Abstract

Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) is a prolific post-war British writer who was involved in both philosophy and literature. This thesis explores six select novels of hers to see what she accomplished in her fiction. Inclusive of samples from fairly all the decades of the forty-year span of her literary career, this selection is examined in terms of both content and form to set the significance of any possible relationship between her intellectual and literary undertakings in the context of postmodernism. In other words, illuminating the ethos of her time and its cultural expression, the study aspires to contextualize her works to see how much she is in sync with her contemporary postmodern ambience. Drawing on Murdoch’s aesthetics and her faith in the ethical value of the novel, it assesses her success to create autonomous beautiful objects of contemplation that remain holistically entertaining without restricting the freedom of the characters, the author and the reader.

Assimilating the aim and ambition of what Robert Scholes calls “formal” and “philosophical” criticisms, this study analyses the selection of her fiction to settle Murdoch’s literary style and its status in the clash between anti-experimentalism and hyper-experimentalism that was in the air in her postmodern era. Its analytical framework tries to explore the novels in terms of theme, plot, setting, characterization, narrator and narration to determine Murdoch’s orientation in the overt struggle of “mimesis” and “poiesis” to become the prevailing impetus in literary creation.

Providing a survey of the generic transformation that the novel underwent from realism though modernism to current postmodernism due to the conceptual change in the notion of reality and the growing incredulity to religious authority and the objectivity of the intellectual discourse that has controlled and systematized human experience since the Enlightenment, this research reveals that Murdoch’s fiction is her unique contribution to the skepticism of time about the metanarratives of speculation and emancipation. Neither in favor of regression to tradition nor against the narcissistic tendency of the postmodern narrative, her novels are a sort of art proving in their very existence that the two stylistic alternatives are not mutually exclusive but can be interlaced to form a new
generic category that pays tribute to both life’s contingencies and the ultimate moral truth Murdoch styles as “the Good” through the very restraints of its aesthetic narrative form.

The study, then, elaborates on her ethical standpoint about the necessity of redirecting attention from our fantasies towards the existence of the other to substantiate that despite her unique celebration of art, especially narrative fiction, she is a postmodernist that shares with thinkers and artists of this movement the concern for alterity, relativism, pluralism and freedom. To this end, it draws on postmodern mapmakers and literary theorists and argues that Murdoch’s novels have many things in common with the self-reflexive fiction of the day. However, highlighting the inadequacy of the critical analysis of her style, the research concludes that her conflation of the realistic urge for details and the postmodern faith in self-referentiality differentiates her fiction from much of the metafictional endeavors. Not only does it expands her novels’ capacity to encompass the complexity of reality while reflecting the unrepresentationality of artistic forms, but it also imparts an optimistic air to their essence by acknowledging the redemptive value of the imaginative power of the narrative fiction. The thesis underlines the self-conscious struggle of Murdochian metafiction to strike equilibrium between mimesis and poiesis through “irony,” the essential strategy Murdoch cherishes for “ideal realism.”