religious sense, the transcendence of reality” (Pg. 247-71).

Thus, Murdoch placed the other-centered concept of sincerity. Truth highlights ‘the unutterable particularity’ of things while sincerity makes a person judge others according to one’s own opinions, prejudices and beliefs. John Updike emphasized the imaginative richness of Iris Murdoch "with rare concern and
knowledge, she wrote, in a post-religious age, about spiritual activity, as it sparks along that interface where human perception breeds demons out of raindrops” (Pg. 197). For Murdoch, Man was not innately rational, good or free. Reason very often has to be earned, unendingly struggled and pined for, and her world was not easily comprehensible as in ‘naive’ realism, but unfathomably mysterious and energetic beyond our easy grasp. Her work consisted of the limited, the messy, imperfect and sometimes that which was the ‘unperfectible’ task of love, and its consequent failure. Murdoch was well aware that one could not blame society for evil around because evil existed in the human mind.

Murdoch attacked both ‘self knowledge’ and sincerity as second-rate and very often found those virtues to be delusive. Therefore, the unenlightened self was almost mechanical, and an escape from it was not only hard but rather too difficult. At such a point only ‘self-examination’ and ‘self-realization’ strengthen the will and help erode the opaque and obsessive inner life. The present study hopes to examine the protagonists trapped in a godless world, faced with innumerable moral dilemmas, and a
life of spiritual bankruptcy. Studying Murdoch’s novels from a theological point of view, Peter S. Hawkins maintains that:

Murdoch in her novels has been preoccupied with religious problems such as the decay of believed Christianity, the loss of its central authority in western society (either as something adhered to or actively opposed) and consequent vacuum in our moral, as well as spiritual lives (Pg. 88).

Murdoch’s interest in religion was the retrieval of the inner life and this had always been a distinctive feature of her philosophy. Not only did it pose a direct challenge to many of her analytic colleagues, who regarded religion as another instance of bogus metaphysics; but also sets her apart from many modern critics of theism. Though Murdoch joined these critics in rejecting the concept of God, she refused to believe that this necessarily entailed a rejection of the idea of a moral absolute. She further argued that although we may lose the symbol ‘God’ we cannot do
without what the old God symbolized, namely, the idea of the
good as the source of an absolute moral claim on human life.

For Murdoch religion was not defined as belief in a
supernatural or personal God as she states, “I have wanted to
move from ‘God’ to ‘Good,’ taking ‘religion’ along too”
(MGM, 426). Many critics have found Murdoch’s championing of
an impersonal Good over a personal God and ‘the
demythologizing’ impulse of her ‘Platonized Buddhism’ a
welcome tonic against the excesses of ‘Christian orthodoxy’ and
‘God talk.’

Murdoch possessed an uncanny skill in identifying the
underlying presuppositions of her times. To the existential hero
of Sartrean ethics, freely able to choose his values in an otherwise
unauthentic world, she contrasted the so-called mystical hero or
saint, who depended not on will but on “genuine intuition of an
authoritative good” (EM, 227). In her essay *Existentialists and
Mystics* she attacked the hero as ‘the lonely brave man, defiant
without optimism.’ Such a hero was more an ‘adventurer’ and
‘Godless.’ So, while the existentialist novel tries to be cheerfully
godless it abounded in gloom. The existentialist novel was about how freedom and virtue helped to assert the will while the mystical novel depicted freedom and virtue as understanding, or ‘obedience to the good.’ However, Murdoch went on to maintain that no pure example of either novel, or of either hero, existed. The existentialist and mystical heroes were both marked by their apparent isolation from moral norms; and both were ‘outsiders.’ Murdoch’s eagerness to think about the lives of human beings and their relationship to morality had her writing philosophy and fiction simultaneously. Barbara Stevens Heusel comments “for Murdoch, philosophy is a rational activity, while fiction draws on unconscious as well as rational activity” (Pg. 1). Murdoch’s novels were a contribution of ‘minds thinking’ and reflecting inner as well as ‘outer experience.’ Her philosophy has more of metaphysical patterns that were used as guide to the good.

Murdoch not only created her own Philosophy but scrutinized others’ philosophies very closely. A thinker par excellence Murdoch had the unique quality of probing into an idea and minutely weighing their strengths and weaknesses. This was the crux of Metaphysics as a guide to Morals, her major
philosophical text. Murdoch studied the conceptual change, observing the old western truths in light of new ideas, and juxtaposing platonic idealism to Saussurean systems, of Post-Structuralism and deconstruction that went on to become a rage in the ‘western academia.’ According to Murdoch, Jacques Derrida, who believed ‘Heidegger to be the last metaphysician’ was himself a metaphysician and his structuralism (deconstruction) “look[s] like another metaphysic” (MGM,197). She further argued that structuralist theory in general and Derridean practice in particular, “by its removal of the ‘old’ idea of truth and truth seeking as moral value,” inhibits the philosophical study of conceptual change: “if all meaning is deferred our ordinary distinctions, for instance between what is clearly true, and what is dubious, and what is false, are removed and we begin to lose confidence… in what is made to seem the simple, old fashion, ordinary, concept of truth” (MGM,194). Murdoch did not attempt to save ‘absolute truth’ or ‘Platonic forms’ but she searched for a meaningful relationship between the outer and inner mind however, arbitrary that relationship was.’ The Philosophers with whom Murdoch identified closely were those who had a religious sensibility -- they included Plato,
Kant, and Wittgenstein in particular. Since her Oxford and Cambridge days, Murdoch had always been wary of belonging to any particular or specific philosophical bandwagon. Deeply involved during her school days at Oxford in the midst of the 'analytical philosophy' of Bertrand Russell, A.J.Ayer, Gilbert Ryle, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, she preferred or showed inclination to the moral philosophy of G.E.Moore and Plato the most. The closest Murdoch came to join at that time any popular philosophical crowd was during her twenties, when she chanced upon existentialism. However, her published work Sartre, *Romantic Rationalist* (1953), clearly demonstrated her criticism of existentialism. Murdoch also publicly contemplated Derrida's deconstruction, which she labeled as "Plausible amoralistic determinism" (MGM,198). At the same time Murdoch empathized with Derrida and others who were comfortable with various forms of determinism:

> It satisfies a deep human wish to give up, to get rid of freedom, responsibility, remorse, all sorts of personal individual unease, and
surrender to fate and the relief of it
could not be otherwise (MGM,190).

Murdoch believed structuralism, including deconstruction,
paused a threat to 'empirical views of truth and value.'

Being a superb storyteller herself, Murdoch made it easy
for the reader to watch the unfolding of her philosophical process
and to participate ardently in her portrayals of characters and
situations. She, being more of an 'iconoclastic Pilgrim' rather
than a 'demythologizer,' depicted in *Metaphysics as a guide to
Morals* a sequence of ideas in which each philosopher
demythologizes the other. Murdoch defined traditional
metaphysics as "a search for hidden a priori determining forms,
constituting an ultimate reality" (MGM,6). In other words a
transcendent or deduced system that strived "to reach the bases of
things and show us what... must be there" (MGM,259). So in a
way, she shared with the structuralists a yearning for structures.
"Philosophers are artist," she wrote, "and metaphysical ideas are
aesthetic – they are intended to clarify and connect and they
certainly satisfy deep emotional needs" (MGM,37). Thus
summarizing Murdoch ideas of demythologization was not a single road, nor need it imply or mean a disappearance of myths and icons, or some profound ‘rectification’ of ordinary language. The modern scene included an individual’s broader outlook to the concept of religion through greater tolerance and knowledge of other religions. *In Metaphysics as a guide to Morals*, Murdoch stood like ‘a rock of classical Greek moderation,’ amid popular contemporary interpretation. She also cautioned of the challenges in finding a balance between ‘faithfulness to the text’ and ‘inventiveness.’ Thus her philosophy dramatized a large range of views. In spite of the changes Murdoch categorically states:

> In philosophy we go where the honey is. Some thinkers are for us, live and life-giving, others are dead [...] Anyone in the philosophical trade seeks in other philosophers for ideas which they can profitably ‘understand’ whether or not they also make them their own (Rowe, 23).
Her experience as a student of Philosophy helped her to choose not to be conventional or logical or even consistent in her novels. It was inconsistency and paradox that Murdoch specially wanted to capture in her novels. Therefore, she refused to console her readers by fulfilling their expectations rather she compelled her readers to ‘unlearn their perceptions.’

For a moral philosopher like Murdoch, keen interest in theology with its elaboration of the nature of good came quite naturally. Non-transcendence was not just accounted for and set aside, but given equal priority in some of her works. Most of her later novels speak with certainty, of only one thing - ‘a change of consciousnesses,’ ‘a purification of mind and desire’ which does not guarantee liberation. Murdoch explored Christianity and borrowed concepts from far eastern religions, specifically Hinduism and Buddhism.

Murdoch studied religion not only because it interested her but also because it was a cause of intrigue. She searched for answers to her dilemma in theology, especially at the time few intellectuals or artists had done. She was not a convert, but
religion interested her, and its theology, by virtue of its reasoning processes even more. Murdoch was equally intrigued by the concept of God, which religion insisted upon illogically. Thus, for an intelligent rationalist God was too far-fetched an idea. Though Murdoch herself belonged to the above category, she soon realized the similarity between God and Good. Murdoch replaced God with the concept of the good and transformed a ‘theological reality’ into a ‘philosophical one.’ So on one hand Murdoch’s intellect demanded a clarification of the good, while her imagination refused to let go of the beauty covering it. Murdoch at such point took the help of Eastern religions. Suguna Ramanathan explains “this idea of connection with good, a purification of consciousness, is borrowed from the non-Semitic religion she knew best, Buddhism” (Pg. 38). She further explained “Buddhism without revelation, without a saviour, invites the pilgrim to try out the way, even suggests its own rejection, but offers a path. Positing no personal God, it does posit the transcendent experience, available once the Buddha nature is awakened” (Pg. 38-39). Thus Murdoch used both Christianity and Eastern religion to affirm and deny at one and the same moments.
The very existence of man is a daunting 'task' a kind of 'vocation' and an endless process of 'classification.' Jan Walgrave commented "we exist in the truth before we think it explicitly, that even before reflection takes place, man is already aware of the mystery in which he lives" (Pg. 32). Every episode, 'encounter' or 'dialogue' was a wake-up call to grow towards understanding, "unselfing" and gradually move towards self-realization. The call for an authentic morality appears to be a basic human experience, common to human beings almost everywhere in the world. Murdoch takes the deontological stand when she asked in *The Sovereignty of Good*:

Are we not certain that there is a 'true direction' towards better conduct, that goodness really matters, and does not that certainty about a standard suggest an idea of performance, which cannot be reduced to psychological or any other set of empirical standards?

(SG,60).
There was an independent urgency that expects us to be moral and good. Hence the human recognition of the good. Again in *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch went on to say that “the idea of the transcendent, in some form or other, belongs to morality” (SG,58). Speaking of good as transcendent, she remarked, “one might be tempted to use the word ‘faith’ if it could be purged of its religious associations” (SG,60). Thus it may be noted then that the later novels of Murdoch were concerned with the ‘affirming of faith’ in a set up which thwarted it. The novels evoked simultaneously both of those ‘regions where nothingness held sway,’ and those regions where goodness created a ‘magnetic field.’ Such an attitude was essentially a religious attitude. The faith that was expressed may have been tentative but a hopeful affirmation of the possibility of good. It was with such conviction that novel after novel Murdoch presented the characters of Good. Thus Murdoch with unflinching faith and determination kept hope alive.

Any discussion of Murdoch would be incomplete without mentioning her treatment of ‘good and love’ in her novels as well as essays. ‘Goodness’ in Murdoch is synonymous with ‘love.’
Love, according to Murdoch, makes us aware of the opacity of the other; and makes us aware of our own limitations. Goodness, also, means doing away with illusions and stepping away from the ego. The journey towards Goodness was invariably the stripping of subjectivity and recognition of the incoherence and ambiguous nature of reality. Thus, according to Murdoch in *On God and Good*, “the only genuine way to be good is to be good for nothing in the midst of a scene where every ‘natural’ thing, including one’s own mind, is subject to chance” (Pg. 358). Murdoch exhorted her readers to be vary of egoistic attachment. She was aware of the harm ego could inflict upon the higher self. No wonder, then does she emphasize on attention and alertness. Among modern philosophers Simone Weil exercised the most powerful influence in moulding the metaphysical stance of Murdoch. Together, with other abstract concepts, she borrowed from her, the theory of ‘Attention.’ In the vocabulary of Simone Weil and Murdoch attention was a word used to describe “the constantly renewed attempt to see things, objects, people, moral situations, truly as they are, ‘uncoloured’ by our own personal fantasies or needs for consolation” (Byatt,9). Attention meant looking away from the self. It also meant to look at the ‘other’
with deeper inside. Another important concept of Murdoch’s philosophy was tolerance, which she believed to be the most essential quality for spiritual progress. This she illustrated through her characters of Good in her novels. Tolerance for her was the individual’s willingness to recognize and respect things as they were. To interfere less and not to impose one’s ideas or notions on others. It was also the ability to train the mind to understand reality beyond one’s limited consciousness. Tolerance was also required from the novelist as much as from a novelistic character.

For Murdoch an essentially tolerant novelist, she “displays a real apprehension of persons other than the author as having the right to exist and to have a separate mode of being which is important and interesting to themselves” (EM, 271). The distinction between second-rate authors and genuine ones depended on the quality of tolerance which was rare. Murdoch also laid much emphasis on avoiding every kind of fantasy which left a person deluded and blinded to reality. Constantly Murdoch bemoaned that our vices were our obsessions with the self. This obsession lead to fantasy and desires, preventing an obscuring the
individual’s vision of Good. Fantasy, which was ‘the proliferation of blinding self centered aims and images’ degenerated human beings and art into individual perceptions with a false sense of unity. Along with fantasy Masochism was also considered by Murdoch as the artist’s subtle yet greatest enemy. The obvious result of Masochism was the over emphasis on ‘suffering’ instead of ‘death.’ All these Metaphysical concepts borrowed from philosophy were a part of Murdoch’s novels and her ‘saint’ or ‘near-saint’ characters. Murdoch’s novels, according to Marowski could be studied as variables on “the relationship between love and freedom; the conflict between contingency and design; and the necessity of looking beyond one’s self to discover truth” (Pg. 286). Her novels dealt with the relationship between art and morality which she simultaneously explored in her philosophical essays as well. This relation was ‘subtle and metaphysical.’ The writer must love his characters in such a way that the reader too begins to love and understand them. Love as a subject was an equally important concept in Iris Murdoch. She puts great faith in the power of love, which in itself could act as a vehicle of “unselfing” if looked at in the correct perspective. To Murdoch love was ‘the non violent
apprehension of difference and the delightful perception of the inexhaustible otherness of the other'. Love, for Murdoch was one of the most peculiar phenomena in the world which she was never tired of exploring in her novels. If Murdoch posited an ethics of love, where human existence was a task to grow in love, then, it must be asked what kind of love ought to be nurtured? In *The Sovereignty of Good* she specifically says "love is knowledge of the individual" (SG,28) and again, ‘the central concept of morality is the individual thought of as knowable by love.’

The novels of Murdoch illustrated the falsification to which such loving was susceptible. Her characters were always ready to fall in love making a nonsense of all barriers of age, class and sex. Harold Bloom concurs: “Iris Murdoch’s particular mastery is in representing the maelstrom of falling in love, which is the characteristic activity of nearly all her men and women” (Pg. 1). Most of her characters are ‘lured by the enchantment of a mirage’. Murdoch described love as the tension between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection which lies beyond it. Admitting that it is the source of our greatest errors, and capable of infinite degradation, she says:
When it is even partially refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for good. Its existence is the unmistakable sign that we are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the good. It is a reflection of the warmth and light of the sun (SG,103).

Love then was the beginning and the end. It acts upon the self, increasing the capacity for loving. Moreover, it brought an awareness that there was more of itself which was ‘a unity,’ ‘a completeness’ and the only way to experience that completeness was to let this work in the soul. Thus, the central fact, however, was that love was the virtue of loving ‘the other,’ and in its purest form it became the highest good. And this good was above the good – evil opposition. Moreover, if good was the union of two different opposites then it would be unfair to consider evil as the opposite of good. Murdoch firmly believed good to be above the good evil contrast. The good for her was ‘sovereign’ and ‘unviolate.’ It has the ability to transform evil, and is therefore
more powerful. Evil thus could change and become good; but good remains unchanged. Thus it may be observed that the deliberate ambivalence of Murdoch’s assertions was inextricably mixed with her moral vision. Her consideration of the inexhaustible variety of the world and the questioning that went with it was supremely moral. Ambiguity and Morality move in parallel motion this also explained why the overall impression was disturbing, and many of her critics complained about incoherence.

Since the publication of her novel, *Under the Net* in 1954, Murdoch had emerged as one of the most influential British novelist. She was immediately recognized as a powerful intellectual and an original theorist of fiction. Murdoch chose an unusual form and went on to explore it in detail. Murdoch pursued her theoretical interest and examined it closely. Her passion for reading and thought, along with a great literary sensibility helped her to write brilliantly. Iris Murdoch had called Sartre’s *La Nausee* the ‘instructive overture’ to his work. Murdoch’s *Under the Net* also fitted into the same description. Moreover, it was placed with novels such as Amis’ *Lucky Jim* as
the new ‘Angry Social Realism.’ Although the novel had similarities with Sartre’s *La Nausee* it stood out in the sense it followed the Romantic tradition. The novel was Platonist in the making, as it enquired into the nature of the good man and his relation with art, with true vision, and with copying. Art as much as Jake was the hero, in its subject matter. The book dealt with anxieties about realism much before it had become fashionable in England.

From the 1950’s onwards Murdoch’s productive flow of novels brought a great deal of public attention as the work of no other post-war British novelist succeeded in doing. The 1960’s witnessed an increase in the frequency of her novels and it earned some critical hostility. However, the later part of the 1960’s saw a change of direction: especially in the size of her novels and in her expression. She wrote with the same intensity and published a novel almost annually. By this time, Murdoch had matured and mastered the art of writing, displaying what her more serious admirers had long sensed: ‘her uncompromisingly firm grasp of the intellectual demands of literary form.’ The 1970’s began to see a lot of public appreciation of her remarkable achievement.
She was elected to the Irish Academy in 1970 and became an Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1975. Her novels went on to win increasing honours making her one of the greatest novelists of international acclaim. ‘Murdochland’ went on to become an ‘internationally known landscape’ which became significant to the contemporary British novel.

Murdoch’s first four published novels belonged to the 1950’s the time when she relied heavily on existentialism. All those novels were written in quick succession. Under the Net (1954) was a genuinely European novel, with its central character an ‘outsider’ figure, its form was the picaresque adventure. Under the Net was told by the protagonist Jake Donaghue, a Bohemian, and an Irish Man brought up like Murdoch in London and a ‘professional unauthorized person,’ ‘a raffish outsider.’ As the story unfolded he came across as impulsive, restless, deeply impressionable, romantic and lost. The book was about the protagonist’s ‘journeyings’ it was also a mixture of rise and fall and a subsequent search for truth.
Murdoch had always maintained that her novels are pilgrimages from illusions towards reality. She further stated that ‘reality’ could not be found in books, anymore than it was in life. Murdoch’s, next work, *The Flight from the Enchanter*, appeared in 1956. The book received a good response. The book clearly stated a preoccupation with power relations. Murdoch in this context had said “a particular kind of mythology that interests me is that of the power figure: the figure who is elected, as it were, to be God by other people, and made into a God who is a kind of false God” (Todd, 32). Mischa Fox was indeed the magical power figure. He was a figure about whom the others were busy weaving fantasies. In this book in particular, many of the characters were 'foreigners.' The story centered around characters, some of them refugees – Mischa himself, Lusiewicz brothers, Nina and Annette Cockayne. The protagonist Mischa had all shades of a negative character. His evil deeds were carried out by Calvin Blick. And Peter Saward, Rosa’s scholarly lover, thought, Mischa was at times cruel and at other times capable of feeling pity. He was seen against the world of suffering and violence of war, where love and human friendship appeared to be
dying. Mischa, conscious of pain, suffering and weakness, felt it a necessity to kill; he felt:

If the Gods kill us, it is not for their sport but because we fill them with a sort of intolerable compassion, a sort of nausea. (TFE,226).

Murdoch projected in this novel an influence of Simone Weil’s concept of “affliction” and of “attention.” Very often “affliction” leads to deliberate annihilation, like Calvin Blick and Nina who suffered and succumbed. They became agents of “uprooting” others like Lusiewicz brothers or even Mischa. The whole narrative was rather claustrophobic and gloomy. The characters appeared dark, filled with chaotic existence and constant struggle. The novel clearly pointed to Murdoch’s link with Sartre. The novel contained broken scenes and episodes where the characters struggled to escape but in vain. Each character represented individual existence and different ‘choices.’ Each was a stranger, alienated and extremely lonely. The novel had loud tones of stark existentialism.
The Sandcastle published in 1957 dealt with the problems of personal relationships but compared to The Flight from the Enchanter, it had a far wider social dimension. The novel was set among the staff of Home Countries boarding school. It was a love story, ending in renunciation. The novel concentrated on Bill Mor’s attempt to escape an unfulfilling marriage by becoming involved with a young painter Rain Carter. Rain has been invited to the school to paint the portrait of the retiring head-master, Demoyte. Mor was faced with moral dilemmas especially when confronted by his children. Once again Murdoch dealt with the subject of ethics and art. Mor decided to give up everything and live with Rain, but the twist of the matter was pointed out through the episode of the car stuck in the mud and overturned into the river. Mor’s plan was foiled by the actions of his children. Rain also later decided to lead the life of an artist, especially when she learnt of Mor’s political ambitions. As the title implied, the book dealt with notions of “form” and “permanence.” Rain was brought up on the tideless Mediterranean, where the sand was too dry to make a sandcastle. Finally, she told him that since he would have to give up his political ambitions and his family for her, their affair would be
“all dry sand running through the fingers” (SC,300). Even in her earlier novels Murdoch had undertones of the subjects she went on to explore “Goodness.” The mind always looked for private consolations. But Murdoch stressed on the need to strip away all fantasy in order to understand true meaning of morality.

Murdoch’s next novel The Bell published in 1958 was about a religious community, Imber, in Gloucestershire. Much of the action was apprehended through the consciousness of Dora Greenfield, who joined her husband Paul, an art historian. The other important character was Michael Meade, one of the leaders of the community. Michael and Dora were the two characters round whom the book centers. Both these characters were struggling within a cyclical structure they have constructed. Both of them lack moral clarity and therefore were unable to cope with the challenges. Michael chose the spiritual vocation not because he felt the urge to do so, but, rather as a means to escape from the tension of ordinary life. Michael was battling to rid himself from homosexuality. As a teacher Michael had homosexual relationship with Nick Fawley a school boy of fourteen years.
Later he developed similar feelings for eighteen year old Toby. Watching Toby asleep, Michael felt:

It could not be that God intended such a spring of love to be quenched utterly. There must be a way in which it could be made a power for good (TB,158).

Michael was trapped under neurotic delusion, for he considered this love as the very nature of goodness. As against Michael’s struggle and moral failure, Dora was shown as having a mystical experience. Her experience at the National Gallery while looking at pictures, awakens in her a higher understanding. Dora thinks of the paintings as “something real outside herself, and good.” She felt spiritually awakened. In The Bell Murdoch explored for the first time the theme of love as leading to Goodness. In this sense, Murdoch had set the tone for her later works which persisted her ardent effort towards self-realization. Her enquiry into the nature of art in The Sublime and The Good developed the idea that the common spirit shared between art and morals was love, “the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real” (Pg. 51-2).
Thus, the early novels of Murdoch pointed to a world of 'multiplicity.' The author had aptly invested much in mystifying her readers. The early novels sometimes buy off our curiosity with bribes to our love of surprise; and surprise can itself become a 'manner' a connection, and can exhibit the human "unfreedom it ironises" (Conradi, 62).

Murdoch expected her readers to be patient to her world of 'multiplicity.' The dark characters or a dark plot was not the author’s negligence towards her readers. She was always concerned with the ethical problems and moral dilemmas of her characters in the early and later novels. Nevertheless, there were characters who offered themselves to strive towards 'the good' for example Bledyard in *The Sandcastle*; the Abbess in *The Bell* argued forcefully for the highest kind of spiritual life. Murdoch crafted her novels allowing her characters to grope in the dark, yet in the midst of the darkness she allowed her characters of good to be the torch-bearers. With a new-found enthusiasm she abandoned the dark and her novel *The Nice and The Good* marked a turning point in her career ushering the best.
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