

Chapter IV

Conclusion

E.M. Forster's Aspects of the Novel, proposes 'Expansion, not completion, which is uniquely true of Iris Murdoch's entire vision. As mentioned in the beginning of the introduction, the expanding vision keeps on stretching and continuing because it involves 'love', which is endless and permeating, creating new worlds and opening out new vistas. There is no summing up of love, no fixed pattern in which it can subside, every instance is unique and novel and as the Abess admonishes Michael in The Bell: "the way is always forward, never back". It might not always be forward, but one thing is certain - it is always diverse, different and distinct.

Linda Kuehl's remarks point up the difficulties of summing up Iris Murdoch's fiction:

This genre is stamped by a combination of pyrotechnics and philosophy, a design of bizarre effects intended to convey reality as contingent and eccentric. It employs stock fairy tale, mythic and gothic devices and transforms them into literary correlates of the author's philosophical vision.¹

The quotation describes the magician with her rod but not the stage on which she operates. The stage consists of what we have called, the 'pursuit and flight', the connection and opening out; that is 'love and freedom'.

Therefore, the stage, the magician and the effects of the rod all combined, produce the baffling complexity of vision that we come across in her novels.

The fact remains that most of her novels are indigestible, in the sense that after finishing a book one still gazes at the ceiling with a blank head and a big question mark in the front. The more one tries to solve it, the larger it grows. But this is true of all great works and immortal arts, because they try to picture a life which is essentially mysterious and baffling. The meaning of life lies in the aura of darkness that surrounds it.- But this does not deter the Murdochian characters from going deep into the very roots and pits of this unnameable mystery and enchantment. After all, for Miss Murdoch, Life and Love are the prime enchanters that attract the Murdochian lunatics, lovers and philosophers. Miss Murdoch's attitude towards life, love and the scope of her works are summed up in the Abess's admonition to Michael in The Bell:

... where we generously and sincerely intend it, we are engaged in a work of creation which may be mysterious even to ourselves - and because it's mysterious, we may be afraid of it. But this should not make us draw back.²

And this did not make Captain Ahab, Santiago or Miersault draw back. Murdochian characters are a bit of

Ahabs and Santiagos (in their own ways) who never mind to have 'come too far' down the road - beyond their limitations. Here what matters is the journey, the search and the timeless enquiry, the results become unimportant. Instead, the 'pointer' or the eternal quest for the destination assumes paramount importance.

So much for the philosophy behind the indigestible unintelligibility. Now let us try to understand the magician who contributes to this mystery in the form of different techniques that she employs. To quote a review on her in the T.L.S.:

One persistent source of trouble for the reader is her uneasy wedding of fable and realism - although when she dropped the yeast of fable and laboriously manufactured the 1916 Easter Rebellion background in 'The Red and the Green' (1965) the book did not really rise at all and became in some parts nearly indigestible.³

Indeed, the intercourse and intermingling of 'fable and realism' is really 'uneasy'; because, the reader hardly knows the line that can differentiate these two. For an example, in 'A Severed Head' the Japanese Samurai sword which Honor flashes with immense hypnotizing speed serves as a fable while symbolising a terrible unintelligible reality. At least Martin takes a fair amount of time after the incident to understand the

implications of that unique phenomenon. As a fable, these swords in Japan are considered practically as religious objects. They are forged not only with great care but with great reverence. And the use of them is not merely an art but a spiritual exercise. Honor said to Martin:

'Being a christian, you connect spirit with love. These people connect it with control, with power'

'What do you connect it with?'
She shrugged her shoulders. 'I'm a Jew'.⁴

Martin is unable to understand this irony. Even the reader is bound to be confused. They tend to forget the hints given by Honor earlier because of the extraordinary impact made by the Samurai sword. That the sword defines and describes the 'control and power' of 'Love' is completely missed, and like Martin, the reader is mesmerized by the exquisite display of the sword by Honor that cuts the napkins into various parts. But here is a display and communication of the perfect 'control and power' of Honor's love towards Martin, a violent simmering fire that is disposed through the utter control over the sword. And this 'control and power' should not be mistaken for chauvinism or dominance, it's rather the

apprehension and knowing of the 'other', the perfect act of 'balancing and neutralizing' (see Introduction) that is symbolized by cleanly cut, decapitated napkins into two halves. The perfect dissection of napkins into even halves symbolizes the balance and control and the neutrality. And the 'hideously sharp' implications of the act like the cutting edge of the sword are naturally missed by the wandering hero - Martin, for he is not ready and yet. The apprehension of 'other' is an unpremeditated, spontaneous realization; it is what D.H. Lawrence calls 'the quick of life' and this has not electrified Martin as yet:

I put my hand on the blade, moving it up towards the hilt and feeling the cutting edge. It was hideously sharp. My hand stopped. The blade felt as if it were charged with electricity and I had to let go ...?

So as we see neither Martin, nor the readers, for the time being can demarcate the line between the fable and the reality implied by the sword. Martin cannot neutralize and tolerate the force of 'electricity' discharged by the sword. But we should always remember that it is not the sword that reserves the charge, rather it is charged with the 'control and power' of Honor's love. The reality of control and power associated with the fable; the Samurai sword and the individual exhibition in its near perfection, are all fused in such a surprising manner that one misses the

entire meaning of this particular act. And this is the basic problem that contributes to the indigestibility of Miss Murdoch's vision. Even the title of the book A Severed Head is a terrible object of fascination, a fable. As Honor herself comments:

I'm a severed head such as primitive tribes and old alchemists used to use, anointing it with oil and putting a morsel of gold upon its tongue to make it utter prophecies. and who knows but that long acquaintance with a severed head might not lead to strange knowledge. For such knowledge one would have paid enough ...⁶

And Honor in fact belongs to the primitive Jewish tribe, with a fugitive and slumberous look which Martin cannot decipher. It might have been sheer weariness, it might have been resignation. Martin always tries in vain to detect and interpret Honor's face with her narrow dark eyes and the slightly oriental appearance peculiar to certain Jewish women. There was something animal-like and repellent in the glistening stare, which Martin cannot resist; for the fact was that Palmer was beautiful while she was very ugly with her sallow cheek which shone dully like wax, and the black gleaming hair, oily, straight and brutally short. 'She was a subject for Goya'. And Martin has paid and sacrificed enough and has learnt a horrible lot because of this 'subject for Goya'. Martin has lost his wife Antonia to Alexander, his brother, his mistress Georgie deserts him and flies away with Palmer to America and to top it all, Martin

witnesses the macabre and dazzling scene of naked Palmer and his naked sister Honor embracing each other. His acquaintance with the severed head has led him to the nightmarish visions of knowledge and the horrible secret twists that life can take and the dark, unknown corridors that individuals pass through.

My intention was to show the doubleness of the vision, the unclear, hazy horizon consisting of fable and fact. Dr. Honor Klein as a severed head with the Samu~~ai~~ sword not only does utter the prophecies and lead people to the awful brinks of realizations, but as an individual, expresses her own emotions and passions through the symbols that act also as fables. ⁶ She is an exciting exorcist, representing the primitive tribes with all their devastating ugliness, but if one sees properly and can penetrate deep into that black, bald head, then one sees the beauty of it. And Martin sees it for the first time:

I had prevented myself so far from looking especially at Honor. I looked at her now ... she looked to my eyes of farewell touchingly mortal, as she had looked then, her demon splendour quenched. Only now I could see, in her ugliness, her beauty. It was almost too much.⁷

Therefore, the interaction within and between these two patterns is in a very real sense the pattern and interaction between individual characters, between different kinds of society, between the sexes and between different

forces and symbols, conscious and unconscious within the individual. Thus in the first pattern, that of A Severed Head, a character such as Martin Lynch-Gibbon moves or attempts to move out of the world of form, pattern and convention into one of contingency. His shift of reading habits alone, from military history to the Golden Bough after he witnesses the extraordinary scene of incest between Palmer and Honor, suggests the kind of movement this is. His relationships with the three women Antonia, Georgie and Honor, clearly represent the various stages of his entry and penetration into the nightmare, as it appears to him of that world.

But suffering is there, at the root of it, creating all the muddles. The restless souls enchanted by the abysmal pit of suffering, wander aimlessly, act hysterically and think in terms of abstract, confusing and contradictory philosophy. Sometimes it seems that they literally pursue the suffering and once caught in it, they enjoy their physical torture and their mental turmoil. They are just cut out for it. Once they plunge into the sea of suffering they lose the rudder and direction because the suffering is chiefly imaginary - it is in their mind sleeping like the gigantic white whale that rests in the miⁿd of Captain Ahab. It acts as the myth, the mystery and the symbol at the same time, and the confounded chasers are left with no option but to be devoured by their own imaginary muddles

and enchantments.

As pointed out in the Introduction, the moral responsibilities of the Murdochian characters begin with their revolt against society, its norms, fixed decorums and defined values. They take nothing for granted. One should not forget the fact that theirs is a constant journey into their own inner self, a journey that is endless; because the 'inner' is a never-ending mystery. The greater the bewilderment and shock that they receive from their experiences, the more determined and deeper their search becomes. Like all other modern characters, Murdochian people are existentialists - the never-say-end torch-bearers into the mines of their own inner dark tunnel. There is no escaping the project. Some of them take it up actively and fearlessly while others watch them from a distance. In every novel, thus, there are two sets of characters, the active ones who act either like Bodhisattvas or narcissists and the passive ones, who try to receive the wisdom from their various undertakings, while labelling it with various philosophical convictions. And the problem or the unintelligible muddle probably starts from this very point. Because no one can share some one else's experience, one may at best apprehend it. One of the Murdochian characters somewhere states that 'no one is wise from others' woes'.

The extensively used metaphorical setting in Miss Murdoch's novels is either the driving rain or the sulphurous fog. Whenever her characters start for an important venture it usually rains or a black, sulphurous fog blurs their vision which symbolises the failure that envelopes the project and its outcome. The actions of man, like his mind and heart are beyond anyone's interpretations. Incest, adultery, homo-sexual relationships, murder, revenge, lies and so forth occur in her novels like routined affairs. And the active characters indulge in such pervasions because they consciously want to dabble in acts regarded by society as immoral and unethical. They want to test its impact on their reasoning, imagination and soul. It is like testing and experimenting with their own being on the laboratory table, applying it with various chemicals and then observing the reactions and the changes that it undergoes. This is chiefly the reason why most of them believe one thing, say another and then act differently. Because for them, morality does not lie in dissociating themselves from the so-called facile evil, but in undertaking the prescribed evils on their own and experiencing it first-hand, in order to be able to apprehend and appreciate the 'other' and thereby to reach the 'inner'.

But it is easier said than done. Because they are extremely conscious of violating the established norms



and orders, they are limited and bound by the lines drawn by the society; otherwise, they will not carry on the arguments on 'nice and good', on to be or not to be so extensively as they usually do. Rupert in A Fairly Honourable Defeat argues:

We experience the difference between good and evil, the dreariness of wickedness the life-givingness of good. We experience the pure joys of art and nature ... All right, we are without guarantees, but we do know somethings for certain.

But does he know really, if one considers what he really does? When his affection towards Morgan is dubiously manipulated by Julius King, he goes to the extent of lying to Hilda, who hitherto had been a solid support and anchor for Rupert. Rupert and Hilda, the certain couple are divided and everything that went in to make the tree erect and solid is defeated.

Yes, they are not sure and they cannot escape the pricks of their conscience. Everything about the existence of goodness or badness, right or wrong, vice and virtue may be a matter of subjective illusion or a relative concept, but the more they argue about its vague existence, the more prominently it occupies their minds. For an example, Martin and Georgie in A Severed Head get rid of their illegal child, and though Georgie's stoic acceptance and lofty spirit consoles Martin a bit, still he is left with a sense

of not having suffered enough: "only sometimes in dreams did I experience certain horrors, glimpses of a punishment which would perhaps yet find its hour".⁹

The statement above refers to both the points that contribute to the riddles in Miss Murdoch's novels: The search for the suffering and the muddles about the age-old questions on good and bad. Once they get the pricks, they do not repent, they search for an immediate suffering or wait for it with a sense of ever-readiness with the belief that the fire of suffering will redeem the wrong-doings.

But this was not my point. My attention was on an active involvement in such actions of which they are not sure. To get rid of an illegal child may be a sin, may amount to killing the soul of an innocent who cannot even protect itself and the act itself may be considered sinister; but they themselves have to experience it with all its horrible pricks of conscience. As Hilary Burde in A Word Child believes:

For a desparate man, any set back can tap a deep base of nightmare, every sin represents the original one, indeed is part of it, every crime is the Crime.¹⁰

It would be a total injustice to Miss Murdoch's works if one of the most important aspects concerning the habit of the characters is not taken up here. And that's

alcohol. Very few characters can say no to drinks - and they drink a lot. Before the start of any conversation, after the deliberations, before taking up a nocturnal adventure and after it, before apprehending a disastrous revelation and after its realization, drinking becomes a terrible necessity. They usually get up with a splitting headache, a confused intellect and a cloudy reasoning. And they indulge in it to such an extent that one is forced to think of them as alcoholics and of their wanderings like that of average sentimental drunkards. Whatever it is, this certainly heightens their eccentric behaviours and makes the entire scenario quite puzzling. And this is probably the reason why many of them so readily can come to a conclusion, drink a toast only to forget it afterwards. They hit the bottles and then they spit out the mad, jarring things, but they do not sleep on it. With the break of another day, it is another venture, a different life, another bottle and another zigzag sojourn.

It seems that Miss Murdoch's valiant characters who throb with excessive energy and spirit and perform immense heroics are really not all that. At heart, they probably are quite nervous and shaken at everything that happens to them. One should always remember that they have a penchant for realizing and seeing things a second before the average humanity sees. And they see it vividly with such clarity

that it becomes a terrible difficulty to communicate or interpret it. The way they visualise things, compartmentalise every aspect of it and scan it can be felt only when one surrenders oneself to the rhythm of her novels.

We expect, but rarely find, characters that live in the memory. E.M. Forster says plot and story might be set aside in favour of some other units, but one wants characters 'to seem alive'. Murdochian character lives long after the novel is read over, he/she represents a principle, a force, a condition, an essence and what is most important - a dilemma. There is, as mentioned earlier, something mysterious, simple and fateful about them.

Murdochian characters remain as distractions, unsolved puzzles and questionable contradictions. They are the fallen beings, the wounded, bleeding and crying victims - victims of their own doings and their own inner confusions. But the peculiar and unique aspect of her novels is that they all end with a happy, reconciled note. In spite of so much of sufferings, 'muddles', 'enchantments' and philosophical dabbings, they hurry on to the closure, that sometimes sounds stage-managed like 'Far From The Madding Crowd'. As one critic has pointed out.

Generally the fundamental pairing off of patterns at the end of the work is common to most of her novels. Either they manage to stay in their static marital relationship, or they find their physical sexual maturity accomplished and hence indispensable.¹¹

They wander, they freak out, suffer and yet they manage to come to a hurriedly managed normal conclusion. Yes, life is incomprehensible, relationships are bizarre, philosophical realizations are incomplete and jarring. But as T.S. Eliot says 'human kind cannot bear too much of reality'. Even these eccentrics, enchanters and Bodhisatvas cannot. Even the most accomplished enchanter Julius King admits, 'I didn't know what to do next'.

But in spite of a normal conclusion, she leaves us with the impression that she does not complete her true attitude towards life, but instead must hurry on to the next novel. I have pointed out that Murdoch herself, in an interview has clarified that she really wanted to write one big novel. And this is what probably she is doing. Therefore as long as she continues to write we should not expect a finality or an ultimate message from her.

And one should always remember that she is a teacher of philosophy by profession, and her own philosophy gives a useful indication of her fictional intentions. Though philosophy has never been a satisfactory *raison d'etre* for the creative writer, still it may explain some of the

problems that crop up in understanding her works. The muddles associated with 'morality' from which her concepts of 'love' and 'freedom' emanate have made her novels more baffling and indigestible. Because, as a philosopher, if she cannot achieve the distinction of defining it, then, it is expected that as a novelist she would make them more 'unutterable'.

The emphasis upon looking at some kind of objective background to morality instead of fixing the source of moral value ultimately in individual decision-making has been transformed by Iris Murdoch in a highly significant work, The Sovereignty of Good, into an extremely metaphysical thesis. She sees great works of art as something which will wean us away from particularity and prejudice in our moral judgements, and which will provide a universal dimension as a background for moral life. She assents that this cannot be found in human nature itself: that man has to look for the transcendent if he is to live morally.

Concepts like virtue and vice, which I have dealt with extensively earlier, further cloud our and her characters' understanding about the 'apprehension' and 'knowledge' of the 'other' that is, the demarcation between 'love' and 'freedom' becomes an extremely difficult task. In an arena of undefined attitude towards life, shapeless realities and shifting values, where the characters regularly oscillate between wisdom and folly, some fixed pattern and

code is necessary to hold things together. But she would not grant that.

Virtues and vices, she maintains, are connected with human flourishing, a notion which in turn is connected with needs and wants. Only in so far as the powers of the human mind are specified in the philosophy of mind shall we know what would contribute to human flourishing. The philosophy of mind would almost provide a transcendental deduction of virtues and vices. Such a view, despite its initial plausibility, shows a great lack of sociological sophistication. Morality cannot be derived from a specification of human needs, for what a man is regarded as needing is basically defined by the moral context in which he lives, moves and has his being.

And the 'philosophy of mind' is a vast roaring space, an ever continuing process and the specification of human needs and relationships will go on multiplying and breeding for ever. And so shall be the life and its incomprehensible, unprecedented aspects. Therefore, ^{no} research on Iris Murdoch can reach a conclusion. Like her characters, the critics are the fated seekers of the 'pointer' that would continue to elude and recede.

Yes, most of her novels end with marriage, or with a happy reunion or just with a great feeling. For examples

I quote here the concluding lines of A Word Child

'Happy Christmas, Tommy'.
 'I'm going to marry you, Hilary'.
 'Are you, Thomas?'
 'Yes, I'm going to marry you.'
 'Are you, Thomasina'? (p.391)

A Fairly Honourable Defeat ends with the note:

The sun was warm upon his back.
 Life was good. (p.447)

But her real attitude towards life is evident from the way she chooses to end her novels like The Philosopher's Pupil or The Unicorn.

I share the general view that the marriage will be a happy one ... the end of any tale is arbitrarily determined. As I now end this one, somebody may say: but how on earth do you know all these things about all these people? Well, where does one person end and another person begin? It is my role in life to listen to stories ... ('The End', The Philosopher's Pupil).

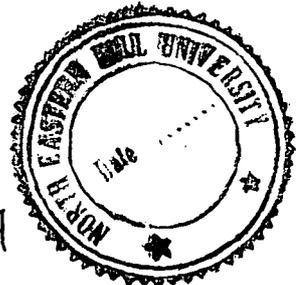
And in The Unicorn at the end, inside the train:

Effingham sighed and crumpled the newspaper in his hand ... they would talk the whole thing over as the express carried them away across the central plain.

Therefore, where does Iris Murdoch end? Every end seems to be a great beginning.

Emphases mine

102377



References

1. Linda Kuehl: Irish Murdoch "The Novelist as Magician/
the Magician as Artist", M.F.S. Vol. 15, No.3
(Autumn, 1969), p.347.
2. Irish Murdoch: The Bell, Triad Panther, 1976, p.235.
3. T.L.S. Essays and Reviews: "Iris Murdoch's The Time
of Angels", T.L.S. 1966, Vol.5 (8th Sept.), pp.33.
4. Iris Murdoch: A Severed Head, Penguin Books, 1963,
pp.97-97.
5. Ibid., p.98.
6. Ibid., p.182.
7. Ibid., p.198.
8. Iris Murdoch: A Fairly Honourable Defeat, Penguin Books,
1972, p.222.
9. Iris Murdoch: A Severed Head, p.13.
10. Iris Murdoch: A Word Child, Penguin Books, 1976, p.71.