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Research Paper

Ethics of Being: A Critical Inquiry into Iris Murdoch's Selected Fiction

Dr. Krishan Lal
Associate Professor of English
C.R.M. Jat College, Hisar

Abstract
This research paper delves into the intricate exploration of moral philosophy in the selected novels of Iris Murdoch (1919-1999), a prominent British novelist and philosopher of the 20th century. Emerging in a post-World War II landscape characterized by moral decline, self-centeredness, and a breakdown of traditional values, Murdoch consistently championed the revival of goodness, love, and freedom as essential humanistic tenets. While denying direct philosophical imposition on her fiction, this paper argues that her novels serve as crucial "testing grounds" for her moral ideas, reflecting her deep concern for social morality rather than rigid ethical systems. The study will analyze how Murdoch refutes aspects of Sartrean existentialism, particularly its emphasis on individual isolation, by positing man as a social being whose freedom is intertwined with the objective recognition of others. Through an examination of novels such as A Severed Head, The Time of the Angels, The Black Prince, and The Sea, The Sea, the paper will demonstrate Murdoch's exploration of various forms of love (selfish vs. selfless), the distinction between "the nice" and "the good," and the consequences of a world grappling with the absence of God. Ultimately, Murdoch's fiction offers profound insights into human imperfection, the arduous path to moral improvement, and the transformative power of genuine attention to others.

Keywords*: Iris Murdoch, Moral Philosophy, Goodness, Love, Freedom, Existentialism, Post-War Literature, Ethical Systems, Human Relationships, Narrative Structure.*

Iris Murdoch, a towering intellectual and literary figure of the 20th century, uniquely straddled the realms of philosophy and fiction. Born in Dublin in 1919, her academic background in classics, ancient history, and philosophy at Oxford, coupled with a brief but impactful engagement with the Communist Party and studies under Ludwig Wittgenstein, laid a profound intellectual foundation for her later work. As a university lecturer and prolific novelist, Murdoch dedicated her life to exploring the complexities of human existence, particularly through the lens of everyday moral issues. This research paper examines how her philosophical convictions, while seemingly understated, are deeply embedded within the fabric of her selected novels, offering a rich and insightful commentary on the human condition.

Murdoch's emergence on the English literary scene coincided with a period of profound disillusionment. The cataclysmic impact of two World Wars had left humanity grappling with a pervasive sense of spiritual and ethical decline. Societal norms fractured, traditional thoughts were rejected, faith in established institutions like Christianity waned, and moral values seemed to degrade rapidly. Writers and philosophers of the era observed a growing alienation and moral vacuity among individuals, who, post-war, became increasingly preoccupied with self-interest, neglecting fundamental humanistic values such as love, goodness, and freedom. Sensitive to this spiritual erosion, Murdoch, like her contemporaries, felt a deep grievance over society's moral decay. Her fiction, acting as a "mirror of society," began to reflect this isolation, rootlessness, and spiritual void, setting the stage for her lifelong literary quest to revive and re-emphasize these neglected moral tenets.

In a society seemingly adrift from its moral and cultural moorings, Iris Murdoch ardently believed that goodness, love, and freedom held the crucial power to sustain genuine human connection and meaning. These three concepts became the cardinal themes underpinning her novels, reflecting her fervent hope for the revival of humanistic moral values. While Murdoch consistently maintained a dual career as a philosopher and novelist, often denying any direct, intentional promotion of philosophical ideas in her fiction, her works undeniably serve as a testing ground for her moral views. For Murdoch, philosophy, much like the daily news, simultaneously guides and mirrors its age. She perceived the world as a place dominated by "muddle," lacking inherent logic or

stability in either events or relationships. This acute awareness of instability and confusion formed the very starting point of her philosophical and moral concerns, particularly as traditional notions of human primacy, uniqueness, and individuality began to dissolve into a "mist of relativity, discontinuity, and contingency."

Murdoch's philosophical interest invariably gravitated towards social morality rather than rigid codes or principles. Her novels, though replete with philosophical ideas, convey a remarkable earnestness in their attempt to harmonize moral action with narrative structure. She believed that human life and action far surpassed the complexities of philosophical and ethical systems. This conviction explains her insistence that her fiction should not be reduced to her philosophy; rather, she saw herself as a serious novelist engaged in grappling with the "real experimental aspects" of abstract concepts like power, freedom, goodness, and love through the lived experiences of her characters.

A key to understanding Murdoch's unique philosophical stance lies in her critical engagement with Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism. While her early work, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953), critically analyzes his ideas, Murdoch ultimately refutes several aspects of his ideology. She particularly diverged from Sartre's ethics, which centered on individual action, isolation, and angst. Rejecting his view of man as a "useless passion," Murdoch defines humanity fundamentally as a social being. She critiques Sartre for his lack of realistic characterization and, while acknowledging the unique individual identity of each person, she strongly disagrees with the existentialist tendency to place the individual at the absolute center of the world. Furthermore, Murdoch took a stand against the influences of philosophers like Kant, Hobbes, and Bentham, who often portrayed the individual as a purely free, rational, self-knowing will. Crucially, in contrast to Sartre's view of love as the enslavement of one consciousness by another, Murdoch identifies the essence of love as the suppression of subjectivity and the recognition of the objective existence of others.

Murdoch's "middle way" offers a compelling alternative to both the "Ordinary Language Man" and the "Totalitarian Man" of contemporary philosophy. Synthesizing insights from various thinkers, she strives to rectify inherent flaws in prevalent philosophical views, presenting a more complex image of humanity alongside a more convincing concept of freedom—the very "essence of morality." For Murdoch, moral freedom is neither about arbitrary choice nor an exercise of solitary, omnipotent will in self-assertion. Instead, true freedom arises from the perception of what is real and a profound respect for the "otherness of reality."

Beyond freedom, her philosophical ideas about love are central to her overall philosophy, intricately linked to her theories of personality and character. Murdochian love is presented not as a romantic illusion but as a disciplined mode of perception that affirms the irreducible reality of the other person. It is an impartial mode that grants the perceiver their own moral identity while simultaneously withholding the privilege of considering it more important than anyone else's. She emphatically states that genuinely seeing another person as separate, not as an extension of oneself, is an "extremely difficult realization." For Murdoch, love is the arduous acknowledgement that "something other than oneself is real," rejecting the common misconception of love as mere self-indulgence.

Drawing parallels with Plato, Murdoch recognizes Eros as a fundamental force that can compel individuals towards enlightenment and freedom. She distinguishes between real and false romantic love: the former being selfless and directed towards the other, the latter selfish and possessive, often a product of fantasy where the beloved is endowed with an imaginary personality. Both forms of love permeate her novels, underscoring this crucial distinction.

Finally, goodness completes Murdoch's moral triad. She believes that the profound crises confronting modern society can only be resolved through a form of goodness directly tied to morality. In a morally chaotic world, where temptations constantly threaten an individual's resolve, only "proper and deliberate attention" can prevent their downfall. Influenced by Plato and even Freud (who highlighted the limited nature of human freedom and the self-preserving mechanisms of the psyche), Murdoch defines goodness as a generously disinterested awareness of the world outside the self, a recognition often obscured by our fundamental imperfections. Despite the formidable difficulty of moral improvement and the near unattainability of absolute good, Murdoch's vision remains optimistic. She posits that any form of attention that shifts one's focus towards an awareness of others simultaneously moves one away from the self, leading to genuine moral betterment.

Thus, freedom, love, and goodness are inextricably interwoven into the moral fabric of Murdoch's fiction, manifesting both as the conscious concerns of her characters and as emergent themes arising from their complex interactions. The consistent recurrence of these moral issues across her philosophical works and novels underscores their centrality to her entire oeuvre. For Murdoch, these three concepts—love, freedom, and goodness—constitute the very essence of both art and morals.

Iris Murdoch's deep engagement with moral philosophy is vividly demonstrated across her extensive body of work. Several novels particularly exemplify her exploration of goodness, love, and freedom, acting as narrative arenas where these abstract concepts are tested and illuminated through the lives of her characters.

Murdoch's fifth novel, *A Severed Head*, stands as a pivotal work where philosophical and thematic concerns are seamlessly integrated into characterization, offering a broader social view than her previous efforts.

This novel directly tackles personal freedom and society's pervasive influence on individuals, particularly in a context where traditional family ties have eroded. Murdoch keenly observes and critiques a society where individuals are driven by a relentless pursuit of their own happiness, often at the expense of others, treating them as mere tools for selfish ends. This rampant self-centeredness was a profound concern for the novelist, as she believed it "mutilates our own humanity," which can only flourish through genuine interaction with others and a fundamental respect for their separate identities.

In *A Severed Head*, Murdoch orchestrates a profound learning experience for the male protagonist, who initially fails to grasp the importance of authentic interaction. Through a series of complex and often shocking relationships, he is forced to confront the "reality of the other persons," leading to a gradual but arduous process of emotional and moral maturation. The novel meticulously portrays how different characters perceive moral behavior, emphasizing that the responsibility for moral action ultimately lies in an individual's acceptance of love, which liberates them from the destructive dynamics of power, whether as victim or victor. Both *A Severed Head and The Flight from the Enchanter* (1955) are considered inventive works that present compelling characterizations and a deeper, more nuanced view of humanity against a realistic modern backdrop, thereby offering potential solutions to pressing moral questions by connecting morality to the "muddle of modern ethics," the decline of religious belief, and the pervasive preoccupation with the self.

The Time of The Angels offers a stark and melodramatic narrative of sex, scandal, sensation, and suicide, yet it serves as a powerful vehicle for recurring Murdochian philosophical themes: primarily, the struggle of love against the many guises of evil in a world without God. The very title of the novel symbolically reflects the contemporary situation where humanity has lost its faith in God, declaring Him "dead." Murdoch contends that in God's absence, irresponsible "dark powers," formerly suppressed in human consciousness by a "superior moral power," are unleashed and reign supreme. Thus, the novel broadly indicates a world ruled by malevolent forces, with the title ironically pointing to angels who are not agents of love and peace, but rather representations of a morally inverted reality. Murdoch meticulously crafts characters to embody different aspects of this eternal struggle between good and evil, fitting them precisely into their roles within this moral war.

This novel demonstrates Murdoch's serious engagement with existential ideas and the contemporary human condition. As previously noted, love and freedom are crucial for healthy human relationships in Murdoch's morality. However, *The Time of The Angels* depicts how love can be perverted into something "hideous," losing its self-effacing quality. The novel illustrates how self-love leads to damnation, showcasing various ways in which individuals undermine both their own freedom and that of others. Murdoch heavily relies on complex sexual patterns—including incest, adultery, and homosexuality—to explore questions of love and freedom, demonstrating how normal affectionate impulses become overshadowed by sexual overtones, assuming abnormal and destructive forms. Carel's adultery, for instance, leads to widespread ruin. While a few characters aspire to a free, fulfilling life, their transformation is painful, often arriving too late or failing to fully materialize.

Crucially, *The Time of The Angels* is vital for understanding Murdoch's distinction between "the nice and the good." These terms, often used interchangeably in everyday language, are sharply differentiated by Murdoch. The novel highlights a general societal tendency to conflate them, but Murdoch's precise point is that true "good" exists beyond the comprehension of "mediocre minds," and "the nice are not necessarily better." Thus, studying this novel is essential for grasping the profound meaning and implications of the quest for goodness. The narrative presents a large, interconnected cast of characters, all struggling to discern the nice from the good, with love serving as a potential gateway to true goodness. Murdoch emphasizes that truth, beauty, goodness, love, and morality are not common terms but "spiritual signifiers." While simple beauty can be comprehended, goodness must be intuitively recognized. The "unutterable particularity of the individual" can only be felt within complex relationships, and love alone provides the proper channel for truly recognizing the "otherness of other people."

The Black Prince, one of Murdoch's most remarkable achievements, is a complex "super-thriller" that delves into the dark aspects of marriage, authorial rivalry, and love, notably subtitled "A Celebration of Love." This novel is profoundly concerned with good and bad art, with the discussion of art as a form of morality being a particularly significant aspect. Distinctly, in *The Black Prince*, the presence of God, or even "angst about the loss of God," has largely diminished. Instead, the novel contemplates right and wrong, good and evil, as essentially human accountabilities. While a concern for morality and "the Good" persists, this concern has shed any reliance on a higher divine authority. Men and women are left to face the consequences of their own actions, often exhibiting a "bland failure to recognize the moral problems" that arise in the absence of an overarching moral arbiter.

The Sea, The Sea serves as a powerful tale of obsession, jealousy, and guilt. In this novel, Murdoch extends her ongoing investigation into themes such as the saint and the artist, the arduous quest for goodness, the inherent difficulties of renouncing power, and the complex relationship between art and life. While *The*

Black Prince meditated on Hamlet, *The Sea, The Sea* draws thematic parallels with Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. This novel stands as one of Murdoch's greatest, offering a poignant commentary on the male protagonist's "unconscious and casual brutality passing under the name of love." His self-serving fantasy of love ironically undermines the very idea of woman that he professes to celebrate. The novel's strength lies not only in its astute grasp of the diverse forms that egoistic self-projection can assume in interactions, particularly in man-woman relationships, but also in Murdoch's profound recognition of the "mystery of the darker forces of our being" and their irresistible allure, even when characters attempt to embark on a path of renunciation. Murdoch seems to suggest in this novel that true love is seldom achievable in this world without "debilitating and distorting contaminations."

Across many of her novels, Iris Murdoch consistently portrays main characters progressing from a state of moral ignorance and a false understanding of freedom towards a condition where they are finally able to perceive the reality of others. This arduous journey involves overcoming the various "patterns and forms" that characters have self-servingly imposed on others, thereby achieving a genuine, albeit often limited, modicum of true freedom. This dynamic, cyclical progression of limited freedom is discernible not only in her characterizations but also in the very form of her novels. Driven by her theoretical ideas of freedom, Murdoch consciously sought to imbue her later novels, particularly from *The Nice and the Good* onwards, with a greater flexibility and looseness of form. This formal freedom, she believed, allowed for more expansive development and deeper exploration of her characters.

A common thread running through the selected novels—*A Severed Head, The Time of The Angels, The Black Prince, and The Sea, The Sea*—is the pervasive presence of self-deluded characters who seek to dominate others, thereby warping their relationships. Furthermore, many of these characters engage in sex as a purely physical act or an "emotional orgy," which ultimately dissipates their creative energy and befuddles their vision. A stark absence of genuine moral consideration permeates these experiences, underscoring Murdoch's enduring concern with the spiritual and ethical state of modern humanity. Her fiction, therefore, serves as a powerful and enduring testament to the complex, often challenging, but ultimately essential human quest for goodness, love, and freedom in a world perpetually grappling with its moral compass.

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