

## IRIS MURDOCH'S MORAL VISION IN UNDER THE NET

Seraj Uddin Pandith

Research Scholar, Department of English Ranchi University, Ranchi – 834001

E-mail: serajenglish@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

Iris Murdoch is one of the prominent mid-twentieth century novelists as well as a notable philosopher. In her works and novels what she sought was to illustrate a personal vision of man's morality. This paper tries to show how Iris Murdoch's novel reflects her moral vision. It is shown that her novel is not mere exemplification of her ideas expressed in her philosophical books. And, in her novels she depicted real characters in real society. For her, man's capacity to love and to phantasies is a saving grace. This love is born out of caring for and 'attention to others', a phrase that Murdoch borrowed from Simone Weil. Murdoch's novels as she has described are pilgrimage from illusion towards reality and also pointed out that 'reality 'as such is never arrived at in the books, any more than it is in life. She believes that morality is connected with change and progress. The study of this novel shows how Jake does his pilgrimage and sees true goodness through gradual apprehension of goodness in his surroundings.

**Keywords:** attention, love, morality, reality, truth, unselfishness.

### INTRODUCTION

"The most obvious difference between nineteenth-century novels and twentieth-century novels is that the nineteenth-century ones are better." This blunt claim from the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch is characteristic. But it is her explanation that deserves our consideration.

The main aim of this paper is to show how Iris Murdoch's novel reflects her moral vision. She is one of the prominent mid-twentieth century novelists as well as a notable philosopher. Her effective writing career stretches from 1945 to 1994. She was born in Dublin in 1919 of Anglo-Irish parents. She announces that her father, Wills John Hughes Murdoch, was a great inspiration to her and the greatest literary influence as well as moral one in her life. Murdoch's philosophical thought proposes that no ethical tradition has ever adequately fashioned a picture of human beings as they truly are and Existentialism offers a superficial optimism and the consoling romantic image of man. She says that we have suffered a general loss of concepts, the loss of moral and political vocabulary. We no longer see man against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him (Iris Murdoch, 1983, p.46)

In her philosophical works and novels what she sought was to illustrate a personal vision of man's morality. Therefore her moral philosophy is an 'effort to reclaim a notion of the self as individual and to reconceive its relation to an idea of moral value or the good.' (Antonaccio, 2003, p.109) Murdoch uses the Platonic imagery of the good as the light of the sun by which we see all other things. She had observed the rise of Symbolist trends in

modern poetry and literature, which seemed to question the importance of the portrayal of character in literature. In the face of this powerful cultural idea that believed only the whole is real Murdoch insisted that the particular and individual are paradigmatic of the real.

In Murdoch's view moral philosophy at the first should provide an accurate picture of man and show how, man may improve morally. In this paper, it is shown how Murdoch depicts her characters in realistic ways and how they do their pilgrimage from the illusions towards reality. In Murdoch's view 'moral concepts are not merely a function of what an agent chooses to regard as valuable; they are more deeply, a function of the agent's moral being, the texture of his or her personal vision or consciousness. Morality is bound up with our deepest conceptual attitudes and sensibilities about the world, which determine the facts from the very beginning'. As she says: 'We differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world, but because we see different worlds'. Moral concepts in fact are the way of apprehending the facts rooted in moral vision. In this novel *Jake*, for instance, at the first has no the true vision of himself as well as of his surroundings. As Murdoch believes, anything that alters vision in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue. In her novels Murdoch shows some of the techniques which help the characters to go out of themselves such as the apprehension of beauty in nature and art and most important, attention to others. Murdoch says: 'Self is such a dazzling object, that if one looks there one may see nothing else.' Therefore the purification of consciousness requires finding objects of attention that redirect vision and psychic energy away from the self. In her novels the characters are depicted between the degrees of the good. And it is only the good that has corrected their consoling fantasies and their selfish illusions by right vision. Her novels have variety of characters which are in different light of the good. By attention to the reality of the world and other persons they move away from their own fantasies and towards reality. By attention to the nature, art, painting, love and religion they go far from their self and close to the reality. In her novels, Murdoch proves it is possible to be good and love people.

In the words of Conradi, 'Like any writer, her characters can sometimes be memorable, sometimes merely believable, sometimes interesting without being persuasive...' Michael and his fantasies in *The Bell*, *Jake* and *Hugo* in *Under The Net*, *Charles* and *James* in *The Sea*, *The Sea*, *Julius* in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* are examples of her portrayal of memorable characters. She has special power of describing individuals and their relationships and emotions. Murdoch describes relation between characters and their feelings about others, as if she or the reader is a character in the novel. Peter Conradi says that Taine remarked of Dickens that his whole work might be reduced to the phrase "Be good, and love". The special use of picaresque convention, the extraordinary relations between the two central figures, *Jake* and *Hugo*, and what passes between them, and finally the tale's open-endedness make the novel different from the novel of nineteenth century.

The destruction of images, pictures and states of mind is a great and continuing theme in Murdoch's work. Here the pathos and impermanence of the phenomenal world distantly

mirrors, perhaps prefigures, the Socratic smashing of illusions and of all theoretical attempts to dominate reality with which the tale ends.

In the novel "the net" is something thrown over truth. The 'net' in the title alludes to the net of discourse behind which the world's particulars hide, a net which is necessary in order to elicit and describe them: language and theory alike (which constitute the net) both reveal and yet simultaneously conceal the world. As Peter J. Conradi says:

'... Murdoch's bias is Neo-Platonic in the sense that it gives a primary and highly ambiguous place to art itself in the discovery of truth, and also in that it subordinates the argument to the moral psychology of the characters. Under the net enquires into the nature of the Good man vis-a-vis art'. (1960, p. 32)

Murdoch has described her novels pilgrimage from illusion towards reality and also pointed out that 'reality' as much is never arrived at in the books, any more than it is in life. In Iris Murdoch's novels human relationships are the main link with reality. Whereas her plots or individual episodes reach into fantasy, symbolism or allegory and fit ingenious patterns, she achieves the contingency, which she considers so important for novel writing, by putting her characters at the mercy of real enough pitfalls of human situations of personal involvement. The reality in her novels is very much our human reality – not only with the details of life-styles, attitudes and problems we encounter today, but also with an undercurrent of unanswered questions that stare us in the face, as old as mankind.

In her book on Sartre, Murdoch has pointed out his lack of interest in human relationships. But for Murdoch 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.

Under the Net is much concerned with lies, art-as-lies, and the deceptive nature of all copying. Murdoch's book on this (*The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*) is notable for the sympathetic vigour of her explication of Plato's objections to art. To Plato, who originated a metaphysical theory about the nature of copying, art is far removed from the truth, springs from merely vicarious knowledge, is the product of the inferior part of the soul, and harms by nourishing the passions which should be educated and disciplined. At the same time she pointed out that great art is also lofty, and expresses or explains religion to each generation. All art lies, but good art lies its way into truth, while bad art is simply bogus. Moreover, since no art is perfect, all art partakes of a degree of moral ambiguity.

Jake comments that his acquaintance with Hugo is 'the central theme of the book' (Murdoch, 1954, p.53). At the heart of the great richness of comic incident the book affords is Jake's fascination with Hugo and the misunderstandings and relative differences between them. Jake's relation with Hugo shapes the book. Without Hugo's presence Jake slips in to a variety of illusions. Yet just as Jake is in Anna's presence for only five minutes during the book, so he is in Hugo's for only a few moments of 'present' time at the film studio and then for half an hour at the Hospital. This half-hour constitutes the book's comic reversal and Jake's sad, partial recognition of the truth.



We early see Hugo in the Mime theatre where 'A huge and burly central figure, wearing a mask which expressed a sort of humble yearning stupidity, was being mocked by the other player'. The irony of the mask that Hugo wears here is that expresses his real nature. He is the only character apart from Finn shown incapable of untruth or dissimulation. Thus towards the end Hugo speaks of Sadie to Jake with an air which Jake characterises as 'disgustingly humble'.

In *The Sovereignty of Good* Murdoch praised humility as 'a rare virtue and an unfashionable one and one which is often hard to discern....The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are. He sees the pointlessness of virtue, and its unique value, and the endless extent of its demand'.

Jake and Hugo meet in a cold-cure centre where Jake takes Hugo for a mental defective and ignores him for two days, despite the fact that they are sharing a room. Hugo puts up with this snubbing with gentle patience and self-possession. When Jake engages him in conversation he realizes he is closeted with a person of great fascination – indeed 'the most purely objective and detached person' (Murdoch, 1954, p.57) Jake has ever met. He notes that the conversation which ensues is germane to the whole story he has to tell. Hugo expresses:

Each thing was absolutely unique. I had feeling that I was meeting for the first time an almost completely truthful man; and the experience was turning out to be appropriately upsetting. I was but the more inclined to attribute a spiritual worth to Hugo in proportion as it would never have crossed his mind to thank of himself in such a light. (Ibid, 61)

Given the care that Murdoch has put into picturing Hugo as a man aspiring to be good, connecting this quite explicitly to his skepticism about the act of classification, there is an irony in the way critics have positively rushed to classify him. Jake early notes that to try to 'place' Hugo, as he at first attempted, was a failure of taste which showed a 'peculiar insensitivity to his unique intellectual and moral quality'. One critic tells he is an existentialist. Others have linked him with Wittgenstein, with whom he certainly shares a quality of 'unnerving directness' in his approach to person and problems. Like Wittgenstein Hugo is a wealthy Central European attracted to an ascetic ideal, sexually tormented, with a curious care for his boots, and a man who worked in his family factory, and had a capacity to renounce.

Hugo's flat despite being so full of art treasure, is left not merely unlocked but with the door ajar. His wholly austere and unornamented bedroom suggests that he is inwardly neither covetous nor attached. He has given up the armaments factory he inherited before the action commences and converted it to fireworks, and then, when these are acclaimed and pretentiously classified, lost interest in them too. At the end of the story he is giving up some remaining attachments: his passion for Sadie, his film industry, his money, his friendship with Jake, London itself. This is a different mode of detachment from Jake's, though both are 'outsider' figures, Jake an Irish expatriate, Hugo the child of German refugees. Jake spends much time wondering where he will sleep during the tale and in fact passes one night with the tramps on the bench on Charing Cross Embankment. What distinguishes these

modes of detachment has everything to do with the specially enlarged sense Murdoch gives to the word 'artist'. Jake's separateness makes him extraordinary to himself; Hugo is nobly unselfconscious. This noble unselfconsciousness makes him the would-be good man who sees objectively alarming ordinaries, and an odd, dogged, animal intelligence.

Jake noted that Hugo is devoid of general theories. An early conversation dramatises the difference between them and concerns the problem of describing states of mind or feelings. That description belongs to the novel as a form, as much as to moral philosophy, is important.

In the novel, as Patrick Swiden points out, we never come into direct contact with Hugo's philosophy. Even of the 'original' conversation between Jake and Hugo we are told that it took half a dozen cold-cure sessions for them to reach this point, so that what we have been given must be an 'artistic' conflation of many weeks talk into one discussion. This is as it was already at one remove from the truth. And given Hugo's doubts about the ways, once you tell a story, you immediately begin to 'touch it up' it is ironic that Jake immediately finds himself very guiltily working up his and Hugo's conversation into a flowery philosophical dialogue which he calls 'The Silencer'. In the excerpt that he reads, art once more plays pivotal role. The dialogue owes something to the Romantic, and the Buddhist, quest to get beyond the duality of self and world. Murdoch (1954) defines the followings:

Annandine: ... All theorising is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try as it were to crawl under the net....

Tamarus: So you would cut all speech, except the very simplest, out of human life altogether. To do this would be to take away our very means of understanding ourselves and making life endurable.

Anandine: Why should life be made endurable? I know that nothing consoles and nothing justifies except a story – but that doesn't stop all stories from being lies. Only the greatest men can speak and still be truthful. Any artist knows this obscurely; he knows that a theory is death, and that all expression is weighted with theory. Only the strongest can be attained, if at all, only in silence (p. 81)

All speech lies, and art is only a special form of speech, yet great art can lie its way into the truth. The same idea occurs in *An Accidental Man* twenty years later, where the novelist Garth says 'you may know a truth but if it's at all complicated you have to be an artist not to utter it as a lie'.

*Under the Net* is as full of artists as it is of philosophers-it concerns, in part, the ancient quarrel between the two, between art and truth. Jake is an artist who writes philosophy of a sort, a translator who has written and had torn up an epic poem, and who ends the book ready to write a novel. His friend Dave Gellman is a 'pure' linguistic philosopher. Mrs Tinck, whose shop Jake finds welcoming, reads 'Amazing Stories' and lives in a world 'where fact and fiction are no longer clearly distinguished'. Anna is a singer who, being in love with Hugo, takes over like Jake what in him is lived out (Hugo is a man trying to get beyond duality) and creates a second-hand vicarious version of it in Mime theatre. She calls singing

‘corrupt’, ‘exploiting one’s charm to seduce people’, compared to the puritan ideal of Mime which is ‘very pure and very simple’.

Murdoch has written of the necessity of thinking of reality as ‘a rich receding background’. This idea- which is incidentally not the assertion of a simple realist but rather one who believes that truth lies in a certain kind of directedness – gets into the text in a variety of ways. Just as we meet Hugo for most of the text only through Jake or Anna’s reflections and copies of his world-view, so there is in the worldly realm of film also a recession of power figures. Hugo is involved in filmmaking too, which gives this recession another kind of piquancy. Jake is outwitted by Sadie and Sammy Starfield over the theft and use of a Breteuil translation he has made. They in their turn are outwitted by Madge and possibly H. K. Pringsheim, who are going to ‘wipe out’ Hugo’s film company. Madge undergoes two changes of style during the book, and there is some ‘final’ paymaster behind Madge’s second metamorphosis into a startle-in-the-making, but though Jake muses about this person and imagines him in three different guises, his curiosity remains unsatisfied. Just as Hugo is the absent centre of the world of ideas, so there is some final paymaster in the world of power who also makes Jake feel peripheral.

Under the Net is a philosophical myth dealing with the question --how do we experience reality, or what is real in our experience? The characters are grouped round this -- Hugo with his simple nostalgia for the particular; Dave with his concern for logical analysis of words and rigid moral philosophy; Lefty with his subjection of everything to political expediency. Mars represents animal vitality; Anna conveys the experience of reality through pure or impure art; Sammy wields money; Sadie’s aim is to use other people. The contrasted worlds of business and art, silence and speech, isolation and society: all of these are patterned, introduced, reflected upon, and used in the story as if a dream allegory would have used them.

Such conditions create tribulations. Therefore, the individual will cope with his understanding of the world as contingent, by indulging in the consolation of self-deception, as in the case of Jake and Misha Fox. Such self-deception will fulfill their yearning for logical necessity in the order of the world. In Sartre’s representation of the world, value - including moral value - is created through a process that starts with reflection followed by choosing an action. It is through his choices that the individual makes, and he also confers meaning on the world around him.

We can see Jake rejects the inglorious, tawdry consumerist fantasies of film in Paris where Madge offers him a sinecure position as script-writer, a rejection paralleled by his distancing himself from Lefty Todd’s requirements also. Madge asks him to use his art, if only part-time, to prettify capitalism; Lefty wishes him to serve the revolution. Jake is declaring for the independence of art, which best serves society when it serves its own truth, in rejecting both Lefty and Madge.

Jake is in the process of acquiring ‘wisdom’. Hugo and Jake’s whispered colloquy in the darkened hospital at night, where Jake risks and indeed loses his job, is the first of a series between artist and saint, always carried out at a pitch of difficulty in her work. Hugo, who



has already divested himself of much, ends the book wishing to 'travel light. Otherwise one can never understand anything' and feels the urge to 'strip himself'. He advises Jake to 'clear out' as he is doing. Then, Murdoch (1954) believes:

'Some situations can't be unraveled,' said Hugo, 'they just have to be dropped. The trouble with you, Jake, is that you want to understand everything sympathetically. It can't be done. One must just blunder on. Truth lies in blundering on.... The point is people must just do what they can do, and good luck to them.'

'What can you do?' I asked him.

Hugo was silent for a long time. 'Make little intricate things with my hands', he said. (p.229) What Hugo going to do about this is become a watch-maker ('A what?' asks Jake) in Nottingham ('In Where?') and when Jake asks 'wildly' 'What about the search for God', Hugo replies 'What more do you want? .... God is a task. God is a detail. It all lies close to your hand'.

The scene is funny and touching and true. Hugo's wisdom, we might say, is centrifugal and particular. His adoption of watch-making – 'an old craft, like baking bread' – signals his calm absorption in the task of honouring the world's details. He stands for a loving empirical curiosity about particulars, for reverential 'attention', that crucial Murdochian word and proposes Jake that he renounce the grandiloquent, seeing life as task, as blundering on, and writing, by implication, as an unpretending craft which must also negotiate the detail and contingency of the world. His face is 'masked by a kind of innocence'; he calls Jake a sentimentalist who is always far too impressed by people. 'everyone must go his own way. Things don't matter as much as you think'.

One of the book's great themes is copying; Jake copies Hugo's ideas in 'The Silencer' just as Anna copies his ideas in the Mime theatre. In each case Hugo ironically turns out to be too modest to recognize the reflections. He is, as Jake comes to see, a 'man without reflections'. He is closest to the truth of all the characters, because he lacks much self-image. He can begin to educate Jake twice-first in showing him what the world looks like to one who lacks preconception, and then at the end by showing him the truth about his relations with the other characters. Hugo's wisdom represents the direction in which art must be pulled if it is to succeed in making a structure that illuminates what it points to without too greatly obscuring it; in a sense, without lying.

In *Under the Net* the theme is concerned with necessity and danger of concepts, forms in thought and action, in the worlds of art, politics, of morals and of love. Murdoch does not agree to the "imaginative solipsism" of Sartre's individual, that she describes as a function of the alienation of the self from the environment, and criticizes Sartre's inability to see emotion as a creative force, and also his view of the imagination as a tool of self-deception but this novel is close to Iris Murdoch's work on Sartre, in the sense that it takes up lightly but profoundly the Sartrean issue of relationship of the individual, and of the art to political structure and ideals.

The central figure of the novel -- Jake, is Sartrean in the sense that he moves through a society, unreal and alien without the consolation of a rational universe. The virtue of this figure lies in understanding his own contingency and not in the contingency of the world. We can say that this novel asks Sartrean questions but do not offer Sartrean answers. Sartre's hero agonizes and contemplates in a lucidly tortured solitude. This fantasy of Iris Murdoch is a kind of meaningful games with Sartrean universe. Jake tries an internal monologue but discovers that the world is full of other people whose views, though he has misinterpreted, yet can learn.

### CONCLUSION

As Murdoch believes consciousness is oriented towards the good as its ideal, in this novel Jake is led to seek true goodness through gradual apprehension of goodness in his surroundings. Jake sees realities and changes. And, according to Murdoch, morality is connected with change and progress. The fact that Murdoch was a professor of philosophy at Oxford and also wrote novels makes it but logical to regard her as a philosophical novelist. And the moment one does so it is further very tempting to put her beside other twentieth century philosophical novelists especially the Existentialists like Sartre, Camus, and Kafka. But the temptation must be resisted for she, both as a philosopher and a novelist, differs a great deal from them. The novels like *The Fall*, *Iron in the Soul* by Sartre and Camus' *The Outsider* and *The Plague* are but illustrations of their ideas advocated in their philosophical books like *Being and Nothingness* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* respectively. Kafka of course, wrote no philosophical treatise and hence his philosophical vision comes to us only through his novels like *The Trial*, and *The Castle* and short stories like *Metamorphosis* and *The Penal Colony*. And to that extent, Murdoch comes close to him in that her moral vision, too, emerges out of her novels which are not mere exemplifications of her ideas expressed in her philosophical books.

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