

Human Relationships in Iris Murdoch's Fiction

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Abstract – Iris Murdoch's interest in human relationships may best be seen in the light of her moral philosophy. Her novels amply illustrates the link she sees between moral philosophy, human relationships and it is not by chance that she elucidates many of them through relationships between people. The concepts of internal struggle as a moral activity, of freedom and of love all share one important pre-requisite, which is attention -- attention to the surrounding world and particularly attention to other people.

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Dame Jean Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) British writer, philosopher, university lecturer and a prolific and highly professional novelist born at 59 Blessington Street, Dublin, Ireland, on 15 July 1919, the only child of Anglo-Irish parents -- Wills John Hughes Murdoch from a sheep farming family from Hillhall, County Down, and Irene Alice Richardson, a trained opera singer who gave up training career to marry at the age of 18. When Iris was a child the family moved to London where her father worked in the Civil Service and had also served as a cavalry officer during World War I. Murdoch was one of the most acclaimed 20th century prolific writers. Her literary legacy includes 26 novels, 5 books of philosophy, 5 plays, one volume of poetry and a libretto and numerous essays. Alzheimer's disease caught her during the mid-1990s then she began to suffer the early effects of this dreaded disease. She died on 8th February 1999. Murdoch's fame as a novelist soon carved for her a niche in temple of the fictional literature and established her as creative social genius, the various facets of the diamond impressed the lovers of the fiction and scholars began to study and analyse her works and yet some aspects of her full genius remain explored.

The main focus of present study is to make a contribution, however modest, to Murdoch's studies mainly by evaluating her views on the human relationships. This is an interesting study; for example, how man behaves towards other man, how woman towards other woman, husband towards wife, children towards parents and boys towards girls and friend towards friend and other relations. She deals with social patterns, erotic involvements, family entanglements and restricted inner spaces of houses within which human relationships are explored and confined. There is a free play of human sentiments like love, hate, sympathy, indifference fear and like sometimes uniting and sometimes separating them. She has rare capacity to fathom the depths of individual feelings and sees how far they can go.

The philosophical thought of Iris Murdoch proposes that no ethical tradition has ever adequately fashioned a picture of human beings as they truly are. In the course of her career this was what she sought to illustrate through her works in philosophy and literature – texturing a personal vision of man's morality. William Van O' Connor wrote that like Sartre, Murdoch views man as a: "Lonely creature in an absurd world ... impelled to make moral decisions, the consequences of which are uncertain".

Iris Murdoch's view is that morality has everything to do with our concerned responsiveness. Iris Murdoch also calls it "Loving attention" – to other particular individuals, where this responsiveness involves an element of particularity not reducible to any form of complex universality. "In Iris Murdoch's writing personal relationships are the principal setting in which this moral endeavor takes place. ... The moral task is not a matter of finding universalizable reasons or principles of action, but of getting oneself to attend the reality of individual other persons. Such attention requires not allowing one's own needs, biases and desires regarding the other person to get in the way of appreciating his or her own particular needs and situation."

Because one's love for the other person is inextricably woven with the importance of that person to one's own life, seeing the other in herself – distinct and separate from oneself – is, as Iris Murdoch emphasizes, a difficult task, and she is correct to emphasize the domain of personal relations as a moral domain. Heather Widdows wrote: "Murdoch's moral vision could perhaps be expected to take into account her vision of people and the world which comes through her novels and which she enacted in her life. Her novels, as her philosophy, reveal her perennial preoccupation with goodness and what makes people good and evil, as well as exploring the nature of religion in a secular world."

According to Murdoch, Freud made an important discovery about the human mind, which might be called a doctrine of original sin. She explains it in this extract: Freud takes a thoroughly pessimistic view of human nature. He sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. Introspection reveals only the deep enemies of understanding, one might say the enemies of love; and how difficult it is in the modern world to escape from one without invoking the help of the other. Sartre's man is like a neurotic who seeks to cure himself by unfolding a myth about himself." The opposite is Ordinary Language Man who "is at least surrounded by something which is not of his own creation, ... But Totalitarian Man is entirely alone. "How well we know this man from the pages of modern literature. He suffers from Angst, which is Achtung minus confidence in universal reason, that is, with its dignified and exultant aspect removed. He makes his choices against the apocalyptic background of the modern world-an apocalyptic world picture favors a total creed-and if he is sincere he knows that he is always in an extreme situation. He is stripped to essentials. Sartre says, speaking of existentialist literary works: 'It is always the whole man that is in question.' ... Ordinary Language Man is too abstract, too conventional: he incarnates the commonest and vaguest network of conventional moral thought; and Totalitarian Man is too concrete, too neurotic: he is simply the center of an extreme decision, man stripped and made anonymous by extremity. "issue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a strongest force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings" (51).

Murdoch quite often uses an issue of psychoanalysis in her novels. She devotes herself to this topic in *The Black Prince*. The psychoanalysis helps people to solve their problems but on the other hand, it can cause abuse of confidence if a wrong person uses it. In any case, in the Murdoch's novels psychoanalysis means a medium of great power. For instance, in *The Black Prince*, Christian wants to help her ex-husband to renew the friendship between them. Nevertheless, she manipulates with Bradley in her favour and then she is able to betray him when he starts to believe her. In a scene, Bradley wants Christian to leave but she persuades him to be friends. Christian says: "I guess you and I ought to try to be honest with each other" and she adds that they should be open, and wants to help Bradley: "...say, have you ever been analysed?" (168) Naturally, this comment annoys Bradley greatly and he does not speak to Christian directly any more but through Arnold, who is a witness of their discussion: "...could you ask your business partner, who has just kidnapped my sister for the second time, to go away, please?" (167) Christian tries to influence not only her ex-husband but also unstable Priscilla, her ex-sister-in-law. From the remark mentioned above it is Christian who uses her female power, she is a

predatory woman, ready to achieve an aim and a success irrespective of the consequences.

The question of power relationships does not end with the case of Christian and Bradley but the reader is the witness of the other form of power and that is the interaction of Frances Marloe, Christian's brother and psychoanalyst, and Bradley. The novels heroes, Martin and Bradley, both excite homosexual lust of their doctors. Although in *A Severed Head* the question of homosexuality is not a central issue of the novel, Martin definitely means homosexual attraction for Palmer and also Martin sees Palmer as "a person of great charm" (Byatt 1965: 118). This can be seen also in the case of Francis in a relationship to Bradley in *The Black Prince*. Both the relationships present manipulation. The males with homosexual inclination try to influence their object in relationships with other people. In the first case, Palmer wants Martin to continue their friendship together with his mistress Antonia. Palmer's suggestion is rather scandalous; they could create a love triangle. In the other case, Francis and Bradley discuss difficulty of life. Bradley claims that if man falls in love, life is not as hard as it seems to be. Francis agrees and openly says that he knows that Bradley is in love. Bradley is persuaded that Francis knows about him and Rachel and so he would like to explain the situation. However, Francis expresses a completely different opinion and thereby Bradley is rather shocked. Francis announces that Bradley is not in love with Rachel, but with Arnold, and that is the reason why he identifies with him:

Francis: "You're trembling with nerves and sensibility"

Bradley: "Of course I am, I'm an artist!"

Francis: "You have to pretend to be an artist because of Arnold, you identify with him"

Bradley: "I discovered him!... I was writing long before him ...!"

(153)

Further, Francis persuades Bradley about Bradley's sexual orientation: "Have you never realized that you're a repressed homosexual?" (153). Then Bradley tries to explain that he is heterosexually oriented and of course, that Francis is wrong. It is necessary to explain the relationship of Bradley with his friend Arnold. Bradley admits that Arnold is the most important man in his life. The artist needs Arnold because he understands him and is willing to discuss art at a price of being offended. Actually, Bradley is fascinated by Arnold, he can criticize his writing and enjoys it; namely, it is easier to concentrate on someone else's production than to search for own mistakes and imperfection. Francis does not believe Bradley, but in a few moments, he tells the truth. The truth is that Francis is a

homosexual, and nobody has ever loved him. Murdoch is fond of homosexuality as well as incest or Oedipal complex. It seems that the issue of homosexual love occurs in all three novels and always inclines to power relationships.

Homosexual love is also evident even in *Under the Net*. The reader supposes that Finn is a homosexual and has more than a friendly relationship to Jake, although Murdoch does not say directly. However, this example of homosexuality is innocent because Finn has no power.

The analysis shows that the power relationships emphasize manipulators' shortcomings and sexual desires. The power relationships and the special kind of love, which is hidden in them, are part of life the same way as incestuous relationships or friendships. Nevertheless, they have a negative "odour."

Iris Murdoch's wish is that philosophy should once again present picture of the whole of human life and provide succour and insight to all. She believes that: "In the erosion of religion and the elevation of science, something essentially human has been 'lost'; a phrase we will encounter often as we discuss her moral vision.

Love could be understood on two levels, the first one is love of work, this includes love, which is reflected in human doings, and the second level represents love of people, this means love recognized in human relationships. Further, love is sectioned in detail into love of art and love of work. Love of art is stressed in two of the novels, in *Under the Net* where creation of art is a path to success, the hero at the end learns that creation of art is a process and he is at the beginning of it; by experience, he judges his present art more positively than before. *The Black Prince* is focused on art more because there are two different artists who stand with their opposite artistic opinions in contrast. The whole novel demonstrates the effort to create perfect art, in the protagonist's eyes, and his own conviction wins. In terms of relation to work, the hero of *Under the Net* finds satisfaction in the job of hospital boy and his selfishness recedes into the background, whereby he shows a good side of his character. Thereby work becomes an important part of life. Love of art and love of work are similar aspects of "Murdoch's" love but whereas art is seen as an egoistic interest in the novels, work can mean a benefit for everyone in the society.

Human relationships and emotions are rather complicated issues. Love, seemingly simple emotion that stands in the foreground can be intricate. It is possible to view love in friendships, relationships of men and women, but also in incestuous relationships or power ones. In *Under the Net* and *The Black Prince*, the friendships are firm; friends respect each other and even opposite views on art do not break the relationship, on the contrary, the relationship of Martin and Palmer in *A Severed Head* suffers losses. Nevertheless, it is understandable because the "play"

of the participants is not very fair; there are a number of machinations there. Concerning incestuous relationships, they occur in the novels in two forms: the first form shows the relationships, which are not incestuous in fact but are similar to them. Such a relationship can be noticeable in case of Antonia and her younger husband Martin, whereas Martin has a position of a "child." The real incest that belongs to the second form is committed between a brother and his half-sister in *A Severed Head*, which is considered scandalous.

Power relationships show how man can be manipulated by a stronger person - sometimes optionally as it is seen in case of Finn, in *Under the Net*, who is glad to function as a servant, but mainly involuntarily through psychoanalyst's mediation or sexual desire, these are cases of Palmer in *A Severed Head*. Very uncertain love is recognized in the last mentioned type of love, love of men and women. The characters are "absorbed" into a net of strange relationships, often with sexual overtone.

To sum up the loves from different points of view it is important to realize that Murdoch does not focus only on expressing love to other humans but also on love to human doings as the result of human production. The explored novels are full of cross grained human relationships where love, beside other human emotions, plays an important role. The people love, hate, respect each other, envy and even are selfish. In some cases the people change, in some cases do not. Different kinds of love are remarkable there and it is clear that all the "loves" can complicate lives of the figures because the relationships are heterogeneous - they are scandalous and understandable at the same time, and thereby take realistic effect. The result of analysis point out that in many cases love is one-sided or unbalanced. The Murdoch's novels are full of cross-grained human relationships where love plays an important role. The people love, hate each other, envy and are selfish. Different kinds of love are remarkable there; it is possible to notice love of friends, incestuous relationships, power relationships and the most widespread type of love - love between men and women. All the relationships can complicate lives of the figures; the relationships are heterogeneous - they are scandalous and understandable at the same time, they are rather realistic. The reader has an opinion that the author does not criticize the relationships and emotions but portrays all the possible situations man can face.

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