Conclusion

Murdochian Metafiction: An Effort towards Ideal Realism

In art, as in morality, great things go by the board because at the crucial moment we blink our eyes.

(The Black Prince, xiii)

In this chapter, the main thesis is restated in the light of the findings and delineations of the previous chapters. Iris Murdoch’s postmodern ethics turns her into a unique postmodern writer whose very aesthetics can be seen as an ethics of ethics since all is focused on the realization of the other. Therefore, she ends writing a distinct kind of metafiction in which she deploys established traditional fictional elements and techniques for a truer depiction of life. Her literary practice is a credit to the value of the novel since it demonstrates how the attention to the otherness of things and people endows a fully independent identity to art which in turn through drawing attention to its own particularity and autonomy gives the reader an opportunity to forget the self and become open to the distinct external world. Bringing together various strands of the study and delimiting its scope, areas in need of further elaboration in Murdoch studies are underlined for future research.

A prolific writer who practices iconoclasm in her philosophical and literary writings, Murdoch is one of the outstanding figures in diverting the Western scheme of things to the path it takes in postmodernism. Her philosophical interpretation of art and the idiosyncratic style of literary art she practices are a response to the pathetical condition of man’s values that gets severely degenerated by the unprecedented scientific advancements of postmodernity and its absolute faith in reason. Due to the fact that Murdoch is a post-war literary writer (1954-1995), the incentive behind the current study has been to identify her unique literary style and see whether it can be called postmodern. Her engagement in philosophical investigations demanded a study of its stance in her contemporary zeitgeist and its impact on her literary creations. Setting against its intellectual background and context, it has been determined in the second chapter that
Murdoch’s philosophical perspective is in fact a rectification of Plato’s ethical worldview. It is a celebration of art as the sole redemptive measure man can resort to especially now that there is a growing incredulity towards the religious discourse of Christianity. Because of its reckoning with the particularity of individual objects and people, her stance is undoubtedly a postmodern ethics. Relying on the tangible philosophical air of her fiction, chapter two to four has focused on the analysis of a select pack of her six novels. It has been shown that, beyond being a reification of her intellectual outlook, her novels are the manifestation of her view of the truthful art. A thorough dissection of each of them demonstrates that what her ethics lends to her fiction is thematically, stylistically and aesthetically postmodern.

Given her training and post as a philosophy tutor as well as her vivid intellect in her own philosophical sketches it is not weird that philosophy, a philosopher’s social and private life, and sometimes their meditative obsession with universal human concepts like love, goodness are the eye-catching topics in in her novels. This thematic dominance does not certify that her narratives are, in effect, philosophical novels. In her talk with Magee, Murdoch dissociates her novels from this sub-genre insisting that most of literary works integrates philosophy as an “idea play” not their own raison d’être: “as soon as philosophy gets into a novel, work of literature, it ceases to be philosophy. It becomes something. I think, it becomes a plaything of the writer and quite rightly . . . I might put in things about philosophy because I happen to know about philosophy. I mean if I knew about sailing ships I would put in sailing ships” (“philosophy”). None of the novels under discussion advocates the Murdochian ethical stance as Sartre’s novels are believed to be upholding his theorized thoughts. Murdoch herself takes La Nausée as a rare example of philosophical novel celebrating “the horror of the contingent” (SRR 12). The discussion of her select novels in the previous chapters concludes that her fiction is, in contrast, a justification of the credit Murdoch gives to the novel. The conspicuous philosophical overload is Murdoch’s way to foreground the novel’s dialogic ground as its valuable feature; it signifies that for Murdoch the novel is the apt cultural discourse to criticize the ideological and analytical; uniquely, it has the essential merit to be “a kind of fictionalized or dialectic philosophy,” or as Bradbury further explains, “a dispute with
philosophy as a mode of knowing, understanding or discovering, and a dispute with philosophers” (x).

Murdoch’s novels never suggest a solution to the philosophical conflicts her novels incorporate. Even none of the writers in her novels accomplishes the good art she advocates in her philosophy. Unlike Sartre, she is not an engageé, writing in support of a social cause; her fiction is a huge detailed portrait of the complexity of human life and affairs. “[T]he states and conditions of speculation and meditation, the business of feeling experience and doing life,” asserts Bradbury, are the “prime object of attention” in her novels. Thus, in integrating philosophical constituents, her novels play the game of challenging the taxonomy of the novel of ideas.

Aside from its intellectual, analytical aspect, her literary writings have attracted critical attention to its artistic quality. In summarizing those criticisms, Bradbury points to the change that has almost unanimously been identified in her literary career; according to him, although there is a controversy regarding the time of this turn, critics more or less agree about the nature of the change and its contribution to Murdoch’s status as a serious novelist. In comparison to her early novels, her later novels around the end of 1960s and early 1970s display more direct interest in pure plot and action; instead of what Elizabeth Dipple styles as “a strong interest towards protraction” and “special luxuriousness” to secure a more meditative tone in her early literary writing, her second narrative phase flamboyantly plays with the established modes and strategies in the genre of the novel (xiii). In this later group of novels, she strikes a deep admiration in her readers by going beyond the early species in projecting her virtuosity in the art of storytelling.

Although the frequent recurrence of the imagery of animals, water, caves and great Renaissance paintings in Under the Net, The Bell, and The Unicorn amazes us at her ease in handling her own codes or utilizing the common sources of imagery and symbolism for her own ends, it is only in The Black Prince, A Word Child and The Philosopher’s Pupil that we have an opportunity to notice her impressive command on narrative structure. Bradbury takes the key novels of 1970s (The Black Prince, A Word Child and The Sea, the Sea) as an open ground to see Murdoch’s “mastery of the art of
the novel and its many tactics now on access” (xiv). In the second batch of the select novels which epitomize the second phase in her literary writing, Murdoch takes advantage of the confessional mood of the first-person narratives, the multifariousness of the frame-tales as well as the lifelike techniques of stagecraft to optimize the presentational capacity of her novels. Exposing the artificiality of each of these presentation techniques in the meanwhile, she implies that none of them are adequately effective in commenting on life complicacy let alone providing its replica.

Disregarding their difference in the degree of formal self-reflexivity and incorporation of intellectual ideas, all the select novels demonstrate the power of art and the dangers of its illusions and myths. In this sense, as her frequent preference for two-word compound nouns in the title of her novels signifies, her fiction is a hotbed of the possible dialogue between art and philosophy. Here it should be emphasized that it is not just due to her training in philosophy that her novels are hard to comprehend. Integrating romantic fantasies, social-moral satires and an obsession with literary metaphysics in her art, she writes novels that resist classification because of the distinct moral role that she ascribes to the good novelist. Since novelists have both conscience and their own visions of life, the novel ought to be more than a reflection of their personalities and life-style; it must, as Bradbury puts, encompass significant matters like, “the labyrinths of freedom, the nature of consciousness, the problems of perception and of picturing consciousness . . . the meaning of art, the quest for personal salvation and the nature of the good” (xi). The representative of her whole literary career, any of the six under-discussion novels are replete with “dreamlike appearances, myths, exotic illusions, impressions” yarning “elaborate sexual webs and erotic love stories.” This allotropic thematic miscellany has confused critics like Bradbury to regard her wrongly as a splendid “romantic novelist” whose intellectual criticism of fantasy involves her in “rationalized romanticism” rather than in Sartre’s “romanticized rationality” (xii). Nevertheless, the certainty, already shown, that the romantic themes are only part of the richness of her novels leaves no doubt that Murdoch cherished and realized a grandiose literary ambition: to produce the

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12 Five of her novels have such titles: *The Red and the Green*, *The Nice and the Good*, *Henry and Cato*, *Nuns and Soldiers*, *The Book and the Brotherhood*. 
highest mimesis, and prove that the novel has not ceased to be an illustrative image of human condition.

In the previous chapters, we, moreover, saw the deviation of Murdoch’s novels from realistic and modern literature. Murdoch is not like realist writers who believing in a stable, shared external reality take for granted the fixed creative conventions and the objective nature of language; she is even dissimilar to modernists who explore subjective impressions of that reality and seek for a perfect literary language that exposes the inadequacy of traditional narrative and moral conventions, in short, aspire to make art reflective of the truth of change; In her narratives, Murdoch depicts the immediate reality, or, as Matz states, “a full sense of connection to the present life” as the most “valuable and yet completely elusive thing” (180). Paul Jay insists that, in globalization age, literary studies should address the more relevant questions and refocus to determine whether a piece of literature contributes to the development of a new consciousness essential for adjusting to the new global contexts (39). Elaborating on Murdoch’s themes and narrative techniques, this study has shown that her works definitely enlighten her readers to the common miserable fate that any modern individual suffers from and the way to overcome it in their quest for perfection.

A pastiche of styles and themes, any of Murdoch’s novels are the incarnation of the postmodern attitude. Renouncing his views about his contemporary literature in “The Literature of Exhaustion,” John Barth highlights the positive potentiality of the new species of the novel in his later article “The Literature of Replenishment.” According to him, the postmodern is not the harbinger of the death of the novel but a “synthesis or a transcension” of the antitheses in the existent modes of writing; the ideal postmodern novel rises “above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and ‘contentism,’ pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction” to avail of all the capacity of the genre to entail the explosion of meaning contained in postmodern reality (203). Murdoch’s fiction is the hard evidence that the new tendencies to extreme skepticism, parody and play, reflexivity and distrust in grand narratives are marvelous resources for the reconfiguration of the novel to make sense of the new world. A fertile ground for diversity and uncertainty, each of the six novels justifies the postmodern
reliance on the novel and Murdoch’s trust in its value. In their complexity and especially self-reflexivity, they embody what Matz formulates about Jeanette Winterson’s belief in the novel: “writing is a kind of prophecy; it anticipates life, articulating the feelings and needs that would remain frustrated and ineffective, were it not for the writer’s unique sensibility” (167).

Animadverting Derrida and structuralism for their adherence to a system, any coherent structure that is disrespectful to the contingency and particularity of the world, Murdoch creates a kind of fiction that autonomously dissolves any system that may get formed in its structure. Making her fiction more comic and ahistorical in which social relationships rather than society is central, Murdoch cuts off the mid-twentieth century present time from both the past and future to project the dominance of the chance and contingency on human life. Addressing the age-old serious moral questions and the importance of the encounter with the other in a comic form, she both attacks the traditional placement of tragedy other comedy and what Eaglestone calls “metaphysics of comprehension.” She promotes comedy as the more serious and inclusive form and exposes the limits of the Western thought in acknowledging the other.

For Murdoch, accepting the reality of others is the highest virtue that opens eyes to the truth. With a twist of Simone Weil’s idea of attention, she modifies Sartre’s notion of “choice” to support her own postmodern ethics. Dovetailing Sartre’s point that “[w]hen I deliberate the die is already cast” with Weil’s notion of attention, Murdoch postulates that the moral decision is a surrender of the self to what is outside the self, “[i]f I attend properly I will have no real choices and this is the condition to be aimed at” (SOG 38). This postmodern morality does not promulgate self-denial as some critics attack Murdoch for. In support of Weil, she asserts to her interviewer that attention to others is “not life-denying . . . . It requires the most enormous spiritual energy to decreate yourself in this way” (Haffenden 34). Emphasizing the concepts of chance and necessity in her perspective, she tries to reckon with the complexity of moral choice and the prerequisites for truly good actions.

For Murdoch, moral choice is the upshot of the process of unselfing. One ought to eradicate self-consolation to attain that ideal. That is why she repudiates suffering as an
ineffective moral punishment since it augments our self-involvement. Death is, for her, the only perfect occasion of unselfing; consequently, her novels stock various forms of near-death experiences as the turning point in the moral status of those undergoing them; for example, the deliverance of characters like Dora, Hilary and George from the risks of the unfriendly lake, the rough river and the sea in *The Bell, A Word Child* and *The Philosopher’s Pupil*, respectively. As all the novels of this study indicate, Murdoch follows Sartre in upholding man’s fate of alienation and delusion, but she is still hopeful that people can disengage themselves from this wheel of fate and ascend toward the good. In a nutshell, goodness for Murdoch is the perception of what is true and the suppression of the self. It entails an attention to the self only after the other is noticed: “[s]elf is as hard to see justly as other things, and when clear vision has been achieved, self is a correspondingly smaller and less interesting object” (*SOG* 66).

The self-reflexivity of her novels debunks Nietzsche’s skepticism in art, which Murdoch styles as his anxiety over the absurdity of art: “the greatness of great art may be an ephemeral illusion” (*SOG* 71). Highly-charged by a smorgasbord of themes and techniques, her fiction promotes the art of narrative as a human activity that can enhance humanity. Interrelating beauty, love and truth, Murdoch values beauty as the only incentive that stimulates her particular sort of unselfish attention. Relying on the aesthetic aspect of art, she writes the kind of novels analyzed to inspire an unprecedented profound respect for art in general and fiction in particular as an engaging moral practice for both the artist and the client.

The labyrinthine structure on which she fashions all her narratives, involve us into the same conflict her characters are caught in. With a few obvious exceptions, all Murdoch’s characters are egoistic; their struggles at the crunch times reflect that freedom is a dual concept. As Murdoch explains, “the true half of it is simply a name of an aspect of virtue concerned especially with the clarification of vision and the domination of selfish impulse. The false and more popular half is a name for the self-assertive movements of deluded selfish will which because of our ignorance we take to be something autonomous” (*SOG* 97). Similar to her characters, we experience the dilemma of freedom in reading Murdoch’s novels: we like to jump easily to conclusion and fix a
significance and category for them but, to use her own words, “[t]here are innumerable points at which we have to detach ourselves, to change our orientation, to redirect our desire and refresh and purify our energy, to keep on looking in the right direction: to attempt upon the grace that comes through faith” (*MGM* 25).

It is in the experience of reading her novels that we understand how art can be redemptive as she claims in her treatise. The onerous tasks that are involved in the rare good actions of her characters suggest that as Plato believes virtue is not natural and teachable but a grace. As she explains, “[t]his does not of course mean that virtue is a matter of luck, but that it comes as the reward of a sort of morally disciplined attention” (*MGM* 23). Although moral change is not an evident commonplace experience in her fictional world, we definitely feel it in accepting the reality of that weird, funny world. Restraining our interpretations and engaging out attention, they kindle in us the same Platonic shift of energy that Murdoch accepts as the essence of moral change: our base egoistic energy and vision (low Eros) is transformed into high spiritual energy and vision (high Eros). Attending to her egoistic persona’s dilemma, we realize that what impedes the growth of man’s moral identity is the fantasizing self that works on the one-making principle of intellect.

Murdoch’s understanding of moral life is Platonic in the sense that “it is a slow shift of attachments wherein looking (concentrating, attending, attentive principle) is a source of divine (purified) energy” (*MGM* 25). Her own philosophical mission, however, is to include art among the redemptive activities and prove it more effective than the ordinary sexual attachment which in Plato’s eyes “can be one possible starting point for the overcoming of egoism” (*MGM* 25). Employing self-conscious narrators and a variety of artists in her fictional world, Murdoch dramatizes the inherent flaw that she believes has encouraged philosophers like Plato to depreciate art as an immoral activity. The ironical structure of her fiction depicts that “[t]he urge to prove that where we intuit unity there really is unity is a deep emotional motive to philosophy, to art, to thinking itself” (*MGM* 1). So the only way for art to resist this natural tendency is through irony.

The disruption of the coherency of her plots through metafictional elements helps Murdoch offer a better presentation of the formless reality. In the meantime, it
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differentiates aesthetic form from other kinds of intellectual forms as the only one capable of holding the diversity of reality: “artists are pattern-makers. The claims of form and the question of ‘how much form’ to elicit constitutes one of the chief problems of art. But it is when form is used to isolate, to explore, to display something which is true that we are most highly moved and enlightened” (SOG 63). As the stylistic dissection in this study has shown, it is only by dint of paradoxical treatment of form that Murdoch succeeds in enlightening us about some taken-for-granted fallacies and evoking in us the Human skepticism that “some of our most cherished unities, the self, the material object, were illusions fostered by imagination, by association of ideas, by ‘habit and custom’” (MGM 1).

Each of the six investigated novels is a detailed sketch of the life of some selfish personae that through its complexity, self-reflexivity intends to remind us of the ignored aspect of everyday life. The aura of moral anxiety alerts us to our own moral identity. In this way, the novels are the specimens of her notional good art which reveals what we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognize, the minute and absolutely random detail of the world, and reveals it together with a sense of unity and form. This form often seems to us mysterious because it resists the easy patterns of the fantasy, whereas there is nothing mysterious about the forms of bad art since they are the recognizable and familiar rat-runs of selfish day-dream. (SOG 84)

The in-built mise en abyme in each of these novels whether in form of a legend and a painting (in The Bell), a drama (in The Black Prince), a fairy tale (in The Unicorn), or the story of their own creation (in Under the Net and A Word Child) paves the way for them to entail ideal realism by opening them to more details and randomness of the world without directly confining them to a form. As examples of literature and painting, these parallel structures assure us of, as Murdoch comments, “the absolute pointlessness of virtue while exhibiting its supreme importance”; they reflect that “the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue. The pointlessness of art is not the pointlessness of a game; it is the pointlessness of human life itself, and form in art is properly the simulation of the self-contained aimlessness of the universe” (SOG 84). The select novels of this study leave no doubt that instead of metaphysical unities the literary aesthetic form encloses a peculiar kind of unity that is “quite unlike the close theoretical unity of ideologies.” They
suggest that metaphor is the indispensable device for ideal realism because it is the best “mode of understanding, and so of acting upon, our condition” (SOG 91). Metaphors bring about an illusion of unity without restricting reality. They acquaint us with truth without claiming to be its avatar.

Demonstrating how much self-reflexivity and the exposition of the conventionality of form have bestowed on Murdoch’s novels an openness to encompass and comment on a wider spectrum of reality, this study has a metafictional interest as its impetus. Dissecting Under the Net, The Bell, The Unicorn, The Black Prince, A Word Child, and The Philosopher’s Pupil for having an idea of her literary style, it has shown that in plot, setting, characterization, and narration and narrator Murdoch prefers irony (in the Hutcheonian sense) to the established narrative techniques of realism and modernism; irony is the key tool that allows her to draw a direct relationship between art and truth. In their concern over the fate of the artistic expression of truth and the stale condition of modern morality, her novels expose themselves as a special kind of metafiction apt enough to encompass optimum reality. Thus, the current research concludes that Murdochean metafiction is actually the truest salutation to the postmodern cause since more than suggesting the unrepresentability of reality, it delineates its complexity. This, however, does not mean that she is more postmodern than other known postmodern artists whose excessive conscious experiments in literary writing have made metafiction a distinct trend in the literary history. She is only as much concerned about the man’s perception of the factual world as she is obviously over art’s fate.

To uphold the objective stance of the current study, it should be emphasized that any generalization about her fiction in such a limited scope is by no means an arbitrary inference but is supported by all her literary oeuvre which appear stunningly the duplications of the same species. Indeed, despite their evident individuality, each of her twenty-six novels bears the mark of her stylistic stamp so vividly that some critics have accused her of self-plagiarism. Moreover, as a statement of the limitation of the research, it should be noted that gender issue is not a determinative criterion in this study. Murdoch’s resort to metafiction is examined without considering the effect that her mindset as a female might have on her style. In other words, neither in its conception nor
in its discussion this research has a feminist bias. Notwithstanding its scope and focus, this study provides a good starting point for further research to see how Murdoch as a female novelist contributes to the post-war literary ambiance; whether her writings support the feminist zest for a écriture féminine; what the similarities between her writing and those of the other influential female writers of her age are; whether her metafiction has anything in common with other female writers’ metafictional creations throughout the history of English literature. The study ends with the conclusion that neither in its origin nor in its configuration and objectives Murdochian metafiction is a restatement of Charles Brockden Brown’s valorization of fiction as the only means to attribute significance to the substanceless postmodern world (Wolter 82); much more to the contrary, her novels are the outcome of her postmodern vigor to capture the complex reality ideally in a fiction that fully devotes itself to it by being simultaneously a mirror of reality and a self-sufficient and contemplative art. In a word, they echo what Bradley reminds us in The Black Prince, “all art lies, but good art lies its way to the truth” (BP 381).

Works Cited


<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m47A0AmqxE>.


