Introduction

As a preface to the study, this chapter is structured to delineate postmodernism—a late twentieth-century phenomenon that emerges out of the completely extraordinary, unprecedented condition that man experiences due to huge technological advances. Known as the cultural expression of sheer disbelief in values, postmodernism is usually taken as an extreme case of the modern aspiration for innovation without cherishing the modern faith in the power of art to represent and redeem modernity. However, as it has been widely acknowledged that postmodernism is a controversial, ambiguous term, it seems more plausible to sketch it against its background. Therefore, the researcher attempts to run the gamut from realism to postmodernism and present a large-scale survey of the major turning points in the philosophical and aesthetic trajectories. This account of the vicissitude of philosophical concerns and artistic expressions in the Western scheme of things at the time of Murdoch’s creative engagement explains in broad strokes the mutation of conventional fiction to what comes to be widely known as metafiction—fiction about fiction, or in Linda Hutcheon’s definition, the fiction that includes within itself reflections on its own fictional identity.

With this introductory backdrop, then, some of the significant works on Murdoch’s fiction are listed to give an outline of the critical response to her works. The next part is a statement of the objective and significance of study: that Iris Murdoch’s novels, contrary to its realist trend noticeable on a cursory reading, are the examples of metafiction because of their affinity with presentational theatre, and their dependence on quasi-novel narrative techniques for depiction of postmodern reality. Having highlighted the point of the divergence of this study, it then maps how the researcher substantiates it through explaining the methodology and the organization of the study.

a. Murdoch and the Literary Legacy from Realistic Fiction to Postmodern Metafiction

Being the only child of an Irish family who moved to London when she was a few weeks old because her father had joined the Ministry of Health, Iris Murdoch (1919-
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1999) grows into a distinguished philosopher and novelist. Having attended Badminton School from 1932 to 1938, she went to Somerville College, Oxford in 1938 and studied Classics. From 1942 till 1946 she worked for British Treasury and then the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. She studied philosophy as a postgraduate at Newnham College, Cambridge and then became a fellow of St Anne's College, Oxford in 1948. Finding fault with many outstanding thinkers form Plato, through Kant, Kierkegaard, Sartre to Derrida and Buber, she constructs her own philosophy out of what she considered to be the valid parts of their worldviews. Almost simultaneous with her philosophical career, she starts her literary vocation and nearly every year writes one novel of considerable length and complexity with such a virtuosity that Spear regards her as an “excellent story teller” telling exciting tales whose comprehension “demands the learning and culture of Renaissance man—a knowledge of literature, philosophy, classics, fairy stories and legend, history, psychology, language, art, drama, music, popular science and probably a dozen other subjects” (121). Her choice of character and characterization and her detailed setting have convinced many critics that she writes in the English realist tradition. Bove connects the reappearance “upper-middle class intellectuals and artist” in her novels with “her admiration for the great nineteenth realists” especially George Eliot, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy. She insists that the two Russian novelists are respectively the inspiration behind Murdoch’s integration of good-evil struggle, “variety of detail and varsity in character” in her fiction (4). Taking the prevalence of “the life of the middle and upper middle classes” in her fiction as a sign of her thematic preference for “social life” rather than “the domesticities of family life,” Spear points to two consequent critical reactions against her works; first, from feminists who expected that as a women she should have dealt with “the problems of modern woman”; second, form orthodox realists who got dismayed at her inattention to the subsistence of her characters (122).

Spear’s judgment that Murdoch’s fictional works are not in vein of the nineteenth-century industrial novel or the twentieth-century feminist novel, though probably cogent enough to reject these adverse criticisms against her, is not absolute. Maneuvering over Murdoch’s seemingly traditional patriarchal world in which only periphery roles are attributed to females, Spear differentiates her from her other female contemporaries as a
writer who does not “espouse the cause of feminism.” Spear stresses that, in her fictional world devoid of conspicuous feminine issues, her “gender-consciousness” is restricted to depict how, in Rachel Baffin’s words, “a married woman is a subdivision of her husband’s mind” (BP142). Bradbury goes further and, insisting on the absence of direct political motivation in her novels, limits the political awareness to her plays (14). The vast and complex scope of her novels, six of which are under the minute examination of this thesis, proves that it is not so easy to decide about the subject-matter category of her fiction; in a way, they are all and none of them as they are built on, as explored in the following chapters, the multi-focus criterion of ideal realism.

Murdoch’s investment in philosophy and literature has always been of considerable significance to her critics. Referring to this duality as “the central problem which Iris Murdoch’s work poses for us,” M. Burnard Le Gros, as Spear translates, points that the nature of the relationship between her novels and philosophy can determine whether she is “a novelist-philosopher or a novelist and a philosopher” (7). Of course, the appearance of names and ideas of philosophers and her characters’ indulgence in philosophical discussions leaves no doubt that philosophy is an inseparable element in her fiction. Surely, as she remarks, “the author’s moral judgment is the air the reader breathes” (“Lit.” 28). But it does not mean that her novels are exclusively the veiled expressions of her practical ethics.

The multifarious nature of her literary works never allows for the dominance of a singular normative system that she may have articulated in her philosophical terms. No committed vocalizations of her moral concerns, her works are the examples of “the novel proper,” in which, according to Bradbury, “the novelist has his eye fixed on what we do, and not on what we ought to do or must be presumed to do.” Murdoch performs the role that most of the latest philosophers and numerous great novelists have performed: “a decipher rather than an explainer” (x). Despite the hybridity of her fictional world, most of her critics take her own self-appraisal as a “realistic writer and admirer of the nineteenth-century fiction” as the cue in her characterization. Beyond the superficial level of mythological significance in many of her fiction, Spear sees a deeper level at which the real people’s suffering of “real human emotions” subverts “the apparent superficiality
of the plot” into “an imaginative presentation of reality.” Murdoch’s fictional project then is to write about the funny, terrible aspects of life (9).

Underlining Murdoch’s ambition for “Shakespeare’s realism,” the term she applies to the formal and characterological achievement of the nineteenth-century novel and her antagonism to the modernist goal of aesthetic autonomy, Herman insists that Murdoch’s realism is, in fact, “a project of rethinking on which her novelistic and philosophic interests converge” (716). The realism that she tries to put into her novels forms out of her dissatisfaction with the unsatisfactory images of the individual that the dominant philosophies of her time, i.e. existentialism, logical positivism, ordinary language philosophy advocate. It is to furnish their notions of man with a moral function that respecting “the irrational, accidental, and contingent aspects of subjective experience,” in Herman’s words, becomes the identifying feature of her realism (716). The expression of such a realism that identifies a unifying moral truth behind the arbitrary nature of life requires a versatile aesthetic form that can include this contradictory nature of reality without compensating its aesthetic values and comprehensibility. Commenting on Sartre’s poetics, she goes for the novel as “a picture of, and a comment on, the human condition, and a typical product of the era to which belong the writings of Nietzsche, the psychology of Freud, the philosophy of Sartre. It is also a type of writing which is more important, in the sense of being more influential, than any of the last mentioned” (qtd. in Bradbury x).

Uncertain reality, fragmented forms, “automatic” sentences and “subjective” voices, the most idiosyncratic features of the modern novel are enough to indicate a drastic change that the novel underwent in the early decades of the twentieth century. Critics unanimously have regarded this aesthetic change as the inevitable consequence of a larger change in the concept of reality because of the technological improvement (modernization) and the growing disbelief in the function of religion. The experimentation, innovation and improvisation in modernity demand “new styles and structures” that are, as Matz accepts, “often shockingly surprising and difficult” (6). In the realm of fiction, artists felt the urgency to keep with the discovered reality if they wish their art to survive. Their solution was that the novel must break with the stale
traditions of realism to remain meaningful and relevant. They did not want to repudiate the classics, as Virginia Woolf ensures; but to rule out the inefficient novels that instead of paying tribute to subjective experience and psychological depth, remain superficial, verbatim, away from reality through employing an impossible omniscient narrator who relates an unnatural seamless story that finishes in a neat ending.

It is not only to rectify the inefficiency of coherency, conventional complacency and objective outlook in the past novels that novelists in 1910s set to revitalize the novel but to inspire an awareness into the negative dominance of modernity. Novelists launched their new projects with the hope that they can provide the public with the new powers of seeing. Thus, the novel transforms to incorporate some critical abilities to let people “see through modernity’s lies” and preserve their feelings in the face of “technological coldness” (Matz 9). As Matz summarizes, with the advent of modernity, fiction felt the need “to modernizes, and find ways to say what the modern eye now saw, to interpret modern experience, and perhaps even to help shape its chaos into better forms of life” (23).

As more and more writers determine to write in the new trend, the original incentive to reflect, fathom and redeem modern life is overcome by an unfettered desire to show off. No longer tricks are invented to keep the novel compatible with real life; on the contrary, remarks Matz, they turn to be “just experimentation for the sake of shock, surprise, or cleverness” (127). Against such radical vogue for innovation, a group of writers start to restore the aesthetics and values of realism by writing about the traditional themes through traditional conventions of storytelling. As we shall see in the discussion chapters, Murdoch’s literary practice is neither of these two extremes. Her novels are as much realistic as she pays tribute to the modern necessity to depict the world of change. The world she creates in her novels is “the transient, the fleeting, the contingent,” the features Charles Baudelaire ascribes to modernity (403). Her characters are stuck in their past and cannot make it with the present or bound to future. Traumatized by conflict and wracked by doubt, they can never make sense of their lives unless they resort to some artistic activity especially writing fiction or turn to an object of attention outside themselves. In this regard, her fiction is different from modern novels since it reminds us
of the useful function of art and morality vis-à-vis this world of change and disbelief that adrift from any traditional ties floats unanchored to nowhere.

A very different pattern of hope that inspired the modernists to reconfigure fiction to the modern reality is behind Murdoch’s trust in the novel. Her fixation with the novel is not for the emotive capacity that Lawrence admires in the novel: “the novel is the one bright book of life. Books are not life. They are only tremulations on the ether. But the novel as a tremulation can make the whole man-alive tremble . . . To be alive, to be man alive, to be whole man alive: that is the point. And at its best, the novel, and the novel supremely can help you. It can help you not to be dead man in life” (195, 197). Murdoch turns to the novel for its vast scope and its discursive capacity, for the space that it provides for diverse characters and the contingent. Her call for character and contingency that modern novels lacked made the world of her own novels so similar that she is accused of redundancy. This general impression of similarity though not false should not blind us to the individuality of her works. Byatt believes that technically her fiction enjoy a great formal variety (xvii). In her twenty-six novels, she proves that the novel is the genre that can be a container of fuller reality. Matz considers her fiction among the amendments to the modern treatment of reality, a way to be simultaneously beautiful and responsible: “Insofar as such philosophical fictons could make the ‘novels of ideas’ a way to experiment with form (as in the case of Beckett’s existential departments, Ellison’s invisible freedom, Murdoch’s morality), then it also helped the modern novel to solve its problems with reality” (118).

Murdoch objects to modern fiction for its wistful nostalgia for form and pattern. The myth of form equips the modernist to ensure the coherency of the disparate elements of modern life. In her fiction, Murdoch does the reverse of the modernist’s artistic procedure because she wants to create a novel that can be, as she famously said, “a fit house for free characters to live in, and furnish in their own way. It can freely discover the aesthetic nature of its own modernity” (qtd. in Bradbury x). She writes in the familiar realistic tradition just to break it by interlacing forms to betray the abnormality and inefficiency of the form. In her attack on “the consolations of form,” too many of her novels pursue the random and open-ended instead of a shapely plot; indeed, indicates
Byatt, she goes so far that she risks being, “associated with a pervasive modern myth that has also damaged both fiction and criticism—the myth of the primary of the ‘random’” (xvi). However, she never lets her fiction drift into the unanticipated random expansions most of the iconoclast modern novels end in.

Murdoch’s mission to produce the simulation of reality with all its diversity, moreover, puts her against modernist turn to “micro narratives.” Her bulky novels disregard the modern reliance on the paragraph that, according to Fredric Jameson’s discussion of Proust, has turned to “the very vehicle for meditation and commentary itself” (181) (qtd. in James 50). In this regard her works diverges from the regional novels of late modernism that heavily draw on this new function of the paragraph. Nonetheless their stylistic footprint is traceable in Murdoch’s employment of the idiosyncratic feature that James ascribes to them: the descriptive rendering of atmosphere and natural objects for the utterance of not immediately appreciable thoughts (50). The indispensable reappearance of funny episodes furthermore dissociates her work from modernism which sanctions only “high art” if culture is to remain untarnished by the debasement of mass culture. This humorous tendency and the fixation with the question of art in her work stimulate one to see her work in the light of postmodernism which denies the demarcation between high and low art and promotes self-reflexivity as the ideal mode to question the relationship between reality and fiction. Herman straightforwardly considers her a postmodernist despite her own explicit dissociation with the postmodern fiction. According to him, “her novelistic practice can in fact be aligned with a particular current within postmodernism, one that ‘preserves with the referential function of art, albeit problematically’” (716).

To see her works as postmodern explains why in spite of all affinities with realism and modernism they break off from them. From a very widespread point of view postmodernism is not a seal to the coffin of modernism, but its replenishment. It is as Matz illuminates a correction on the modern impulse to make it “more fully effective, artistic, and responsive” (12). It is an attempt to complete the unfinished projects of modernism, creating the most exuberant images to remind people of their value and role for a better human life. In Matz’s view, the awareness that culture can survive in the face
of perpetual change only if the modes of representation keep changing its form to match the change has been stirred in us through modern novels (181). It is in them that writers start to question not only the reality that is caught in the mirror of art but also the efficiency of art to be a mirror (33).

Postmodern novels complete these projects more effectively by attracting attention to the ontology of form. In the footsteps of Gustave Flaubert, the father of modern fiction in Matz’s eyes, modernists focused on the artistic execution and created "stories intensely imagined, carefully framed, ambiguous in meaning, and intricate in their philosophical designs" (15) as a way to subdue the unceasing change and speed of modernity. Postmodern novels invest on the same deliberate artistry not to assure people of the vitality of culture to restore order and stability to chaos but to enlighten them of the way it hits this target by letting open certain windows and closing others. A distinction that Matz recognizes between artistic modernism and postmodernism is that the former is a defensive strategy to restore culture its value after World War I reduced civilization to a lie, while the latter is the product of World War II when all modernist trust in art are doubted (98). Iris Murdoch is a counterexample. Betraying the mechanism of art and culture and their dependence on form, Murdoch’s works are kind of postmodern that never doubts the capability of art for beauty, meaning and wisdom. They prove that postmodernism is not all skepticism about art and Matz is too quick to generalize that for postmodernists art was just a false cover to authenticate the aristocratic and political privilege, a covert ideological discourse to “make people believe that those in charge of culture deserved to be in charge, because they had special kinds of taste, creativity, and knowledge” (129). For Murdoch, both in her philosophy and fiction, aesthetic forms especially the novel can affect the way people, see, act and live in both positive and negative way; so she sets to hint us how to avail it for a perfect life.

Owing to the speed and dynamic change that modernity imposes on life, the novel turns its focus from society to the way people are estranged from themselves and others. It sets to mirror the mysterious inner world of each individual, separate and unknown to others. Modernists, thus, expand the scope of fiction to be more than “an entertaining description of life,” something that can, according to Matz, “‘compete with life’ and
improve upon it, capture life for finer purposes” (16). Highlighting the mysterious existence of each human being in their relationships with others not just their introspections, the postmodern novel settles to modify the modernist aesthetic mission, suggesting that art cannot refine and enrich life unless it is its extensive presentation. To be its presentation it must be as chaotic and random as the actual life, what neither the realistic nor the modern versions could achieve. Despite all its disagreement with realism, the modern novel remains a representation of life, that is, it anchors all the chaotic content on an artful form to ensure that literature can redeem life.

Frank Kermode in *The Sense of An Ending* argues that contrary to the irreconcilability of “the tension or dissonance between paradigmatic form and contingent reality,” narrative fiction has always been a site to reconcile the two, a state to strike a balance between the two patterns of human life: “contingencies” and “providence” (133). Definitely those who have achieved that equilibrium in their fictions are not numerous. As will be seen in the following charters, Iris Murdoch is the artists who accentuated the necessity of this balance in her philosophy and created her fiction to this end to suggest that mimesis is the indispensable feature of art; otherwise it cannot be redemptive and enlightening about various constituents of reality. Murdoch’s success to balance the chaotic content with the aesthetic form is ignored especially in her first novels in a haste to highlight their affinity with the contemporary French literature and their resonance with existentialism. Byatt regards *Under the Net* and *the Flight from the Enchanter* as her European novels because of their setting and their contention with existentialism. “Owning its form to Raymond Queneau to whom it is dedicated, and to the early Samuel Beckett of *Murphy,*” *Under the Net,* she comments, is “partly a philosophical quarrel with Sartre’s *La Nausée*” (ix). It is only in her most obvious involuted novels that her experiment in form and content is noticed; for instance, Bradbury takes *The Philosopher’s Pupil* to be both “a clear-minded and brilliant study of the leading philosopher of the time, the Age of Anxiety, which was also the Age of Existentialism” and “a meditation on the nature of the novel, its close relation to philosophy, and what the novel can instinctively do” (ix).
As we know, modernists’ doubt about realism nourished another reality in their work that denies strongly a universal reality. Relativism, skepticism and irony replace universalism, certainty and cohesion in realism to make the modern art a sketch of subjective experience. The same fundamental attitudes dominate Murdoch’s fiction for a different end. Murdoch never accepts the modern reductionist presumption that reality is what each individual sees, not an absolute, permanent transcendental certainty. This thesis is an attempt to explicate that her fictional mission is not to depict subjectivity but to flash the vast scope of reality. It intends to show how Murdoch disengages herself from the modern impulse by intensifying the superficial coherency and expanding the scope of her novels. The value that she attributes to the mimetic feature of the novel, that is, to its presentational quality, would put her on the side of Luckács who debunks modern fiction for promoting a bad “ideology” through its false risky features like “surrender to subjectivity,” “disintegration of personality,” and “disintegration of the outer world” (24-25).

What Murdoch delineates in her novels is that man is a narrative creature and people’s perceptions of reality are usually the fiction they make. Rendering all her fiction self-conscious about this functionality, she indicates that despite this human tendency to spin yarns the novel can be both the expositor of life and a key to human goodness. To this end, Murdoch draws upon the realistic narrative conventions and the techniques modernist discovered in the novel to reflect the consciousness namely, heteroglossia, symbolism, ambiguous characterization, aleatory patterns. It is widely accepted that the modern novel’s basic strategy to reflect modernity is “defamiliarization,” jolting people into contact with the everyday capricious reality. Modernists felt it essential to “block the normal view,” asserts Matz, rather than supplying the reader with “a transparent window.” Thus, they deliberately made their works poetically dense and imaginatively shocking to the extent that their fiction walks away from reality and risks its appeal to the reader (72, 74).

Murdoch avails this strategy in a manner that enthralles the reader in her fictional world. Taking painting as a ground of comparison, it can be said that modernist defamiliarization aspired to the linguistic compositions of abstract painting, while
Murdoch’s defamiliarization wants us to take her fiction as linguistic counterparts of realist paintings: some entities distinct from the world that through certain similarities prepare us to encounter the world more fully and impartially. Through integrating strange characters and weird events even settings, she convinces us implicitly that fiction is a more efficient analytical tool for disclosing the nature of reality than philosophy.

Although she includes the beauty of art among moral incentives in her ethics, as we will see in chapter two, she never allows her novels to be as autotelic as the modern novel is posited to be. They are involuted and concerned with their styles and structures as a way to train us to discard our selfish shell for the open world of external reality. The modern fiction like those of James Joyce do not aspire to be pleasurable in the realistic sense of arousing our empathy vis-à-vis the fictional people, but as Matz explains, they want us to feel pleasure in difficulty, in their ability to bring “unimaginable beauty into the world” (76). The pleasure that we take out of Murdoch’s fiction is neither fully empathetic nor wholly aesthetic; it is both due to the teasing “pursuit of surprise” that she achieves via a series of literary acrobatics (explored in chapters two to four) to sharpen our consciousness to the futility and immorality of trying to systematize chaotic human experience, as well as the confidence we gain about our freedom to be good.

In response to the political chaos after World War I, two certain tendencies are ingrafted in the modern novel; Matz calls them “critical” and “redemptive” tendencies (76). The former tends to make people more responsive to the dehumanizing effects of modernity while the latter sets to divert people from the difficulties of the time to the fun of an exciting riddle. This extreme duality is the source of major attacks to modern fiction. George Orwell feels the extreme modernist experiments like innovative linguistic puzzles and radical skepticism very self-indulging procedures that detach the novel form reality. He laments the lack of a middle ground between critical awareness and aesthetic freedom in the literary art of the time (235). This thesis will demonstrate that Murdoch is an artist that fills this lacuna with novels that meet both their aesthetic and social commitments by striking a balance between art and politics, form and content, experimentation and accessibility.
Two distinct styles arise to limit the experimental blood of modernism that has devitalized fiction of its recreative energy. The first is the consequence of the socio-political conscience of the 1930s which merges the plots and themes of social realism with the modernist sparse language. Two groups known as the Beats and the Angry Young Men write in this style to substitute the post-war counterculture for the invalid cultural values of modernism. With the decline of the “bourgeois” values, the novel that according to Ian Watt was its artistic expression can no longer echo the hope and faith in culture but has to be rebooted to be expressive of the new post-war attitude. Instead of the experimental urge of typical modern novels, these two groups incorporate a nihilistic tone in their novels which is more aimless and hopeless than the disappointment that modernists subdue with an hope of restoring the past (Matz 110). In their anti-experimental incentive they never fully embraced the social realism of the past since they knew that mode never would be effective in an age that was doubtful of objectivity. Drawing on the world of the disaffected young generation, they make a new social realism that yields three different forms of novels with different focus; as Matz explains, “in new fictions of sexuality, they enabled change by unleashing repressed erotic energies; in new philosophical fiction, they made ‘consciousness’ in fiction a matter of exploring the very nature of man’s fate; and, in the case of ‘commonwealth literature,’ they simply let the emergence of new world cultures create new forms for new realities” (104-105).

The second batch of writers known as “New Puritans”¹ is more adverse to the modernist experimentations and advocates a return to the traditional space and the more straightforward and simple style of realism (qtd. in Matz 179). These two criticisms against the modern preference of form over content act as the catalyst for the birth of the postmodern novel since they demand new innovations in fiction. In a hope to make the dominant literary trends more reflective of the everyday reality, writers set to seek new narrative techniques more committed to reality without scarifying the modern faith in novelty. Matz believes that existentialism helps the modern novel to overcome its

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detachment from reality. Drawing on the existentialist stress on “commitment,” many modernists including the existentialist thinkers wrote novels that respected both creativity and realism. Such novels have more appeal because their resonance with the existential philosophical questioning of reality enables them to intensify the modern doubt in reality and create the novels that are “both pragmatic and unreal, seriously pledged and absurdly detached” (115-16).

Notwithstanding the radical turn that most postmodern novels take in favor of content, there are some writers who find a balanced style in the name of reality without weakening their postmodern mission. Iris Murdoch is such an artist. She develops a hybrid style that questions reality, depicts the multifarious nature of truth, doubts the representational power of the novel, and alerts her readers about their moral identity and the value of art without repudiating the indispensability of artistic form. For Matz, Murdoch is a modernist who underpins the modern novel in intensifying its engagement with reality. He regards her as a writer who having been influenced by existentialism grows into an influential philosophical novelist remodeling the modern novel on the “novel of ideas” (117). Pointing to her divergence from “the excessively romantic freedom of existentialism” in her later works to a “less anxious, more practical,” style that is hopeful of the restoration of values, Matz includes her among the anti-experimentalists who turned to a plain, direct literature for the sake of the novel’s survival and a better understanding of the socio-cultural milieu (103). Although the accessibility and the soberness of Murdoch’s style validate much of Matz’s conclusions about her, the goal of this thesis is to show that like all postmodernists, her major literary aim is to get at fuller realism about consciousness, individuals and art.

Like its ancestor, postmodernism cannot be defined by itself. However, it gets much easier to comprehend in relation to modernism. It cannot be said that postmodernism is a continual or even an end to modernism since in addition to its interest to complete the unfinished project of modernism to bring man’s consciousness out, it seems to aspire out of a completely different urge: to brandish the functionality of art, in case of novel the significance of narrative. Therefore, it is safer to take it as a reconception of the fundamentals in life and the nature of fiction. The wide range of
postmodern literary styles suggests that literary postmodernism is not all about crossing the cultural lines to focus on lower classes as, according to Matz, “refreshingly vigorous,” and “inspiringly primitive, to render their lives in heroic or in grotesque terms,” or as worthy enough to make “their miseries a focus for direct political arguments” (105). It is not irresponsible, morally blunt and nihilistic as it has been attacked for. The works of novelists like Murdoch proves that the postmodern novel has found a way to compensate for the loss of “foundations” what Lyotard styles as “incredulity toward metanarratives” after World War II—a total disbelief in the underlying cultural discourses that authenticated people’s living, thinking, feeling, even writing.

Known as the cultural expression of sheer disbelief in values, postmodernism is usually taken as an extreme case of the modern aspiration for innovation without cherishing the modern faith in the power of art to represent and redeem modernity. Matz emphasizes that experimentation without the faith in art is just “a game all about its own uselessness” (131). Murdoch’s artistic accomplishments are illuminative enough to convince us that modernists never made it to revitalize the aesthetic and ethical complexity for a world that went apathetic with the coldness of technology, materialism and rationalism. Her novels demonstrate that it is only when the artistic form is questioned that art can achieve the complexity essential for ideal realism. They prove that echoing the dominant empty tone of despair is not the only possible response to her ethos, that fiction can be truthful without losing faith in itself. Thus, she injects a positive significance to the postmodern novel by creating fiction that tells the truth in the very act of deflating any pretensions to faith, meaning and truth. As it will be shown in the following chapters, she employs play, parody and reflexivity not to celebrate chaos but to expose the very nature of truth.

The failure of reference is one dimension of the postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives. The implications of the collapse of grand narratives make some postmodern writers so excessively skeptical about linguistic representationality that their works becomes all about language crisis, and linguistic pointlessness. This grave concern makes critics like Inger Christensen to define metafiction narrowly as a fiction that “focuses on the difference between art and reality and displays its consciousness of this
distance” (22). For others like Murdoch, however, it is the best chance to fulfill both the mimetic and redemptive impulses that narrative cherished through its vicissitude. This study will argue that Murdoch is a postmodernist because she does not subordinate the mechanism of storytelling to a direct engagement with the consciousness as in modernism or a traditional effacing of the narrator as in realism, but prefers to make narration an eye-catching issue in her novels. Her fleshing out of her mythoi with philosophical commentaries opens a gap for the reader to see the true nature of fiction and reality. Her novels, in this sense, are the epitome of metafiction that, in Jack Stewart’s definition, “examines the story, as fictional pattern, from the inside, laying bare mythicizing impulses in author and characters that constitute the act of narration” (78).

Matz believes that postmodernists turn fiction into stories about stories, novels within novels and fictitons about narration to express the growing belief in the falsehood and dysfunctionality of fiction. Elizabeth Dipple takes Murdoch’s novels as the “studies in the impossibility of their own ambitions” (The Unresolvable 186) emphasizing elsewhere that “[n]o contemporary writer struggles more ironically and ferociously against the impossibility of art than Iris Murdoch” (Iris 4).

The point of this thesis is that as far as Murdoch incorporates metafictional discourse in her works she is like all other postmodernists who, according to Patricia Waugh, practice “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an aretefact in order to pose questions about the relation between fiction and reality” (2). What identifies her, however, is her strive to remind us of the power of fiction over our lives and the role that it can play in promoting humanity when it is capacious enough to encompass life as it is. The following analysis of Murdoch’s select novels will indicate that her practice of metafiction is the upshot of her belief in the “opacity of persons.” Since people cannot be taped and life is full of inexhaustible details, many of the narrative tenets that take it for granted are renounced in her novels, i.e., “omniscient narration” or “first-take reading.” She finds metafiction a feasible device to expose the reader to the fictionalization of reality without shattering their confidence in the reality of fiction.
Aware of the theoretical acceptance of the metafictional impulse as the innate quality of the novel, the current investigation will project Murdoch’s fiction as postmodern stressing its compliance with Mark Currie’s definition of metafiction as a borderline discourse “between fiction and criticism” (15). Her coalescence of the details of quotidian with magic realism, the miraculous and transcendent validates Currie’s proposition that in “the postmodern context the boundaries between art and life, language and metalanguage, and fiction and criticism are under philosophical attack” (18). A pioneer of the “ethics of postvisuality,” explained in chapter one, she opposes any established narrative frameworks that blind the reader to the arbitrary nature of experience and the tendency of the consciousness to narrativize reality. Creating novels that obstruct any final interpretations in spite of self-conscious narrators or focalizers that readily work out the significance of events, Murdoch succeeds to interlace Aristotelian mimesis with what Linda Hutcheon calls a “mimesis of process.” Her novels, then, both present life and sharpen the readers’ vision to their co-creative agency since in any narcissistic narrative, according to Hutcheon, the actual narrative becomes part of the action for the reader.

Murdoch incorporates a creative uncertainty about story-telling to project fiction's capacity to create alternative worlds stirring both the author and the reader out of the cave of appearance into the exotic everyday life. It does not mean, however, that her fictional world is devoid of her authorial voice; taking as many metafictional devices as self-conscious narrators, double-coded irony, intertextuality and meta-language that engage both the reader and manifest her presence in the style, her fiction is definitely a challenge to Raymond Federman’s generalization in Surfiction where he overestimate the role of reader vis-à-vis the postmodern novel: “the new fiction will not create a semblance of order, it will offer itself for order and ordering. . . . In other words, no longer being manipulated by an authorial point of view, the reader will be the one who extracts, invents, creates a meaning and an order for the people in the fiction” (14). Unmasking narrative as constructs of imagination, she is very similar to a group of postmodern writers who, believing that history depends on stories to convince people of certain realities, put fiction before reality in what Hutcheon calls a “historiographic
metafiction. Murdoch shares their concern with alterity, self-consciousness and authority, but she never writes the fiction of the same breed which portrays specifically “the loss of the feminine voice in history.” Being self-conscious of its falsehood, her fiction demonstrates that truth is not reducible to stories, rather stories are the basis of reality.

In its focus on the way that the members of extended Irish family take the civil war of 1916, The Red and the Green may seem, in effect, modernistic dramatizing Ronald Sukenick’s view that “[r]eality is . . . our experience, and objectivity is . . . an illusion” (41), and authorizing psychography over historiography. The self-reflexive twist that the frustrated attempt of defrocked seminarian, Barney, to complete his autobiography adds to the plot makes it postmodern, an objection to the validity of “historical fiction” in the postmodern age when history is believed to be fundamentally a story, a patchwork of fantasy and imagination. This exaltation of formative role of fiction vis-à-vis reality is the major project of all her select novels. As the representative of her literary career, they draw on the past stories to suggest that reality is nothing but a reworking of the fictions of the past.

Self-reflexivity is the strategy that guarantees her novels the postmodern qualities without letting it end in the literature of absurd. Of course, her fiction is in a way the game-novel; they leave the reader in the ambiguity of meaning perplexed by the paradoxical relationship of art and life; however, they never go radical like the common puzzle-novels of postmodernism that as distorting mirrors duplicating illusions and deceptions land the reader in a void never assured of any message or meaning. Letting the reader to face the mystery of life and feel the moral secret of the novel, Murdoch’s novels display that the postmodern influence is not all about “less earnest engagement with new realities” and “giving up on any sincere and serious effort at aesthetic redemption” as Matz suggests (139). Built majorly on parody, they prove that parody and irony can be used for more practical regenerative aims that a cynical play with the problems of the world. Murdoch relies on parody not to counterbalance the fragmentation of the modern

2 In Hutcheon’s view this postmodern phenomenon includes “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages.” See Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction. (New York: Routledge, 1988)5.
world or just for the fun of it but to make her art a better register of reality and the ethical value of any act of aesthetic perception. That is why, her fiction never shows a marked tendency to digression which happens in all radical novels of postmodernism.

The following investigation is an attempt to show that Murdoch’s metafiction is a defamiliarization of the mechanism of fiction for the sake of both reality and man’s goodness. Writing metafiction authorizes her to be like postmodernists giving full justice to the pluralistic universe and selfhood though in her own way. Other Postmodernists feel the need to reckon with the way the ever-growing globalization has made the postmodern world another subservient to controlling systems by setting people, things, information free to mingle together in new mixtures at an unprecedented speed just to be unified in an ever more compelling fashion. In her metafiction, Murdoch finds fault with man’s egoism as the primary culprit for all reductive unifications and credits novelish unity to be the only healthy illuminating one only if it is self-conscious.

b. Review of Literature

The broad range of critical responses to her fiction is a telling sign of its depth and richness. Here some of the studies are listed to give a glimpse of the smorgasbord of ideas, in certain cases contradictory, that the complexity of her novels has evoked. The diversity of topics and the perspectives on her work testifies that she is beyond classification. She cannot be pinned down since her themes and style inhibit one from placing her as a modernist, a postmodernist, a feminist, or even a traditionalist, asserts Spears. She includes Victorian narrative devices in her fiction and resembles modernists in her decree against writing autobiographical novels presuming that to be in one’s book is “the obvious danger for a writer.” However, what is admirable about her novels, continues Spear, is their fusion of philosophical discussion with her interest in myth-making, weaving stories, patterns, forms and above all their allegiance to establish “a raison d’etre for truth, goodness and love in a world that has dispensed with God” (121). For Byatt who writes the introduction to a later edition of her *The Shadow of the Sun* (1991), Murdoch is as great as Proust since both tune “a kind of toughness of thought with a sensuous awareness that is part of their thought” (qtd. in Spear 125).
In her moral philosophy, out of her wish to vocalize the individuality of man and contingency of life, Murdoch centralizes the concept of love by which she means the capacity to realize the other as “real.” She believes that only “by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art . . .,” man is able to move beyond the self. To attain a moral, good life, indeed, she necessitates the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real, the process she calls “unselfing.” Various critical investigations of her fiction deal with detecting the trace of these philosophical tenets and the moral function she attributes to art. The major full-length studies done from distinct angles by A.S. Byatt (1965), Elizabeth Dipple (1982) and Peter J. Conradi (1986) are the detailed classic examples of the project to contextualize her novels in her philosophical writings (Johnson xiv).

Devoting one chapter to the examination of Murdoch’s philosophy and aesthetics, Cheryl Browning Bove, in her book Understanding Iris Murdoch (1993), attempts to help the reader understand Murdoch’s aesthetic viewpoint and the way it is conveyed. Categorizing her literary works periodically into five chapters for a close reading, Bove detects in them Murdoch moral theme of man’s suffering due to egoism and lack of attention to others. She succeeds in explicating the novels’ symbolism, point of view and the direction their plots take in terms of man’s entanglement in his egoistic illusions. In chapter eight, she focuses on the gothic features of Murdoch’s novels despite the fact that Murdoch herself never admits to be called a “gothic novelist.” All in all, by retracing Plato’s idea that truth and vision are illusory and man has only intimations of truth as well as Freud’s theory of the egoistic and self-protecting nature of psyche in her fiction, Bove concludes that Murdoch is a “Modern Realist” depicting in her fiction the void modern man lives in for egoism, “death of God,” and “spiritual void in the Western consciousness and increasing inadequacy of language for communication” (5).

Connecting most of the preoccupations of Murdoch’s narrator-protagonists with her contemporary issues in philosophy, psychology, narratology in his book Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction (1999), Bran Nicol, notices that her fiction is “outside the central pattern of the post-war British novel.” Exploring “the ways in which Iris Murdoch's compulsive plots and characters are motivated by the question of the
past,” this well-documented perceptive study focuses on Murdoch’s six novels which have first-person retrospective narration, namely, *Under the Net* (1954), *A Severed Head* (1961), *The Italian Girl* (1964), *The Black Prince* (1973), *A Word Child* (1975), and *The Sea, the Sea* (1978). In a detailed examination of these novels against their literary-historical backdrop, Nicol concludes that Murdoch is an antimodernist rather than a neo-realist because rather than reproducing “modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy,” her novels are after imitating the nineteenth-century novel in form and characterization. Nicol finds two core ideas in these retrospective novels that are central in psychoanalytic theory: the reappearance of the past in the present and the need to bring it into signification. Drawing on Bakhtin’s theories to explain Murdoch’s preference for third-person narration as its polyphonic play of voices enables her to articulate her ethical respect for the genuine otherness, Nicol, furthermore, attracts attention to Murdoch’s special use of first-person narratives in which she “expose the questionable attitude of her heroes by a subtle process of distantiation.” A division of these novels into what Dorrit Cohn describes as “consonant” and “dissonant” narration helps Nicol account for different reappearance of the past in the present as a recycling repetition or a cause of epiphany.

The technique of the first-person narration is emphasized in Gillain Dooley’s “Iris Murdoch’s Use of First Person Narrative in *The Black Prince*” from a different perspective; drawing on Romberg’s and Wallace Martin’s elaborations on two different reader response to first-person narrations, Dooley projects how Murdoch takes “full advantage of her readers’ demands for the ‘illusion of reality and truth’ in the novel, only to unsettle and undermine them, not only in the postscripts at the end, but also in the narrator’s addresses to his ‘dear friend,’ P. Loxias which interrupts the narrative from time to time” (2). Dooley insists, notwithstanding other characters’ postscripts which in their denial of the accuracy of the narrative sheds doubt on the reliability of Bradley, the reader is willing to accept Bradley’s version of events because of Romberg’s notion of “authoritative I” which “binds the reader more tightly to the fiction.” Dooley adds, “Murdoch works to unsettle this illusion, but does not destroy it” (4).
Rather than the illusion involved in reading experience, the illusion that blinded Bradley Pearson, the character, is the burning issue in Martha Nussbaum’s “Faint with Secret Knowledge: Love and Vision in Murdoch’s The Black Prince.” In an attempt to reflect on Murdoch’s notion of love, Nussbaum argues that it is the contradictory nature of love which is in operation in The Black Prince. On the one hand, Murdoch dramatizes the blinding nature of love as the ego obscures reality in Bradley’s ignorance of his surrounding; on the other hand, following Plato’s the Phaedrus, she projects the illuminating nature of love in the way Bradley’s love for Julian finally compels him beyond his ‘self’ to see much more than he had previously seen.

The exploration of Murdoch’s novels in search of the impact of Plato’s philosophy constitutes the major body of the critical material on her fiction. In his examination of her novels in the light of her philosophy, Stephen Laurence Edwards, in his doctoral dissertation titled Playful Platonist: the Development of Ideas in the Novels of Iris Murdoch, concludes that her work is out of key with her contemporary philosophical thinking. Emphasizing her objection to Existentialism due to its disgust with the contingency as the result of an inherent approval of defensive solipsism, he brings to light her indebtedness to Plato in taking beauty as a significant guide to the good and equating love with the knowledge of the external world.

Another Platonic topic sought for in her literary domain is the significance of Plato’s Myth of the Cave. David Farn in his dissertation, A Place of Illusion: A Study of the Works of Iris Murdoch in Relation to Certain Aspects of Her Use of the Platonic Cave Myth, charts Plato’s parable of the cave and the sun as well as the way Murdoch has customized it to say more about the Self. Maintaining that Murdoch is interested more democratically in the denizens of the cave, he examines her fiction both to indicate her subtle interweaving of Plato’s parable in various levels of her fiction, and to place them in the context of the works done in the same field by her contemporaries.

Deborah Johnson in her book Iris Murdoch (1987) retraces Plato’s Myth of the Cave in Murdoch’s novels in the light of feminist criticism to substantiate her search for feminist edge of her fiction. With an eye to evaluate the novels within the context of contemporary feminist debate about the nature of women’s writing, she focuses on the
prominent feminist theorists like Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar and Hélèn Cixous to conclude that Murdoch employs “the image of Cave in her defense of art”; “as a Cave of sorts, a ‘theatrical enclosure,’ a ‘theatre of shadows’, to appropriate Irigaray’s phrases, it allows the female author to explore, as she cannot do in her philosophical texts, her own sense of the ‘free ambiguity of human life’ into which the statements made by art escape” (Johnson 95). Touching upon a myriad of different topics “such as Iris Murdoch’s relationship both to modernist writing and to ‘female Gothic’, her reading and understanding of Freud, and her very individual handling of love and sexuality” (xiv), she explores the novels in terms of diverse narrative elements—“questing heroes,” “narrators”, “plot and setting,” and “symbolism”—and comes to the point that “in Iris Murdoch’s novels a dialogue between the public ‘male’ philosophical voice and the private ‘female’ poetic voice” can be discerned (95).

*Iris Murdoch: A Re-Assessment* edited by Anne Rowe is a collection of 16 papers reevaluating Murdoch’s works broadly in three categories of theology, philosophy and fiction. It sheds new lights on her writings that challenge both the common understandings of her thought and in places Murdoch’s own view of her position. Writing on “Iris Murdoch’s Deconstructive Theology,” Suguna Ramanathan invalidates Murdoch’s objection to poststructuralism pinpointing her implicit indebtedness to and obvious practice of deconstruction respectively in her philosophical statements and challenging novels. According to her, Murdoch’s pronouncement that “everything is relative, incomplete, not yet fully real, not yet fully true, dialectic is a continual reformulation” (*MGM* 488), “sounds suspiciously like Derrida’s différance,” an similarity that “in the theology of the later novels undecidability finds a more complete expression” (35). She insists furthermore that there is breach between her ethics and fiction: views that are debunked in her philosophy are valid in her novels which seem to displace the certainty about transcendental principles with the faith in “a change of consciousness, a purification of mind and desire” (35-36).

Martha Antonaccio in “The Ascetic Impulse in Iris Murdoch’s Thought,” tries to disparage the narrowness of the ascetic interpretations of her philosophical stance. Identifying the same saint-artist tension that Conradi finds in her fiction in her ethical
arguments, she insists that Murdoch’s moral position is the more dynamic, self-critical posture of the “anti-puritan puritan” rather than that of the ascetic idealist or the “anti-puritan aesthete” (89). Her point is that Murdoch is aware of the flaws of moral idealism and, as in her fiction, she “builds the consciousness of imperfection and failure into her account of egoism and the paradoxes of askesis” in her philosophy (98).

In “The Curse of The Bell: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Narrative,” Bran Nicol finds it valuable to explore how much her philosophical concerns are in effect literary problems. Discerning her preoccupation with the narrative form in both her fiction and philosophy, he maintains that “Murdock’s interest in narrative is due to her own fascination with the practice of writing fiction” not a proof of the philosophical experimentations that a “philosophical novelist” would do in her novels. In his examination of The Bell, Nicol concludes that Murdock’s writing narratives about the human predisposition “to make connections between things, to put events in narrative sequence” make the reader “feel” her philosophical and aesthetic belief in the double function of art since they implicate them with the same dilemmas her characters face in their perception of the external reality through “personal fables.” Considering the commonly regarded theme of the saint-artist thematic dichotomy in Murdoch’s novels, he reconceptualizes it as Murdoch’s concern with the aesthetics and ethics of narrative to put Murdoch in the wider currents of late twentieth-century fiction: her work is “symptomatic of the changed attitude to narrative which marks ‘postmodern’ culture” (110).

“Houses of Fiction: Iris Murdoch and Henry James” by Priscilla Martin is an article that outlines the extent of Henry James’ influence on Murdoch as a novelist. In addition to allusions, their similar taste for visual arts and their religious faith in the truth of art, she traces the Jamesian legacy in Murdoch’s setting, characters, the theme of the relationship of money, freedom, love and art, the frequency of writers and artists. Martin ends her exploration with the identification of their divergence. Murdoch writes art to account for the contingencies and undecidability of life while James sides with art against life. That leads them into the valorization of two different artistic forms. The former allows for the loose ends while the latter credits just the complete pattern. Martin postulates that their preference to such contrasting forms is due to their difference vis-à-
vis human experience. Murdoch sees life fundamentally chancy and absurd, more comic than tragic which works on appointed dooms.

In “A Literary Foremother: Iris Murdoch and Carol Shields,” Alex Ramon traces the influence of Murdoch in the works of Shields. He argues that despite “certain thematic and stylistic disparities,” the affinities between their works outweigh. Besides their personal and professional similarity, he finds their affinity further in their creation of writer characters in their novels, their shared conviction that authorial personality should be purged from fiction, and their tendency to build their fictional world on the tension between pattern and randomness, a detailed picture that challenges its realistic framework by including elements of “magic realism, the miraculous and transcendent.” However, he zooms on their thematic concern with the relationship of self and other, their use of “epistolary sections and extended conversational and anonymous voices,” and considers their “ambivalent relationship to postmodernism.” Recognizing Murdoch’s preference for “formal experimentation while retaining a commitment to realism,” he characterizes her fiction as the forerunner of Carol Shield’s “middle way” between postmodernism and realism.

The postmodern vein of Murdoch’s writings has been further noted by many great critics of her works. In his review of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Terry Eagleton takes her fiction as the embodiment of poststructuralist values: “the sheer contingency of human life, its tragic-comic muddle and incompleteness against all that would seek to systematize it.” Conradi highlights her support of incredulity towards metanarratives in her attack on totalizing theories: “[she] is wholly of our time in her insistence that ‘truth’ cannot be secured. There are short glimpses of clarity and insight, but the single Big Truth is always illusory” (372). Dipple connects the paradoxical nature of her fiction to her contradictory inclusion of “games, tricks and ironies” in her “practice of a firm defensible realism” (*The Unresolvable Plot* 5). More narrowly in terms of her fiction, in her comparison of Murdoch’s *The Black Prince* with Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, Anne Rowe refers to the paradox that these novels pose by subscribing simultaneously to “positions that undermine the stability of the literary text” and “the moral tradition of the novel.” Rowe maintains that both fiction incorporate simultaneous multiple perspectives
on the ground that “seeing only one possible truth engenders fanaticism” (Iris Murdoch 152). In this sense, both writers are postmodernist that are still committed to “the moral function of literature” (150).

Tammy Grimshaw’s discussion in “Plato, Foucault and Beyond: Ethics, Beauty and Bisexuality in The Good Apprentice” is that bisexuality is an noticeable aspect of Murdoch’s characterization that being fundamentally Platonic means the appreciation of beauty regardless of sex and gender. Focusing on the Stuart Cuno, She argues that Murdoch’s fiction is redolent of Foucault’s exegesis of the classical model of sexuality and beauty since she is trying to introduce new expressions of gender instead of “compulsory heterosexuality” that society impels on individuals in Adrienne Rich’s eyes. Grimshaw accepts that this affinity with Plato and Foucault in terms of gender issue secures Murdoch a paradoxical stance in in the context of feminist thought.

“Reassessing Iris Murdoch in the Light of Feminist Philosophy: Michèle Le Doeuff and the Philosophical Imaginary” is Marije Altorf’s attempt to dispel the prevalent exclusion of Murdoch’s philosophical writing from the feminist debates. Highlighting the growing interest in gender issues in her novels, Altorf argues that Murdoch does not take the neutrality of philosophical discourse for granted as it is commonly believed. With the help of Le Doeuff’s notion of “philosophical imaginary,” she maintains that Murdoch’s thought has its feminist streak both in its criticism of her contemporary intellectual images of man and her own use of imagery and rhetorical devices.

In her book, The Mystic Way in Postmodernity: Transcending Theological Boundaries in the Writings of Iris Murdoch, Denise Levertov and Annie Dillard, Sue Yore claims that as a woman writer mythically oriented in her life and intellectual and imaginative work, Murdoch is one of those who have adopted a new form for mysticism in postmodernity. With an aim to create an interdisciplinary dialogue between literature, mysticism and theology in the context of postmodernity, Yore argues that it is to develop mysticism as an intermediary theology for her irreligious age that Murdoch involves in both theological discourses and creative writing that are mythical in form and content.
Modern Fiction Studies devotes a special issue to Murdoch intending, as its editor David Herman declares, “to reveal multiple, systematic interconnections between Murdoch’s oeuvre and developments in the literary, philosophical, and cultural contexts in which she lived and wrote (“Introduction” 552). Katherine Weese in her article “Feminist Uses of the Fantastic in Iris Murdoch’s The Sea, The Sea” focuses on The Sea, the Sea to show that in contrast to Todorov’s announcement of the absence of the classic fantastic literature, Murdoch resorts to the fantastic devices to express her social and historical concerns, particularly her dissatisfaction with the construction of gender roles. She includes unreal events in the current historical world to repair the connection between literature and the “real” by counterpoising a literary form to the traditional Gothic novel so that both her characters and readers can scrutinize the patriarchal dictation of the real.

In “Philosophy’s Dangerous Pupil: Murdoch and Derrida,” Bran Nicol explores the relationship of literary and philosophical writings of Murdoch psychologically. Finding two rare moments in her writing when her attempt to keep her double writing identity distinctively apart fails, Nicol Bran argues that there are moments when the tension between her philosophical disgust for fantasy and her literary crave for it breaks to the surface of her writing. With the help of “Lacanian notion of ‘giving way’ [céder] on one’s desire, that is, continually frustrating or failing to recognise it,” He defines her as a writer whose philosophical imperative to respect the alterity could not block her desire for fantasy completely.

In his article “Realism Disavowed? Discourses of Memory and High Incarnations in Jackson’s Dilemma,” Richard Todd sets to renounce the critical tendency to belittle this last novel as affected by her encroaching Alzheimer's disease. Focusing on the characterization of Jackson, he argues that despite certain manifest flaws Jackson’s Dilemma is quintessentially Murdochian. Building his point on the novel's apparent disavowal of realism, he maintains that Jackson's Dilemma, more than being a sad harbinger of its author’s memory decline, is a disturbing novel that credits her success “in fulfilling her avowed aim of pulling the texture of her fictions apart” (692) in the name of the “presentation of the contingent or circumstantial stuff of life” (680).
Considering the theme of this current study, the metafictional scheme of Murdoch’s novels is still widely uncharted especially in the broad, in-depth, particular scope this research intends. Generally speaking, Murdoch has not been considered as an experimental novelist, and the few critics who have commented on her use of metafiction do it in a low-key approach in which just one novel or a general reference to a couple of novels is under consideration. For instance, Jack Stewart, in his article “Metafiction, Metadrama, and the God-Game in Murdoch’s The Unicorn,” insists that The Unicorn, far more than an “allegory of reading,” is an “allegory of interpretation” in which readers’ perplexity in decoding the meaning of an artwork, their inclination to be fooled by illusions of truth and the author’s manipulation of plot and characters are mocked. Indicating Murdoch’s integration of various metanarratives in the main plot and her employment of multitudinous metafictional techniques in the narrative, he, moreover, takes the novel as a model that betrays the conventional mechanism by which realist novels convince readers of their being a ‘slice of life.’ In this wise metafictional approach, he reaches to his final conclusion that what Murdoch achieves in The Unicorn is “empowering a hermeneutics ultimately directed towards understanding the self and enlarging the reader’s view of reality” (93).

In his book Fabulation and Metafiction (1979), Robert Scholes sets to determine the theme and form of the new experimental fiction of the day without losing sight of the pleasure that accompanies its reading. Identifying an unprecedented tendency of most of his contemporary writers for “art and joy,” he calls their fiction that avoiding the realistic investment in the thematic content runs the risk of “emptiness and meaninglessness” as “fabulation.” Although Scholes refers to “allegory, self-reflection, and romance in ‘a sense of pleasure’” as the distinguishing modes in fabulation, he takes allegory as one of the main tools of “metafiction.” For him, metafiction is a special kind of fabulation that is “too self-involved” for the reader. He points to The Unicorn in this light as a metafictional endeavor that attacks the laws of fiction through assimilating “the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself.”

Patricia Waugh, in her insightful book Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction (1984), briefly refers to Iris Murdoch as a metafictional writer. In
the continuum that she considers to define metafiction in all its diversity, Murdoch is among those writers who deal with fictionality thematically (19). Their resultant metafiction commonly known as “self-begetting novel” is at severe variance with the radical metafictional works which would include “fabulation.” Waugh asserts that Iris Murdoch’s or Jerzy Kosinski’s metafiction has limited formal self-consciousness while the works of Gilbert Sorrentino, Raymond Federman or Christine Brooke-Rose “in rejecting realism more thoroughly, posits the world as a fabrication of competing semiotic systems which never correspond to material conditions” (19). In her avowal of the disparity of authors’ opinions about the relation of the verbal world of fiction to the everyday world, she, further, categorizes Murdoch in the same group of authors like E. L. Doctorow, Vladimir Nabokov, Muriel Spark, and Kurt Vonnegut who “suggest that ‘reality’ exists beyond ‘text’ certainly, but may only be reached through ‘text’” (89). Fiction is here a means of explaining a reality which is distinct from it, it is, she quotes Vaihinger “an instrument for finding our way about more easily in this world” (89). She pinpoints that the metafictional technique which involves dominant characters who manipulate others explicitly as though they were playwrights or theatrical directors is prominent in many of Iris Murdoch’s novels since, according to Murdoch, fictionalization is part of actual life as “people create myths about themselves and are then dominated by the myths. They feel trapped and they elect other people to play roles in their lives. . . . a novelist is revealing secrets of this sort”(Bellamy 138). In her overall survey of various examples of metafiction, of all Murdoch’s work Waugh makes a cursory mention of Under the Net (1954), The Unicorn (1963), The Black Prince (1973), A Word Child (1975) and, with less emphasis, A Fairly Honourable Defeat (1970).

**c. Objective and Significance of the Study**

Of course, Murdoch draws on all of these metafictional themes and devices in her novels and the objective of this study is to show what marks Murdoch distinct from other postmodern writers is her unique, idiosyncratic way of employing these techniques and devices. Unlike postmodern writers such as Burroughs, Pynchon, Carter, Atwood and Acker, she never sticks to radical, shocking approaches to embody postmodern reality. On the other hand, since she credits novels with the sacred function of improving
imagination, which is in itself serviceable to usher both the author and the reader closer to truth, she applies a subtle, distinct procedure in her fiction to open the reader’s eyes to the muddle of life. Clearly not intended as strictly realistic, her portrayal of the twentieth-century middle-class life reflects acute observation because, “her narrative skill conceals the seriousness and abstraction of her preoccupations—with the nature of good and evil, the religious life, the sacred and the taboo, the nature of sexuality and Freudian determinism” and above all the nature and function of art (Drabble, Stringer, and Hahn 491).

Consequently, by creating the resultant rich and profound novels that really baffle critics by their evasion of recognized fictional genres, she vivifies a form of art that, challenging Plato’s disparagement of art and the artist, is both educational and a light on truth. In this sense, she contradicts the postmodern theorists whose postulation that postmodern art is a pastiche of already existent artistic works rules out the concepts of originality and uniqueness from the discussion of artistic evaluation. Murdoch follows the tenets of postmodern literature which, according to Allen, “seems concerned with echoing and playing with previous stories, classic texts and long-established genres such as the romance and the detective story” (5). However, she appropriates them to redeem both man and art from their impending doom.

d. Methodology

To substantiate that Murdoch’s fiction is the incarnation of postmodern spirit more than it has been acknowledged, the current study examines both the form and content of six select novels of hers, namely, *Under the Net, The Bell, The Unicorn, The Black Prince, A Word Child, and The Philosopher’s Pupil*. It will discuss that these novels do address some of her philosophical issues though not in a didactic form to propagate her intellectual standpoints. Showing the affinity of her ethics with postmodern thinking, it will delineate that her specific self-referential narratives are partly the inevitable consequence of her postmodern respect for the other and partly the outcome of her unPlatonic faith in value of art especially the novel. To do so, while outlining the dialogism between her views and those of the thinkers (e.g. Plato, Kant,
Simone Weil, Wittgenstein, Sartre) who put into them, a reference to postmodern mapmakers the likes of Eco, Jencks and Lyotard as well as postmodern literary theorists such as Linda Hutcheon, Brian McHale, Patricia Waugh seems inevitable. The ideas of Freud, some poststructuralists like Derrida and Kristeva, likewise, appear serviceable to bring some points of this research project home.

To expatiate upon the exact nature of this research methodology, Robert Scholes’s typology of literary criticism is fairly helpful. In his attempt “to ‘place’ certain fictional and critical activities so as to understand better both their capabilities and limitations” (“Metafiction” 100), Scholes figures a scheme to subsume various fictions that have emerged in literary history. Suggesting a correlation between the order of fiction and the condition of being, he assumes that similar to the duality of the condition of being as existence and essence, the order of literary fiction can be divided into forms and ideas. As designated in Fig.1, Scholes identifies four different fictional forms, viz. fiction of ideas, fiction of forms, fiction of existence and fiction of essence. Connecting these forms to the basic notions about fiction, he then postulates a parallel scheme for the schools of literary criticism in Fig.2 believing that each kind of fiction is subject to certain kind of criticism.

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Fig.1

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Fig. 2

For Scholes, in contrast to behavioral and philosophical criticisms that are involved in interpreting fiction, structural and formal criticisms are interested in the essence of fiction, hence concerned with “the way fiction works.” Behavioral critics assess pieces of literature according to their stance vis-à-vis their own ideological perspectives, while the philosophical critics restrict themselves to “exegetics.” What differentiates structuralist criticism from the formal one is their different approach
regarding the teleology of fiction. The structural criticism, best exemplified in the works of French structuralists and Russian formalists, explicates Scholes, is synchronic and scientific as it sets to expose the ideas behind all fiction and the common formal principles in multitudinous literary works. On the contrary, formalists diachronically set to account for the way generic patterns evolve in the history of fiction; their end is then aesthetic, willing to illuminate the achievements in each particular work. Being a stylistic analysis of Murdoch’s fiction in the light of her postmodern thinking, the critical approach of the current study is, therefore, eclectic, both formal and philosophical.

e. Organization of the Study

To substantiate the claim of this study that Murdoch’s fiction is an attempt to go beyond the aesthetics of realism and high modernism, in other words to be a mirror of reality while being self-sufficient and contemplative, in order to change her contemporary dominant doctrine of “art for art’s sake” into “art for life’s sake,” this introduction is followed by the first chapter entitled “The Aesthetical Ethics and Ethical Aesthetics” which sheds light on Murdoch’s worldview and aesthetics in four sub-sections. It illustrates how her weltanschauung, itself a postmodern moral philosophy, leads to an aesthetics which is in essence a postmodern ethics. This specific aesthetics not only prompts the reader to question the current moral status of man but also gives rise to a unique artefact that through attracting attention to its very construction involves both the writer and reader in moral practice.

In chapter two, “The Anti-Art Art of Demythologizing Realism and Modernism,” the building-blocks of her various, voluminous narratives that have contributed to the emergence of her unique style are examined against those of realism to illuminate how their diversion from the realist traditional techniques of narration, plot and characterization ends up in their demythologization of realism. Notwithstanding the resistance of modernists to the myth of realism, Murdoch’s style maintains its originality and authenticity in deploying the traditional techniques to distrust their functionality in illuminating the multifaceted reality. In fact, it will be demonstrated that Murdoch’s intentional magnifying of the unreliability of her narrators, the unexpected, sometimes
unbelievable turn of the plot with its lack of center and ending and her distinct characterization of all the personae who peopled her exhilarating plots are integral to her disbelief in the underlying principle of realism (not denied totally in modernism), and are due to her postmodern view of reality; namely, the unrepresentability of the truth and the relativity of reality.

The focus in chapter three styled “Fictive Narcissism at Thematic Level” will be on the thematic aspects of Murdoch’s fiction that ascribes it as metafiction. Themes such as the complexity of reality, the ineffectiveness of language in reflecting reality, the self-reflexive portrait of the creation of an art object by an artist, and the explicit blurring of the distinction between fact and fiction will be traced in her select novels to show that the prominent themes in Murdoch’s literary career echo her postmodern critique of man’s selfish propensity to reduce the particularity of everything and everybody to an unified whole in his fantasy.

To complete the inquiry into the metafictional nature of Murdoch’s fiction, chapter four “The House of Fiction: A Presentational Theatre” is devoted to discerning the underlying metafictional techniques in the select novels. Drawing a similarity between metafictional novels and presentational theatre in terms of their frame-breaking practice, it aspires to attract the reader’s attention to the aspects of Murdoch’s novels behinds which she looms large like a director in presentational theatre. Indeed, to illustrate Murdoch’s modus operandi, her chosen novels are examined for personal symbols, and their possible transtextual dimensions, issues like intertextuality, hypertextuality, and architextuality. The integration of personal symbols and the overt assimilation of the known generic literary forms are Murdoch’s ironical techniques that far from frustrating the reader prove morally valuable; more than making her novels indeterminable and beyond interpretation, they entangle readers under her textual net to raise their moral status by vocalizing the ineffability of life, a phenomenon that is dramatized in presentational theatre as well.

To tie up the different strands of the study, the main claims will be reiterated in the conclusion chapter in the light of the literary and philosophical backdrop of the postmodern era as well as the results of the analytic examination of her novels in chapter
one to four. As its title “Murdochian Metafiction: An Effort towards Ideal Realism” recapitulates, this chapter concludes that Murdoch’s fiction is a distinct kind of
metafiction in which she uses the traditional realistic conventions of narrative techniques just to question the very conventions. In fact, her thoroughly fresh reading and utilization of fictional elements are highlighted to demonstrate how the attention to the otherness of things and people, in Murdoch’s view, endows a fully independent identity to art which in turn through drawing attention to its own particularity and autonomy can play a moral role in man’s spiritual growth and his advancement towards perfection. Having pulled together the issues raised in the overall study, the chapter points to possible questions and queries that may be addressed in future research.

Works Cited


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