

## Goodness in Iris Murdoch's Novels: Hard to Seek and Understand

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### Abstract

Born on 15<sup>th</sup> July,1919, Iris Murdoch has carved out a niche as one of the great Post Second World War English novelists. She has created a world uniquely of her own which is not restricted by the social realism of 1950s and 1960s. Instead, she chooses to grapple with the malaise which has come to plague the world in the wake of the holocaust of the Second World War. Her fictional universe highlights the Post-Christian moral dilemmas and 'The God is Dead' syndrome. While rejecting a deterministic traditional theological concept of goodness, Murdoch emphasizes that there is a need for a comprehensive value system based on love, freedom, and imagination which can bring goodness in the characters of human beings. The present paper is a humble attempt to encapsulate how Iris Murdoch defines and highlights the concept of goodness in her novels namely, *The Bell*, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* and *Nuns and Soldiers*.

**Key words:** Existentialism, nihilism, utilitarianism, sinners, strivers, freedom, love, imagination.

A philosopher, novelist, and poet, Dame Jean Irish Murdoch (1919-99) entered the literary arena at the time when a swift transformation was taking place in British literature. A novelist claimed to be adhered to the 'aesthetics of impersonality' on the one hand and moral burden of art on the other, she delved into the ethical and moral aberrations the twentieth-century man was confronting.

In *On 'God' and 'Good'* in *The Sovereignty of Good* Murdoch deliberates in detail on the concept of goodness. She seems inclined to the philosophy of Freud and Marks while rejecting existentialism. Existentialism for her provides an unreal picture of human beings since it obliterates the existence of others and give importance to one's own self and annihilates the concept of sin. In her opinion, Freud provides a 'realistic and detailed picture of fallen man'[1]. Murdoch seems influenced by him when she interprets 'modern psychology as a modern doctrine of original sin'. Western moral philosophy has replaced the idea of goodness with the

idea of 'righteousness' and 'sincerity.' For Sartre, agents of freedom and choice constitute basic components of morality. She rejects Richard Hare's moral philosophy that wrestled with ethical questions determining that 'man is morally the set of his actual choices'[2]. This appears to her 'unrealistic, overoptimistic and romantic '

[3] as it dismisses the existence of individual background and his consciousness which plays a vital role in determining goodness and evil of characters.

Iris Murdoch had varied types of affiliation with Plato, Moore, Kant, and Hume also. She agrees with Moore who in his book *Principia Ethica* held that the good is indefinable and is a non-natural entity. But she distrusts Moore's philosophy when he tends to endorse Humean philosophy which separates ethical values from reality. She opines that it may result in:

"...diminished, ever perfunctory account of morality...and with the increasing prestige of science may lead to a marginalization of ethical" [4]

She denounces the utilitarian definition of moral goodness. The Good and the evil which we think of are more 'incarnate' than we visualize in the chosen world. Murdoch does not accept the definition of goodness endorsed by utilitarian philosophers. For her, Gilbert Ryle's behaviorist theory was unreal. It lacked the proficiency of comprehending moral life. She has objections with 'Oxford Philosophy'. If choices were the basis of moral quality, she feels, then the circumstances that entail choices must also be significant. For her, consciousness which she calls 'vision' is a great factor in influencing the choices.

For Murdoch, the Good is both transcendent and real.

"If someone says 'Do you then believe that the idea of the Good exists'? I reply, "No, not as people used to think that God existed" [5]

While defining the good, she alludes to Plato, insisting that Plato never identified the Good with God. Moral values are unfettered, independent of any vision of God. They have 'nothing to do with a personal God or gods. The idea of Good is not God'[6] For her, "Good represents the reality of which God is the dream"[7]

According to Hilda D Spear, her novels deals:

...with the ideas of Good and Evil as they are manifested in man and with the existence or non-existence of God [8]

A.S. Byatt opines:

What Murdoch understood better than anyone else i have read was the way in which our sense of our moral beings, the imperatives and prohibitions we desire, or agree, to accept, depended on a religious structure which our society as a whole no longer believes in. [9]

While rejecting dogmatic religious doctrines, Murdoch substitutes the Good for God. Murdoch feels that human beings constantly struggle against their own temperaments and constant fears that are nagging them in the form of swollen egos. To be good, they will have to remove the aggrandized layers of self. She concludes that in the absence of solid moral referents, there is a need for a comprehensive value system based on love, freedom, and imagination which can bring goodness in the characters of human beings. Love in Murdoch's terminology is the recognition of the volcanic otherness of others. For her, no moral progress is possible without the recognition that 'others exist-exist separately and independently of each others'[10]. She constantly stresses:

We need to return from the self-centered concept of sincerity to the other- centered concept of truth [11]

Murdoch ardently believes that such kind of feelings of love are essential to achieve goodness. In fact, in Murdoch's world, good men are always judged by the virtue of their realization of the limits of their freedom:

Freedom is knowing and understanding and respecting things quite other than ourselves.[12]

For her, love is to be associated with contemplation and apprehension of others and freedom is related to moral action. In *God and Good*, Murdoch says:

'Freedom is not strictly the exercise of will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes an appropriate, occasions action'.[13]

Both freedom and love aim at the crucifixion of selfish desires and taking people to the heights where their self is reduced to nothing and they find joy in performing a duty towards others, i.e., respecting the otherness of others. She feels that as fantasy is an enemy both of understanding and imagination, those who strive for sainthood must liberate their soul from it as it is:

.... the tissue of self- aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevent one from seeing what is there outside one.[14]

Joseph Malikaïl says:

“Unselfing” is a prerequisite to gradually directing the moral agent's consciousness towards what Murdoch, following Simone Weil, would call loving attention "Attending with love" enables one to counter the powerful and natural egocentric mechanism, to purify and direct its energy towards choosing rightly when occasions arise.[15].

Murdoch gives much importance to ‘imagination’. To her, imagination is a positive aspect of mind. It respects contingency and unravels the complexities of human existence:

Imagination is doing. It is a sort of personal exploration.[16]

Murdoch provides us a moral system based on love, freedom and imagination which can save people from committing various sins.

Jennifer S Goodyer believes that Murdoch's 'metaphysical ethics' have significance for theologians. Her insistence on goodness is another form of nihilism as far as her emphasis on loving attention is concerned. It is realized only when one overcomes his ego by staring into a void and accepts that reality is meaningless. When Murdoch replaces transcendence with void, any form of real love or human goodness is deleted.[17]

James K.A. Smith finds

“Iris Murdoch creates a world that mirrors our own, with all of its cross –pressures and stubborn hopes.[18]

In varied ways, the theme of the possibility of becoming good without God has been taken up in her novels. In *The Bell*,[19] It is studied with human frailties and limitations. Murdoch's definition of the Good with its stringent emphasis on self-transcendence is beset with almost impossible attainment. In the novel, a small group of the faithful desire to establish a quasi-monastic lay community at Imber Abbey. But this 'otherworldly community' is marred with persistent mysterious maneuver oferos. For Murdoch, it is not hypocrisy but a comprehension of the convulsion of hunger of all sorts

In Dora Greenfield who decides to play a witch at Imber Court and had escapades, Murdoch provides traits of a potential striver for goodness. She is the only character who is granted the privilege of epiphany.. Murdoch presents her innate goodness when she tries to rescue a butterfly. To begin with, she undertakes the task of digging the bell as a source of power for herself. Soon she realizes her mistake. When the Imber Court is destroyed, she stays back to

help Michael in winding up the Community. Murdoch's intentional tactics to make Dora share Michael's burden is an indication that Dora, despite her little jealousies is capable of having innate goodness and sharing it with others. Murdoch has always talked in terms of degree of self-knowledge. A person who is capable of discerning reality away from the subjectivity of her own thoughts can be a real quester. Dora's intuitive hold on goodness is a significant signal in this direction.

In Murdoch's frame of work, evil does not operate for evil sake. Murdoch has quite often lamented over the absence of pictures of evil in modern novels. She has been unable to delineate characters capable of evil for the sake of evil. There are demonic figures in her novel but as potential evildoers, these are just a few. Evil is circumstantial e.g., Nick suffers because he lacks direction in life. He destroys Michael with a sense of revenge. Nick becomes an objective correlative to magnify Michael's failure of love. But he is a fully drawn character and stands for the presence of love in life. Even though he is an evil character, Murdoch does not reject him as a sinner because he is more sinned against than sinning. Murdoch does not approve of the religious dictates of goodness and evil. No doubt, people like James Tayper and other inmates of the order stand for the solidity of a moral order, but in the highly complex modern they are misfits because their concept of morality is obsolete and irrelevant.

Published in 1970, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* [20] also revolves around the theme of good and evil where palpable evil predominates till the end and good has to suffer honorable defeat.

Although based on Christian allegory, the novel is set in a post-Christian era. At the centre of the plot is a well-to-do happily married couple Rupert and Hilda, who believe in the authority of the good. The plot projects Rupert Foster- a Sunday metaphysician as character of good. For him, if evil has depths, goodness has heights. He believes not only that goodness is definable, attainable, and distinctly preferable but also that man is capable of realizing a level of the good which would be higher and more desirable than his present conditions reveal. His high-minded Platonism proves no substitute for Julius' cynicism and malevolence. Murdoch clarifies that the accepted moral codes are irrelevant for people who have experienced the holocaust of the modern world. Julius King who has undergone the worst ever-imagined suffering in a concentration camp, probably cannot accept Rupert's facile theory of virtue.

While rejecting goodness and truth, he feels that human beings are misanthropists. For him, goodness is dull and depressing. He becomes an active agent of the devil and both Rupert and

Axel become a victim of his intrigues. Julius succeeds in destroying the citadel of stability and harmony. But the point of focus here is not the evil inclination of Julius. Rather it is the vulnerability of human situation. Murdoch reveals that it is easy for Julius to enact a god-like puppet show because human beings are ever ready to be played upon like this. Morgan, his beloved is, to some extent, his alter ego. Murdoch has definitely projected Hilda as a solid character who though temporarily has been duped by Julius' mechanizations. In deliberately pairing her characters on antithetical lines, Murdoch intends to keep a constant struggle between saintly qualities and sinful existence. The structure of the novel has been designed in a way that despite Rupert's dismal failure and Julius' Mephistophelian mechanizations, it is Tallis who shines forth, though his humble acts sound insipid. He represents Murdoch's vision of real goodness which starts from responding to the real human needs with self-denying humility... The novel shows Rupert's doom as he is a victim of fallacious theoretical metaphors because they cannot be substantiated by any practical creed. Julius works systematically to demolish all signs of good, love, and faith because he feels that the top of the vessel is empty. But Tallis with his moral strength invites attention to the fact that it is not empty. Goodness does not suffer defeat; it is the self-righteous idealism of Rupert Foster which faces defeat.

*Nuns and Soldiers*, published in 1980 [21] is another important novel in Murdoch's cannon which emphasizes that the quest for goodness has nothing to do with the existence of God.

The novel focuses on human potentiality and human endeavor. Yet the goodness remains a distant and difficult goal because none of the characters possesses the qualities of self-abnegation. Guy Openshaw stands for Murdoch's own views. Dying guy reinforces Murdoch's emphasis that consolation in any form takes the search for good from its goal. Anne, after remaining enclosed inside a convent for fifteen years suddenly loses faith in God and returns to the outer world. She urgently feels that cloistered life cannot lead to the path of goodness. At the same time, she wants to have her faith protected without names and concepts. Tima compulsive thief, a mediocre painter, a dwarf both in front of guy Openshaw and the Count appears insignificant. David J. Gordon opines:

We are told that his unpossessiveness creates a space around him, precisely what Murdoch says the authentically good person manages to do [22]

Even though Murdoch all through presents him as a character in possession of qualities which align him towards goodness, yet he is left to be marginalized by mediocrity because his selfishness overpowers him.

Murdoch, undoubtedly compels the readers to take notice of the fact that the possibility of the highest good remains with those who can make sacrifices and seek renunciation. Daisy shines forth thus. Filthy, foul-mouthed, hedonist, professing sympathy with terrorists, she asserts her authority as a morally advanced character. A character who is not vindictive, she forgives and forgets easily and believes in providing others the freedom to take decisions She loves Tim passionately but allows him to chase his happiness in Gertrude's love, thus recognizing his entity. Anne is not a saint. But her capacity to identify her imperfections indicates that her soul is alive and is ready to absorb the anguish of pursuit. She has come to realize that the idea of void, itself may prove a trap, and being an anchoress in the world may be a meaningless, hollow dream. She is enlightened by Christ's message. The significance of the scene between Christ and Anne underlines the need to distinguish between the theoretical idea of non-existent God and the difficult and hazardous path to goodness.

Everywhere there are traps for those in the quest of goodness and it is difficult to come out of these traps. All those who think that the path to goodness is easy and comfortable are victims of the novelist's ruthless irony. Yet Murdoch has faith both in the possibility of human goodness as also the potentiality of human endeavor to achieve it. Michael Meade and Dora Greenfield are the potential strivers in *The Bell* and in *Nuns and Soldiers*, Anne Cavidge matured and hardened by the vagaries of religion and life vows to serve mankind. Tallis Browne in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* stands for what goodness in human life ought to be. In Murdoch's spiritual wasteland, there are characters with strong moral inclinations, and those who are good and possess saint-like qualities have a peripheral role to play. In varying ways, she shows that the path to goodness is open to all but many do not seek urge to follow. Only those who can relate to others and can annihilate their own self can achieve the highest good Such characters are mocked and chide as Tallis is chided in *A fairly Honourable Defeat*. But even Christ was mocked. Goodness is really difficult to attain.

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