



## Illusion to Reality: A Reading of Iris Murdoch's *The Nice and the Good*

**Dr.A.Nisha**

Assistant Professor of English , Scott Christian College(Autonomous) Nagercoil-629003 Tamil Nadu

**ABSTRACT**

Freedom is connected with an accurate vision of reality. As human beings are constantly engaged in weaving falsifying structured veils of fantasies, they often fail to perceive the reality. Psychological freedom can be brought about by a disciplined process of unselfing and suppression of ego. Murdoch is aware of man's consciousness of self and his lack of interest towards others. The study tries to explore Murdoch's concern for self-knowledge and moral evolution which are necessary for the process of self-rejuvenation. Murdochian self-knowledge is the knowledge of what lies afar self. This kind of knowledge is achieved by unselfing, a process through which a solipsistic self identifies its solipsism and challenges it by means of love and art.

**KEYWORDS**

Freedom, Unselfing, Self-knowledge, Solipsism

Literature provides a unique and valuable contribution to matters of moral concern. It has a powerful and unique role to play in understanding life's deepest ethical problems. It also has an important but indirect role in moral education by helping readers to develop and practice the centre ethical skill of empathizing with other people's lives and perspectives. The larger function of literature is "to teach morality and to probe philosophical issues" (Guerin 25).

Murdoch, a writer of the second half of the twentieth century has influenced her readers through her moral philosophy. Most of her novels focus on ethical and moral topics, partly due to her philosophical training. Her novels show her characters in different lights and in various degrees of moral goodness. Murdoch traces the moral progress of her characters from mediocre illusion ridden lives to self-realization. Blinded by self-interest, romantic notions of freedom and an opaque vision, they are engaged in transforming reality into various self-designed patterns and forms. Their moral development is a gradual transition from this stage to a condition where they have a better insight into themselves and others. This evolution is achieved by a loving and compassionate attention paid to the reality of people or situations confronting them. The direction of attention on individuals and obedience to reality is an exercise of love and freedom. Both freedom and love involve the imaginative recognition and respect for this otherness.

The most important aspect of Murdoch's literary imagination derives from her conceptual thought which reveals a Platonic concern for truth in art. According to Murdoch, art can play an important part in the discovery of fantasy and she offers suggestions to the individual as well as the artist seeking the good. In *The Fire and the Sun*, Murdoch explains:

The prescription for art is then the same as for dialectic, overcome personal fantasy and egoistic anxiety and self-indulgent day dream. Order and separate and distinguish the world justly. Magic in its unregenerate form as the fantastic doctoring of the real for consumption by the private ego is the bane of art as it is of philosophy. Obsession shrinks reality to a single pattern. The artist's is his eternal companion, the cosy dreaming ego, the dweller in the vaults of eikasia. (70)

Thus art purifies and clarifies one's fantasy ridden consciousness. Murdoch urges each human being to pursue this quest. Her philosophy states that one's main pursuit in life should be to destroy selfish fantasy, which in turn will allow a true vision of the world and encourage the attainment of goodness.

In *The Nice and the Good*, the philosophical ideas and moral principles are worked out at the experimental level. One can find Ducane's moral progress towards freedom and discovery of reality. He is a Scottish puritan whose chief ambition is to lead a "clean, simple life and to be a good man" (32). This desire of Ducane is almost like a rationalist's egocentric dream of freedom. It also shows his fear of contingency and messy human relationships. He remains a bachelor at the age of forty three. He enjoys the supreme state of independence from all entangling relationships except those that are convenient to him. He is the legal adviser to Octavian Gray who is a Bureau chief at the Whitehall. Ducane is a disciplined and virtuous scholar, and is very anxious to be good. He is assigned to investigate the suicide of Radeechy. By virtue of this investigation, he is given power over others.

Ducane's egoism and distorted concept of freedom is more apparent in his attempt to break his affair with Jessica. His passion for orderliness and form is stronger than his love for Jessica. Jessica refuses to be cleared away as she is attracted by Ducane's "Stability, his alien solidness and slowness, his belongingness to the establishment, his age, above all his Puritanism" (83). Looking up to his wisdom, she longs to be instructed and guided by him. His refusal to attend to her needs is a refusal to face the contingent reality of another person. His motives are tainted by selfishness, particularly because he wants to carry on the Platonic fantasy relationship with Kate Gray, wife of Octavian Gray.

Most of the Murdochian characters belong to the group of neurosis. It refers to the human tendency to construct self-absorbed myths or fantasies that increase the self's importance and obscure the reality of others. He looks at others as menaces and objects to be manipulated rather than loved. This excessive self-preoccupation hinders him from establishing contact with other human beings. Freedom is an important aspect of Murdoch's moral philosophy. For her, "freedom is knowing and understanding and respecting things quite other than ourselves" (Sublime 284). Real moral and psychological freedom lies in understanding the others' existence by taking them into account and conferring upon them an equal status.

Ducane is only interested in himself. His guilty consciousness prevents him from seeing himself accurately. His quest for goodness is impeded by this demon of guilt since his own interest is involved in it he gets confused. More than Jessica, he wants to keep himself free. He has an image of his own self as a pure innocent good man. He wants to present himself in this image to Kate. From his superior position, Ducane refuses to accord independent and equal status to others. He has

exercised considerable influence on other characters but has not been much concerned with the power he has over them. Although Ducane considers himself to be good and just, he is far away from these virtues.

Death often figures in Murdoch's novels as a catalytic agent. By forcing an interest of attention in the dreamy life of man, it sharpens not only the apprehension of reality but also inspires a selfless love and a true exercise of freedom. In the words of Datta, Murdoch "undertakes serious examination of death as a powerful force for the destruction of dreaming, self-aggrandizing ego that hinders moral growth and freedom" (115). The idea of death forces to attend on the good and releases the hold of the normal deluded working of the egocentric self. It opens the way to love, virtue and freedom.

For Murdoch, unbridled conduct and emotional unrestraint are not freedom. She feels that human beings do lose their freedom through neurosis. An ideal freedom is connected with goodness and virtue. Freedom entails clarity of perception exercised in interaction with others. It is only Ducane's experience in Gunnar's cave that makes him a good man. He risks his life to save Pierce's life by swimming Gunnar's cave. Ducane is trapped in the cave along with Pierce and the dog, Mingo. With the rise of the sea water, their lives are in danger. When Ducane faces death his views about himself undergo a change. It is evident in the following lines:

He saw himself now as a little rat, a busy little scurrying rat seeking out its own little advantages and comforts. To live easily, to have cosy familiar pleasures, to be well thought of.... He thought, if I ever get out of here I will be no man's judge. Nothing is worth doing except to kill the little rat, not to judge, not to be superior, not to exercise power, not to seek, seek, seek. To love and to reconcile and to forgive only this matters. All power is sin and all law is frailty. Love as the only justice. Forgiveness, reconciliation, not law. (304-5)

Thus Ducane is able to become good when he rises above his self-interest and risks his personal life to save Pierce's life. A desperate encounter with his own death makes him realize that he can judge no man. He recognizes that his idea about himself as good is the greatest sin because it prevents him from doing good for others.

Love and near death help Ducane to see power and law as evil and love and forgiveness as good. For the first time, he comes to understand the immense moral danger involved in the use of power. Ducane's moral progress is evident in the acceptance of his shortcomings. As a character immersed in a moral struggle, he exercises his power over others. He sees himself a "perfect whited sepulcher" (251). He realizes that he has deceived Jessica and Kate by keeping them unknown about each other. He recognizes the illusory power with which he has been obsessed. He is able to free himself from his physical involvement with Jessica and also to come out of his romantic involvement. He learns to perceive others sympathetically and justly. Thus the abandonment of self leads not only to love and freedom, but also to happiness.

Ducane's basic characteristic is moral struggle. He expends his considerable powers of rumination on examining his own moral potentialities. He learns one significant fact about evil, that evil was within human heart. He releases himself from Jessica's possessiveness and Kate's playful kitten love and decides to marry Mary Clothier. He acknowledges, "He had begun to need Mary when he had begun to need a better image of himself. She was the consoling counterpart of his self-abasement" (334). Ducane's love for Mary moves away from the selfish, self-absorbed love that he earlier felt for Kate and Jessica. He confesses to Mary about his relations with Jessica. He does not fear what Mary would feel about him.

Ducane begins to feel the impersonal and transcendental love for Mary. Earlier, he fails to apprehend Mary as a separate in-

dividual. For him, "She was far too plain an object to remain visible to him" (334). He develops a growing respect for her and begins to attend her. He tries to free her of the obsession with the past. For Ducane, Mary is the mother goddess, the very embodiment of goodness and generosity. Murdoch makes the readers understand that love is linked with goodness. When Ducane's illusion about his goodness is shattered, he realizes and the uprightness of Mary.

Murdoch's novel reveals how the protagonist comes out of his fantasy world to face reality. Facing reality brings mental as well as moral maturity. Murdoch shows the main characters succeeding from a stage of moral ignorance to an accepting of reality. Her characters achieve some degree of self-knowledge and freedom from forms and illusions. Murdoch is aware of the complexes of human motivations, desires and moral choices. Her characters are self-obsessed and their primary aim is to go in search of their own interests. Her novels focus how the characters succeed in arriving at the imaginative identification of the reality of others and themselves by giving up the various forms formed by obsessions, images imposed on those with whom they come into contact. Widdows says, "The moral life for Murdoch is a quest from illusion to reality, in which the human beings progress from the natural state of egoistic illusion towards a clearer vision of reality and towards the good" (14). Reality can be understood through love and man's attempt to restructure the sufferings of fellow human beings.

The novel *The Nice and the Good* is psychologically realistic and has granted a degree of freedom to Ducane. It also represents a landmark in Murdoch's fictional career. It exhibits her mature but pessimistic outlook about the importance of death as an instrument of knowledge. For Murdoch one of the means of recognizing solipsism or illusion is the near death experience. Ducane is shown to be in a state of illusion that he comes to recognize through love and a near death experience, and he finally becomes partially unselfed. Inside the cave, he faces the threat of death and this affects him substantially. He embraces the idea of the world governed by chance, which does not frighten him because he has started unselfing and the unselfing self embraces chance and is not concerned about its existence. Death can result in shedding of some illusions and forms falsely created by man.

The discovery of reality is the paramount concern of Murdoch's novels. She describes her novels as "pilgrimages from illusion towards reality" (Bradbury 72). At the end of her novels, she makes the major characters achieve some degree of self-knowledge and freedom from magical forms and illusions. They are set on more realistic courses and see themselves and grow from inside to outward, a prerequisite of real moral freedom. They realize that in order to create an illusion of freedom they had translated reality into a self-conceived concept of destiny. It is only when they are released from the hold of patterns that they learn to accept the past along with the contingency of their own selves and others.

For Murdoch, literature is the highest form of art. Its fundamental virtues are tolerance, and respect for reality as it is. According to Murdoch, morals must have their starting point in the concrete and in contextual reality. It is life as it is experienced that provides the framework for being moral. Moral life must be rooted in reality, but at the same time must include active focusing on and attention towards ideals. For her, the primary task of moral philosophy is to develop a set of terms that will enable one to reflect upon morality in a way that transcends human experience. Her philosophy is concerned with developing a metaphysical horizon for morality, rather than constructing simple ready-made recipes of what to do and what not to. The desire to see truly and justly the others with patience and tolerance is an exercise of virtue because clear vision brings with it insight, lucidity, clarity, enlightenment truth, knowledge, love and moral goodness.

#### Works Cited

1. Murdoch, Iris. *The Nice and the Good*. Harmondsworth:

- Penguin, 1968. Print.
2. ---. *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished Artists*. Oxford: OUP, 1977. Print.
3. ---. "The Sublime and the Good". *Chicago Review* 13 (Autumn 1959): 42-55. Print.
4. Bradbury, Malcolm. *Possibilities: Essays on the State of Novel*. London: OUP, 1973. Print.
5. Datta, Nirmal. *Iris Murdoch: Freedom and Form*. New Delhi: Macmillan, 2000. Print.
6. Gurein, Wilfred. L, et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. 14<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: OUP, 1992. Print.
7. Widdows, Heather. *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005. Print.