

## Chapter I

---

### Introduction

---

It is a worthwhile critical exercise to work out the Murdochian vision which is not a conclusive but an expanding one. The vision is not conclusive because it concerns 'love' which is indefinable and indefinite, mad, blind and boisterous. For Iris Murdoch love means freedom in love, thought and actions. That is to say, Murdochian love knows no obligations, is not bound by any emotional or sentimental shackles - it is not transcendental in character, nor Platonic in its philosophical implications. It is a detached and ironic view of life that freely flows down like a fountain. To Iris Murdoch love is not 'a red red rose', nor is it the journey's end - it is the thorn that awakens, pricks, and prepares one for a journey into one's own inner self.

Love hangs and pierces like a sword, blossoms like a flower, consumes like fire and eludes like Time. It destroys and creates, chains and sets free. While in love Murdochian characters do not grow like vegetables. They achieve their own perfection, at least constantly yearn for it; they must have all the consciousness, the understanding of a God and, what is most important, an exact balancing of each other. Such a vision may appear to sound Lawrentian, because for both Miss Murdoch and D.H. Lawrence, love is the guiding force that brings an individual to his fullness of being. To both love is not just the mutual mixing and

mingling; it is not a complete fusion. It is a bridge that connects two points, or two extremes, while each maintains its respective separateness. Like two planets or heavenly bodies revolve round each other or remain separate by a secret understanding and law, the Murdochian and Lawrentian lovers maintain a perfect balance. While the sudden fusion leads to catastrophe and cosmic disaster the balance guarantees existence and freedom. Therefore, as we see, for both of them, love is the liberty of mind, freedom of choice and sovereignty of soul. Both stress freedom in love, but Miss Murdoch departs from the ethos of Lawrentian world in so far as she deals with the concepts like 'morality', 'evil', etc. and thus achieves a uniquely personal approach.

Always in Miss Murdoch's writing, there is the insistence on 'morality' as a technique for discovering more about what is real, with the warning that unless great care is taken we may fail to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own. It is this topic of 'fantasy' meaning 'bad imagining' - (The Darkness of Practical Reason) that is central to all Iris Murdoch's works. To live morally and valuably a man must, Miss Murdoch feels, be always on his

guard against the state of 'bad imagining', he must respect the unique otherness; and he must undertake "the constant quiet work of attention and imagination".<sup>1</sup> This is the reason, why most of them contradict their own sayings and feelings, change their judgements and shift their positions. This is the main lesson of her writings, and in each of her novels, at least one character is made to learn it.

For Iris Murdoch everything is empty, if it is superficial. She is not concerned with the facile evil and any kind of value judgement on it is redundant - "it's all just conventions and feelings". The judgement outside the context is improper and the evaluation outside the purview is untimely. In the course of a constant search for one's own self while respecting the "otherness", the concepts like evil become quite confusing and misleading. In a world where incest is committed and justified, murder becomes a logical necessity for freedom, and deception a habit; concepts like evil become empty and meaningless.

To understand 'evil' in Iris Murdoch's novel one has to examine characters like Julius King in A Fairly Honourable Defeat. The man breaks up his relationship with Morgan, destroys the happy, unique comradeship between Simon and Axel, undermines happily married Hilary and Rupert and yet no one can really bear a grudge against him. His evil designs cannot

be called malignant - he destroys but is not disgusting. He is an artist who schemes and designs, his dance of destruction has a rhythm and harmony. But one can safely say that Iris Murdoch's 'evil' is unnameable like her understanding of 'reality'. In other words, 'evil' has various manifestations which shall be discussed in the later chapters.

In all her novels, love unites and unfolds the human personality which is constantly in search of its identity. All kinds of literature participate in this timeless enquiry, probes into the fundamental question of self-discovery. Such questioning leads to alienation, distances an individual, makes him an island and even in a deep human relationship Murdoch considers such probings as freedom emanating from love. The free agents in her novels do not fuse themselves and the more they indulge in sexual acts and intellectual arguments, the more vigorously they pursue their own, independent courses. In the cosmos of love, Murdoch's characters are the dances of several forms of energies who do not mix and mingle, but neutralise and balance each other.

She defines love variously and cogently as "the imaginative recognition of, that is respect of otherness", or the "non-violent apprehension of difference". Implicit in this definition is her idea of "opacity of persons" or

as she terms it in her work on Sartre, the "volcanic otherness of people". Murdoch can see no moral progress towards a reconceptualization of personality without the recognition and deepening of her view of love as the acknowledgement that others exist, exist separate from each other, exist independently.

Both 'love' and 'freedom' are equally important to her concept of personality and the ideas of character creation. As Murdoch's definition goes, it is very difficult to make a clear distinction between 'love' and 'freedom'. She says "Freedom is knowing and understanding and respecting things quite other than ourselves."<sup>2</sup>

This definition is very close to her definition of love, but there is a difference suggested by her emphasis on "imaginative" regarding love and "knowing" regarding freedom. One might infer from this differentiation that love is to be associated with the contemplation and apprehension of others, while freedom is to be associated with the knowledge of the 'other'. She says:

To be free is something like this: to exist sanely and without fear and to perceive what is real.<sup>3</sup>

To live is to love in Iris Murdoch's novel. The love keeps on creating numerous ripples, chains and cycles

and very confusing networks. They swirl and swivel and yet reach the shore. They get puzzled, exhilarated and exhausted, and yet have enough left for finding out the 'pointer' - their ultimate love. Murdochian characters believe, witness and wait for a sign - the strange, spiritual, miraculous and sometimes inscrutable:

It was an aspect of Michael's belief in God, and one which although he knew it to be dangerous, he could never altogether reject that he expected the emergence in his life of patterns and signs. He has always felt himself to be a man with a definite destiny, a man waiting for a call.<sup>4</sup>

Eventhough they terminate an affair, cancel the present love and find out an alternative, they cannot leave the past, they need all their past and all of their present for a preparation for the future. The fixed, determined, future sign is their inevitable destiny.

Iris Murdoch acts within a specific network. The existential man once sure of his shore, must sail towards it relentlessly. Once they get the unmistakable call of destiny: their 'love', they rush forward with unimaginable speed. And from that point onward all kinds of pressures, such as, guilt, morality, social establishments and responsibilities break down. The 'lovers' become liberated. It is like heading for heaven. From the ashes of the dead and bygone relationships they pick up the squibs and they understand it in a flash. But what is more interesting, the

reader knows it, all along their wanderings. The characters themselves also have it in their subconscious, like a fire burning all the time; they have felt its heat, only they did not see the light.

To say that Murdochian characters only pursue the inevitable destiny would be an oversimplification. Murdochian Destiny like Hardy's Fate is the ever elusive, mysterious mirage that baffles all the time and never does permit the seekers the exact recognition. This is not to say that such a destiny is gloomy and cloudy and dark like Hardy's, it is rather ironic, contradictory and hence, real. Catastrophes in intense love affairs (ranging from homo-sexual to hetero-sexual to incest) not only lead to a heart break, involving common reactions like despair, dejection, jealousy, revenge, etc. but also to the emergence of confused intellect that has moments of self-recognition. Such states are momentary and transitory because the realizer soon contradicts or seems to forget his earlier moments of rejuvenation. Michael in The Bell loved both Nick and Toby with the fullness of his being. Nick had overwhelmed and fulfilled him but afterwards despised and betrayed him. Toby was another fate, another pointer - a wrong, 'misunderstood' dangerous sign.

Nick had forced Toby to play exactly the part which Nick himself had played thirteen years earlier. Toby had been his understudy indeed. Michael had hoped to save Nick. But Nick had merely ruined him a second time and in precisely the same way.<sup>5</sup>

Everything is true in its proper aspect, everything is false outside its proper moment. The confusion, the understanding, that is, the ultimate sign lives in them and yet it is for ever eluding them - the ultimate revelation has to wait for its turn. And in the meanwhile life goes on, relationships are made and broken, the Present and Now stretches itself on. They all live in the present, with all their past consciousness turned into present experiences - they live eternally. In the churning of various relationships they perceive the moments of awakening, experience freedom and these consummating moments set them free, lead them to one profound experience after another and finally prepare for the Ultimate.

Danby in Bruno's Dream has flirted with Diana and Adelaide like a machine with occasional moments of self-realization. There were times when Diana and Danby yearned and longed for melting into each other and sway with the harmony of slow music:

Slow foxtort  
with eyes half-closed Danby and Diana  
were rotating dreamily in each other's arms.<sup>6</sup>

But once Danby sees the flash, perceives his 'Destiny' in Lisa the emancipation becomes complete and natural. The smoke curtain vanishes, the clearer horizon reveals itself and Danby is swept off his feet. The enchantment begins, the mad, stupefied ghost walks out:

You may find this incomprehensible. I've only seen you a few times. But oh God Lisa, please believe it's serious, it's terrible. I love you ... I feel a sense of destiny here ... I'm a frivolous person, but not about you ... I dare to say respect the fact that I love you ... you have got to ... I love you Lisa, and everything else is utterly blotted out.

Your slave Danby.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, for Danby everything else is blotted out - all the past, all those so called precious, unique, fulfilling moments with Adelaide and Diana simply come to nothing and are forgotten, no more of looking back with guilt and remorse - it is a forward journey and a conscious drive at his destiny.

They follow their lovers wherever they go. Denial or refusal is simply not taken into account. Come hell, fire or brimstone, like ghosts they pursue. In the dead of the night, even in driving rain, they enter into their lovers' compounds like thieves. And when everything fails, including all kinds of pursuit, the last resort is violence. Violence to them is the last method of communication and the capacity for committing violence is like self-liberation. The violence has to be learnt as a form of communication.

One of them is made ready by the other in order to properly neutralise and balance. In A Severed Head it is the woman Honor who understands its necessity first and prepares Martin step by step:

I believe you love my brother.  
But you do no good by letting him off.  
He wants, he needs, your harshness, your  
criticism, even your violence. Because  
they are both persons with great capacity  
for self-deception.<sup>8</sup>

This gives Martin a clue, a clue to love and communicate. When Honor's snake-like eyes and the hideous Jewish face bowls Martin over, Martin settles down to the last resort: Violence.

'we're not likely to meet in the future', said Honor Kleen. 'I'm going back to Cambridge almost at once' ...

Now the frustration builds up in Martin, the despondency simmers not because he is bothered about Honor not seeing him in the future, rather he feels wretched that his love will remain uncommunicated, unheard and untold

what happened next may seem a little improbable,<sup>9</sup>  
but reader must believe me that it did occur ...

they indulge in a violent, macabre fight.

Honor had already understood and received the communication and several pages after when Martin asks

'when did you know I loved you?'  
It was a lover's question  
'when you attacked me in the cellar'.<sup>10</sup>

If with D.H. Lawrence women are in love, with Miss Murdoch, it is men in love. In her novels the most intense focus is on the flawed, culpable and questing - learning male. In the matters of relationships, not just the initiative, but the madness and an impatient yearning usually catches up the Murdochian male first. It is Tim (Nuns and Soldiers) who has got to hold Gertrude's hand and when with an evident ~~and when with an evident~~ and relentless attention Honor waited for Martin to speak, he says at last "I suppose you realize that I'm in love with you?" And Honor, of course, replied back in affirmative. She has realized, no doubt, but it is Martin who first speaks out.

But this is not to say that the women are always at the receiving end. While the world of form, convention, in practically all her novels is largely male, that of contingency is ruled by women. The Bell is the clearest example, in which the religious lay community at Imber Court led by Michael is set up against the community of nuns under the governorship of Abess.

But in this context, both D.H. Lawrence and Iris Murdoch, meet at one point, which we should explore here in the introduction. Like Lawrentian characters, Murdoch's lovers constantly desire to achieve the best of both worlds:

a perfect male bonding and a fulfilling hetero-sexual-mental relationship. Almost all the novels of Miss Murdoch resort to a very unintelligible male-bonding and homo-sexuality. Unintelligible, because it is not manifested, it shows and presents itself, but never convinces as it does in D.H. Lawrence's novels, in Women in Love in particular. In short, a healthy, profound and essential male-male relationship is necessary in case of D.H. Lawrence but Iris Murdoch has not been quite convincing in showing its inevitable occurrence in a very conscious intellectual which some of her characters are. But the fact remains that both the novelists have grappled with this problem.

The constant attempt of Lawrentian characters is to find in each possible pair a final, almost extra-human relationship. Only Birkin and Ursula manage to succeed "a new consummation of my being and of her being in a new one, a new paradisaal unit regained from duality". Birkin, who understands how the perversion distorts the living mysteries brought upon by Gerald and Gudrun, watches the snow-God, the 'Industrial Magnate' and is suddenly illuminated: "He should have loved me".

And let us compare all these with Martin's letters to Honor Klein:

My feelings for Palmer are of normal intensity. I've never been in the accepted sense, a homo-sexual, but certainly my attachment to Palmer has something of this colour ... Palmer's liaison with my wife has increased rather than diminished my affection for him.<sup>11</sup>

And the third letter reads:

I hope we shall meet again and this incident may serve as a stepping stone to an understanding of each other which has so far been, on both sides, conspicuously lacking.<sup>12</sup>

Not only Martin, most of the 'flawed and culpable' Murdochian male characters, want to understand the pull and magic of both the worlds. D.H. Lawrence cannot have the best of both the worlds, not that he does not want it, but it is 'impossible', concludes Ursula. Even Miss Murdoch cannot. The understanding is not the reality. Iris Murdoch in The Darkness of Political Reason writes: "I would be prepared to imply that one who perceives what is real, will also act rightly".<sup>13</sup> But reality is always baffling, it subtly escapes human comprehension, it never manifests itself with a calculable certainty, may be, it just leaves its shadow, its footprints. Therefore, "Reality is not a given whole" ...<sup>14</sup> she says in her critical writings and many of her novels echo such expression.

And to impose this aspect of absence of reality or truth on a form which ignores the contingencies of life is to endanger the rich conceptual background from which

imagination can take sustenance. As she advocates more concepts with which to picture the substance of being, so also she demands acceptance of the accidental, the unlikely and the improbable. Contingency, supplies characters with aspects not of ambiguity, but of mystery.

This, then, is the broad base of Iris Murdoch's vision and theory of personality. The individual is unique, "unutterably particular", and opaque. He is composed of fact, myth and unknowableness. He exists, and he must learn through the exercise of love and freedom that others exist independently of himself. He can apprehend "this volcanic otherness" only when his moral concepts are transformed and once again there is a background against which he may picture the transcendent realities of his being. Miss Murdoch cites Camus as a novelist who writes in an attempt to speak the truth that human being is substantial, impenetrable, individual, indefinite and valuable.

Miss Murdoch is her own best critic. In one of her recent interviews, she said to Ruth Lake Heyd that she is "objective about any flaws that her work may have, and is particularly sensitive to weaknesses in character delineation". She "attempts in each new novel to create stranger characters, who will seem realistic and valid".<sup>15</sup> She cites Hannah of The Unicorn as a character who eluded the pattern

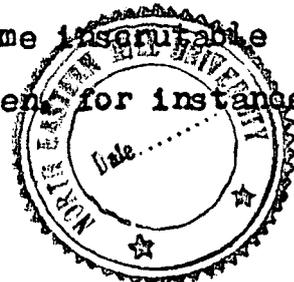
laid down by her creator.

It is apparent that Miss Murdoch's solution to these problems hinges on the matters of authorial tolerance, i.e. the exercise of love and freedom that will establish the balance between character and story. That she is not always successfully tolerant in creating her people Miss Murdoch attributes to "imperfect love" or imperfect apprehension of otherness. Professor Heyd found that Miss Murdoch's attitude toward love is summed up in the Abess's admonition to Michael in The Bell:

Good is an overflow ... Remember that all our failures are ultimately failures of love. Imperfect love must not be condemned and rejected but made perfect. The way is always forward, never back.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to these problems of ideas and characterization, there is the problem of the contingent. Besides mystery, chance and opinion there is also the aspect that Murdoch calls "eccentricity". For example, her characters often argue with themselves at great length (usually narrated as an interior monologue), a given action is justified and then they abruptly act in opposition to the preceding detailed reasoning. They are "Accidental Men" and they are "philosopher's pupils". Austin, George, "the word child", Martin, Danby and the whole lot carry some insupportable hideous aura around them. Even some women, for instance,

102377



Honor and Hannah assume symbols like the 'severed head' and 'the unicorn'. Primarily, to my mind, two important causes are responsible for this impregnable and unintelligible eccentricity about them, i.e. the accidental love or the contingencies and the philosophical biases. If the former is an enchanting irrational attraction, the latter leads to all sorts of chaos, confusions and intellectual wanderings. When asked by Heyd why so many of her characters exhibit eccentric patterns of thought and behaviour, Miss Murdoch 'laughed rather ominously' and suggested:

when one has the privilege of knowing one's friends more intimately, one learns that people are eccentric.<sup>17</sup>

This study also explores the responsibilities of typical Murdochian characters. As pointed out earlier, an individual's idea of morality is influenced by his understanding of evil. And this morality is connected with the "knowing" aspect of freedom. Murdochian characters are bound till the end and the novels one after another record their passionate desire to break the bond, to tear it apart and at the same time their moral considerations and their personal inner conflicts constantly wrangle with each other. Modern literature, ethics and philosophy that are bereft of moral referents do not even care to go deeper than the facile evil. But she creates a world of demonic, all

pervading, almighty evil which enchants and attracts the characters with a predetermined and predictable precision and the enchanted ones like the sleep-walkers have no other alternative but to go to the end of it.

Therefore, my contention is that different manifestations of evil with its amorous, romantic and magical powers are as powerful and magnetic as that of the love and the divine. A Murdochian character falls in love with such evil, becomes overwhelmed, chases a mirage, then tries to fly to the clearer horizon of freedom by cutting the hideous threads, misunderstands the trap, gets more entangled and baffled and finally revolts. And for Miss Murdoch morality begins with this. Morality begins with the revolt against society, its norms, its defined evils that restrict one from going into his own inner self and respecting 'otherness'. That Patriotism is divine, that incest is immoral, that Satan is an evil incarnate, prevents one from dabbling and corresponding with the evil and such taboos encourage fanciful preoccupations. To perceive what is real amidst the intense human relationship (that is love) and to perceive it on one's own in relation to 'other' (that is independence or freedom) becomes a moral responsibility for every Murdochian character.

References

1. Iris Murdoch: "The Darkness of Political Reason",  
Encounter, XXVII (July, 1966), p.49.
2. Iris Murdoch: "The Sublime and Beautiful Revisited",  
p.270
3. Iris Murdoch: "The Darkness of Political Reason", p.50.
4. Iris Murdoch: The Bell, Triad/Panther Books, 1976, p.82.
5. Ibid., p.296.
6. Iris Murdoch: Bruno's Dream - Triad/Panther Books, 1977,  
p.80.
7. Ibid., p.146.
8. Iris Murdoch: A Severed Head, Penguin Books in Association  
with Chatto and Windus, 1961, p.64.
9. Ibid., pp.110-111.
10. Ibid., p.180.
11. Ibid., p.114.
12. Ibid., p.116.
13. Iris Murdoch: 'The Darkness of Political Reason', p.50.
14. Iris Murdoch: The Flight From the Enchanter, The Viking  
Press, N.Y., 1956, p.304.
15. Ruth Lake Heyd: "An interview with Iris Murdoch" -  
University of Windsor Review (Spring, 1965), p.142.
16. Iris Murdoch: The Bell, p.235.
17. Ruth Lake Heyd: "An interview with Iris Murdoch", p.143.