CHAPTER VII
Conclusion

Iris Murdoch has written novels, essays, reviews and is one of the leading British Novelists of today. Being a prolific writer, she has written nearly a novel a year since Under the Net, her first published novel came out. She also has tried her hand at plays. One play, A Severed Head has been written with J.B. Priestly. She is also a poet in her own right.

Although Murdoch was born in Dublin, she was brought up in London, studied in Oxford and has held prestigious chairs in both Cambridge and Oxford. She is a philosopher and has many articles and books on Philosophy as well. Some of her famous books on philosophy are Sartre: Romantic Rationalist (1953), The Fire and the Sun (1977), Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals (1992), Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues (1987). Her husband John Bayley is a Professor of English at Oxford and also a well-known writer and critic.

I have always been an avid reader of Iris Murdoch, since I read her Under the Net. One has to re-read Murdoch's novels, to get to know more deeply her thoughts and the development of the novel form. Her novels have won increasing honours: The Black Prince was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1973, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine received the Whitbread Literary Award in 1974. In 1978, The Sea, The Sea was awarded Britain's most prestigious literary award, the Booker-McConnel Prize and her reputation became international. Many of her novels have been translated into various languages Russian, Danish, Japanese, African etc. Of Sartre, whom
Murdoch admired and commented, 'he has the style of the age,' she later in the same book says,

"His inability to write a great novel is a tragic symptom of a situation which afflicts us all. We know that the real lesson to be taught is that the human person is precious and unique, but we seem unable to set it forth except in terms of ideology and abstraction ...".

Murdoch herself has shown deep interest in the social institutions, customs, moral virtues of man. Her novels are courageous, dealing with themes which have the power to shock and at the same time amaze the reader. She does not ignore the historical moment in which she lives. She has given great thought to form and contingency in her novels.

Her novels attempt to portray the truth about human life, its unpredictability and complexity which defies any theorising whatsoever. One of the ways of understanding life is through attending it in a selfless manner. In Murdoch, the process of knowing becomes the process of loving. Murdoch's belief in the universal potentialities of love in transforming human lives to more integrated meaningful relation makes her very significant.

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1. SR. 7.
2. SR. 119-120.
Still Murdoch does not become a mystic in her emphasis on love to her treatment of character and reality. She expresses the differences between individuals as part of their being. Love, she shows in her novels, must accept, not do away with irreducible differences.

Murdoch accepts a world without God as most people do today and then leads to the significance of love. Love in Murdoch's world can be a saviour, for it can be the basis of morality. Man does not need God, according to Murdoch. She admires Buddha and finds the practice of meditation very relevant to modern life. In the absence of the ability to pray to God, one can learn to review one's life and go beyond oneself through meditation.

This ideal of love is combined in Murdoch's works with realistic portrayal of human beings. Man's moral development and emotional maturity can be measured by his capacity to love. By the use of irony she suggests the gap that exists between the ideal and the real. Hence her sympathy for those characters who give themselves up to the difficult goal of loving by transcending their selves. It is a difficult task for it requires a sustained mental effort to get out of the web of illusions and

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myths that human beings create around themselves. But Murdoch is not a cynic and fully believes that it is possible to outgrow their strong psychological factors and establish meaningful emotional relations that lead to love:

Martin Lynch-Gibbon is amazed towards the end of the novel A Severed Head to find that Honor Klein loves him, instead of his friend Palmer Anderson, her half-brother. Martin says to Honor: "You told me you were a severed head. Can one have human relations with a severed head?" 4

Honor "smiled splendidly, 'You must take your chance!'" 5

Love is established and certainly chance plays a very important role in the human relationships. These complex changing states of the human personality are dealt with in a realistic manner but are fully suggestive of the ambiguities that human beings consist of. They move from rational to irrational and the development from inhibitions, regressions and complexes, to mature selflessness, is contained within stories that are invested with mythical patterns and implications.

In The Bell, Dora Greenfield, the girlish, worldly wife of neurotic Paul is much out of place in religious piety of

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4 SH. 205.
5 SH. 205.
Imber. She goes to the National Gallery to temporarily escape from her unhappy marriage and also from an unsatisfying affair with the journalist Noel. She finds looking at the paintings a religious act.

..."She felt that she had had a revelation. She looked at the radiant, sombre, tender, powerful canvas of Gainsborough and felt a sudden desire to go down on her knees before it, embracing it, shedding tears ... Her real life, her real problems, were at Imber; and since, somewhere, something good existed, it might be that her problems would be solved after all." 6

Murdoch urges contemporary man to remember the existence of evil. The novels, The Time of the Angels, A Fairly Honourable Defeat, Henry and Cato, The Book and the Brotherhood are some which try to point out to the anti-evil consciousness of the present liberal western society, the far-reaching effects of evil. In A Word Child the Peter-Pan myth has been applied to the lives and characters of Hilary and his sister Crystal. Like Wendy in the story Peter Pan, Crystal grows up and marries and her entrance into the ordinary world of family life causes her to lose her brother, Hilary.

Arthur suggests Crystal's dilemma in describing Wendy

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Arthur suggests Crystal's dilemma in describing Wendy of the play: "Wendy is the human soul seeking the truth. She ends up with a compromise (living half in an unreal world) like most of us do. It's a defeat but a fairly honourable one. That's the best we can hope for. I suppose." Crystal's life between Hilary and his friend Arthur, between an unnatural world and a real and natural one, reflects this fairly honourable defeat, but when she marries Arthur she is finally removed from Hilary's unnatural world entirely and is alienated as from the Never-Never-Land of Peter Pan's fantasy.

Murdoch has dealt with these complex changing states of the human personality in a realistic manner, but is fully suggestive of the ambiguities that human beings, consist of.

In The Sandcastle, the romance between Bill Mor and Rain Carter is broken because he has to face defeat in the hands of his daughter Felicity and son Donald, both teenagers. The near-fatal tower climb of Donald is a firm reminder to Mor that he is not a free individual. His life is entangled in the mesh of family commitments and affairs. His wife Nan, the villain of this novel, announces to a gathering that Mor will run for Parliament. This fact, which Mor had never mentioned to Rain,

7 SH. 167.
alienates her and horrified, she leaves the dining-room and steps out of Mor's life.

Mor 'had told her nothing of his political plans. She was hearing of them now for the first time. She looked towards him, her lips parting as if to question him. Her eyes expressing astonishment and sheer horror, her whole face working in an agony of interrogation ...'.

Perhaps Mor had withheld this piece of information from her to show that he was both in love and free to go on loving Rain.

Murdoch says through psychoanalyst Palmer Anderson, "... 'do what you want costs others less than do you what you ought'." Palmer says this to Martin and we get Murdoch's own views on life and love.

In A Severed Head Murdoch pictures a society as lying, deceitful, given to vanities and shamelessly determined to get what it wants in the name of freedom. In this novel, the characters should reflect the highest level of middle-class civilization by their education and privilege, but sexual permissiveness, heavy drinking and changing partners and superficial, idle, wealthy middle-class women are portrayed. A Cambridge don,

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9. SH. 167.
a university lecturer, a psychoanalyst, a sculptor, a cultivated
Wine-merchant with an interest in history form the characters
along with two other idle women. The comic goings-on of this
group reveal the follies of psychoanalysis and the artificial,
superficial lives and frivolity of these characters. The readers
feel a dislike for those characters who speak of freedom, rather
than sympathise with them.

Realism in Murdoch's fictions is not a limited factual
reproduction of the appearance. In suggesting the demonic in
human nature, the areas of mystery in men and life, she creates a
world that has subtle shades, each casting a shadow on the rest
and making the whole a rich world.

"Murdoch writes to tell what she sees in the sophisticated bourgeo"s society she knows so well, and many readers
recoil from the horror of a world we also know too well. Murdoch's revelation is brave, even audacious, venturing into
areas we fight to avoid.\.\n
"The real world is one that most characters in Murdoch's
fiction would dodge, but the ineluctable working out of cause and
effect in their personalities, as well as their past and present
actions, keeps them on a firm track towards a conclusion that
only chance, the uncontrollable, frightening, indifferent element

10 'WS. 51.
that governs much of human destiny, can change ...\textsuperscript{11}

In *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* Julius King is like Satan and Tallis is a Christ figure. We feel a sort of frustration with Rupert's death. The awful, sickening knowledge is that Rupert's death has been caused by his own weakness. We begin to despise Rupert as much as we hate Julius. Murdoch tries to show us that this is the real world and that a person can be destroyed by his own weakness is a deep human truth. We see a pattern here which is repeated in many of her novels, the defeat of good by evil in spite of the enormous moral and spiritual energy the weaker characters expend in order to strive to be better.

"Julius King, as an outside agent of evil invading an apparently secure milieu and spreading destruction on to those who lack an inner core of adherence to the truth and thus cannot effectively resist his manipulation ...\textsuperscript{12} is a real demon, but shown successfully as an ordinary human being. Julius is however wrong in thinking that the breaking of relationships is not a matter of great seriousness. It is to Murdoch's credit, that she has so boldly depicted a successful homosexual relationship in this novel, a relationship which the demonic Julius fails to break. It is the relationship of love between Simon and Axel.

\textsuperscript{11} WS. 51.

\textsuperscript{12} WS. 197.
This unstable relationship, endangered though it is by society, is seen ultimately to be strong enough to withstand Julius's evil attentions. Murdoch here has shown a sensitive respect for the individuality of homosexuals.

To see human relations in a realistic, concrete manner, Murdoch creates a large number of diverse characters, who are closely involved with each other. Their relations, conflicts and realisations bring into play certain emotions, whether it is love, hate, fear or sympathy. This dramatisation depicts the complexity and difficulty of the process of choice-making. It suggests the gradual moral awakening in human beings.

There are only seven characters in *A Severed Head*, whereas many of her novels like, *The Sea, The Sea, The Philosopher's Pupil, Nuns and Soldiers, The Book and the Brotherhood* are overflowing with characters whose lives are somehow intertwined with each others.

Murdoch's novels centre around the emotion of love, through which she measures man's moral development and emotional maturity. In *Nuns and Soldiers*, Murdoch portrays various degrees of love.

"The dying Guy is one of those characters in Murdoch's world who act as guarantors of meaning, continuity and stability to those who surround him. He represses his own cruelty, and is generous financially, morally, emotionally, expecting a calm dignity in those to whose problems he patiently listens. In
Murdoch's godless world such people shine out with something of the force that once accrued to the Church ... 13

Murdoch shows Guy to be a father figure, a saviour, loving and sheltering all those who seek his help.

In Murdoch's discussion of the novels of Sartre, she finds that his characters are out of the world.

"The grasp which his characters have of each other seems flimsy if we compare it with the joyful and terrible apprehension of each other of, for instance, Anna Karenina and Vronsky — or with the relations of Dorothée and Casaubon in Middlemarch, that brilliant study of being — for others ... 14

"Sartre has commended moral seriousness in the writer. He would agree that the emphasis and configuration of a novel are decided by what the author really values. We have seen that Sartre attaches no value to the intellectual's lonely meditations, nor does he seem to attach much value to the muddled and frustrated efforts of human beings to understand each other. It remains possible that value lies in 'Social relations — in something to do with politics ..." 15
Murdoch says that this makes his novels another form of philosophical tracts unable to recreate imaginatively substantial human life. Because Sartre does not relate emotions or consciousness to the whole texture of human life, individual and social, Sartre's characters never emerge. Murdoch feels, as real human beings. Sartre is seriously concerned with philosophical virtues but he fails in making his characters related to the world of lived emotions.

As a consequence of her views on the true relation between the novel and real people her own novels deal with human relations and her characters probe into a chaotic, morally dark world for a vision of the good, patience and tolerance in interpersonal relations and in a society where a vacuum is created by the absence of religious content.

The Philosopher's Pupil is a novel "about the search for innocence, the nature of religion, morality, redemption, damnation ...". The older characters have been shown by Murdoch to be more awful than before. The younger characters like Tom, Hattie and Emma by contrast look sentimental and foolish.

In The Black Prince, "the word most often used of Bradley is 'puritan'. He describes himself as a perfectionist, a

16 SA. 268.
worldly failure, ineffective both as a sensualist and as a monk, a seeker, a devotee of silence, gentle to timidity, a fastidious, easily disgusted self-absorbed person who detests the ad hoc and spontaneous. He likes to fix his appointments with his sister weeks in advance and by letter ...  

Critics have noted that Murdoch can portray a variety of emotions through her characters.

Attention to others, the gaze of one being towards the others does not petrify or restrict his freedom. Murdoch shows the significant effect of the gaze of one character on another. In A Severed Head Martin feels a shock when he is confronted by the gaze of Honor Klein, he is then made aware of his shameful position, his moral compliance and is awakened from this stupor.

"As I approached Honor Klein I saw that without moving her head she was following me with her eyes. It was like the animation of a corpse. I looked down at her with a sort of fastidious surprise ..."  

When Martin entered Palmer’s house with Honor Klein, they both saw Palmer with his arm around Antonia, Martin's wife.

"Something strange happened in that instant. As I

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17 SA. 191.

18 SH. 94.
turned to look at her (Honor) she seemed transfigured. Divested of her shapeless coat she seemed taller and more dignified. But it was her expression that struck me. She stood there in the doorway, her gaze fixed upon the golden pair by the fire, her head thrown back ...19

Honor acts as a figure of perfection and this makes her morally stronger.

In Palmer’s house, Martin looked at Honor and she appeared to me for a second like some insolent and powerful captain, returning booted and spurred from a field of triumph, the dust of battle yet upon him, confronting the sovereign powers whom he was now ready if need be to bend to his will ...20

Murdoch has portrayed the power which Honor wields over others.

In Bruno’s Dream Danby is somewhat similarly affected by Liza’s gaze and undergoes a moral regeneration. Lisa is a character very close to a saint. The novel begins with her. Lisa’s life of discipline, religious questing and service to others is disrupted by love affairs which develop. At the end, sitting by Bruno; Diana estimates the present:

19. SH. 58.
20. SH. 58.
"A Lisa in India would have become a divinity. A Lisa sitting in Danby's car with an arm outstretched along the back of the seat, as Diana had last seen her, was fallen indeed ..."21


"Far from imprisoning these lives in pattern, she allows them to enact their personalities wholly, to break out of the system which Murdoch both asserts and renies. Lisa's disinclination to continue her quest for adulthood — her eschewing the very image of it — connects to Murdoch's distrust of all such images, for her they belong to fantasy, not reality ..."22

Love, as Murdoch sees it, is a deeply emotional and moral vision. It is the force which sweeps away false pride, illusion and selfish interests. Unless one discards these illusions and smaller interests, one cannot know reality or be moral.

In all her novels, the dramatisation of various manifestations, failures, faults, degrees of success, and remedies of love, holds and controls the action. Her novels are a real galaxy of the innumerable ways of loving, of various love

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21 BD. 290-291.

22 WS. 170.
relations, the differences of expectations and involvements. The problem of knowing others, of knowing the reality, the obstacles that hinder true knowledge, along with the difficulties that arise out of imbalanced personality, are the themes that run throughout her novels, from the first, Under the Net, to A Word Child and others likewise.

Conradi says that A Fairly Honourable Defeat is a favourite novel of his.

He says, ... "I think, in it, both reader and character are drawn through the experience of attention to the being of others which Miss Murdoch sees as the heart of morality. Julius destroys Rupert. He does not destroy the homosexual marriage of Simon and Axel because, as we are shown, as we experience, they know each other too well. They love each other, talk to each other, consider each other, and automatically discuss Julius's lies and manipulations for what they are."^23

A Fairly Honourable Defeat is a novel 'in which a patterned plot, the thoughts of the characters, the multiplicity of people, the events, add up to a moral and aesthetic experience both unexpected, delightful and distressing.'^24

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23. SA. 31.
24. SA. 32.
Until *The Good Apprentice* appeared, most of Murdoch's good characters had a tendency to be eccentric, 'glimpsed at the edge of the action, with an inner life the reader is vouchsafed little information about. Part of the fascination of Stuart's depiction comes from Murdoch's courage in attacking so directly the problems of portraying goodness.  

Stuart Cuno, the character, of the good in *The Good Apprentice*, is a man who stays patient, useful and dutiful and in one place. 'Murdoch is clearly interested in the predicament of the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son ... receiving no reward for any of this, while his brother enjoys the glamour of sinning, repenting, wandering and being forgiven, as is even rewarded by a fatted calf — as Edward too will be rewarded — to boot. Stuart wants to do good and stay unspotted by the world, and discovers just how unpopular his attempt on virtue is to make him ...'  

In Murdoch's treatment of love, one may notice a constant enlargement of vision and expectations. Her early novels, from *Under the Net* to *The Bell* are less complex and probe the philosophies and behaviouristic aspect of the emotion of love. She grows more deeply interested in the concept and with A
Severed Head, she plunges into the various psychological complexes and difficulties that prevent the individual from knowing himself as well as others, objectively. She is keenly interested in those who do not have any moral values or love. In The Nice and the Good her treatment of love becomes increasingly more mature and moral. Her characters go deep into the meaning of different moral values and attain an understanding that is compassionate and mature. The vision of these novels is hopeful and joyous. The finest expression of this vision is contained in Bruno's Dream. The novels after this mark another mood, which is critical and less hopeful. She takes up deliberate lies and sophisticated, hypocritical twistings of truth practised by people and shows that under the circumstances, truth and love are often defeated.

A.S. Byatt says, "She is aware, in a way I think no other English novelist is aware, of the importance for our cultural life of the decay of believed Christianity, the loss of a sense of central authority, believed in or opposed. She is aware of the importance of spiritual experience ..." 27

Murdoch's concern with the problems confronting contemporary man is portrayed in her novels, through which she attempts to suggest a solution. The problem is the breakdown of old

27 'AB. 28.
values and disruption of human relations. She is a novelist who thinks deeply about the dignity of man and the potency of love to heal and redeem. Murdoch clearly perceives the hollowness of modern life, the moral bleakness in man today. Many of her characters lose their ideals, visions and values by living a hedonistic, senseless and self-centred life. The absence of conscience in the younger generation is also linked with this situation. Younger characters like Donald and Felicity in The Sandcastle, David in A Sacred and Profane Love Machine, Peter in A Fairly Honourable Defeat reject the values of the older generation. They do not feel closely linked with their family or society.

Murdoch’s novels mostly portray a godless generation, yet the emotional and spiritual quest goes on, as she too has not failed to point out. She feels that man still wishes to find out afresh the meaning of life around him.

In this thesis I have thought about and discussed some aspects of Murdoch’s fictive world which I feel have been able to focus upon a new dimension to her works. I have discussed at length four aspects which I have felt are very important if we wish to know Murdoch better.

Murdoch’s interest in man in relation to the world he inhabits and the society he is a part of, shows us how deeply concerned she is about the role of an individual, his responsibility to both God and to other men.
I have discussed Murdoch's abiding interest in the East, in its rich cultural heritage and traditions, in Buddhism, in the chapter, Iris Murdoch and the Oriental Interest. It is interesting to note that it is not only Ireland, the land where she was born, or England where she was brought up, studied, married and served as Professor of Philosophy, and is still residing in, or the European countries she has visited that concern her. She is just as much interested in the East. Many of her characters are spiritual questers hoping that Buddhism will show them the path to goodness and truth, some are Indian women, some visit Japan or journey to India or Australia. But it is Buddhism that Murdoch is certainly most interested in.

Then again I have found that Murdoch's good characters are near-saints. Since it is not really possible to attain sainthood, according to Murdoch, she has shown the state closest to a saint, a good man. Such good characters have been portrayed as spiritual questers, or as ordinary human beings who are striving to be good. Since they are sage-like, but not really saints, they make mistakes and often a sad, moral derailment is caused in their lives. There are both sage-like characters and those human beings who are normal and sane in her fiction.

Just as Murdoch has portrayed characters who are striving towards goodness, and questers after Buddhism, so too she has shown the moral failings in human beings who inhabit this world full of evil. Murdoch has dealt with the problem of
homosexuality but she has not once tried to offer any kind of solution. It is a reality she has portrayed, as she is a firm believer in realism. Many of her characters are homosexuals or have homosexual tendencies and feelings. They are priests, they are teachers or they are high-ranking officials, but they are homosexuals. That is a stark, naked truth which Murdoch has so courageously and unhesitatingly focused upon in her novels.

What comes as a breath of fresh air is Murdoch's understanding of the youth and adolescents of our modern age. After a discussion on homosexuality, a topic which though an acknowledged truth, is fearfully depressing, I have found Murdoch's sympathy for and understanding of the parent-sibling relationship, the extremely difficult adolescence, the tender, touching manner in which a father promises a dog as a pet for his wayward teenaged-daughter, the neglected children of prostitutes, or the pampered, spoilt adolescents of well-to-do upper-middle class families, interesting and revealing.

It should be evident from the foregoing discussion that Iris Murdoch's oriental interest, her understanding of the sane and sage-like characters, her courageous portrayal of homosexuality in modern society, not as a problem to be tackled with but as a naked truth, her attitude towards youth and adolescence, make significant contribution to the totality of her vision and help us to understand the very complex and difficult nature of the fabric of her vision as a novelist.