Seeking Human Freedom: Iris Murdoch on Humanism

Dr. Richa Tripathi
Assistant Professor, Department of English, GCET, Gr. Noida
Uttar Pradesh Technical University, New Delhi, India

Abstract: Dame Jean Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) was one of the best and remarkable British novelist, philosopher and playwright of twentieth century. She was the author of twenty six novels and Primary themes include love, lust, marriage, morality, truth, adultery, reality, liberty and incest with in a group of criticized and educated people. Murdoch represents that freedom is only an idea and physical freedom is not a necessary sign of true liberalism. Moral, ethical and spiritual pressures are more shattering. To be free from desires and illusions of personal interest is the true renunciation. One must accept the reality and knows oneself in the true context of the world as it naturally exists and it's the true essence of human freedom for Murdoch and it enlightens in this paper.

Keywords: Humanism, human freedom, society, liberalism, humanity.

I. Introduction

Dame Jean Iris Murdoch (1919-99) has been recognized as one of the best and remarkable British novelists of twentieth century. Within the period of forty years, she engraved twenty six novels, five philosophies, six plays and two poetry collections. She was best known for her fiction writings. Among all 20th century novelists, Iris Murdoch has proved herself a challenger author through her strong, dynamic, realistic and humanistic approach towards society and individual. Her novels revealed very strong humanistic qualities, which soon established her as one of the most important writers of her time. More than any other novelist of her generation Murdoch tries to isolate approach and explore problems concerning art, truth, love, life, reality, liberty and also the element of humanism to reflect these in her fictional works. Her area of humanistic vision is basically circled in religion, morality, love, marriage, society, individuality, liberty, goodness, sexuality and adultery. The main objective of the study of this paper is seeking her humanistic approach with the help of her selected novels ‘Under the Net’ (1954) and A Severed Head’ (1961).

A Severed Head (1961) was one of Iris Murdoch’s most commercially successful novels. In 1958 The Bell was published, considered by many critics to be her finest novels. After her last novel Jackson’s Dilemma (1995), she had established herself as a great writer. As a working moral philosopher and novelist, the intellectual agenda that Murdoch pursues is at once philosophical, practical and useful. She explores concepts of freedom, individualism and social justice The present study proceeds to analyze, in the major novels of Iris Murdoch of different decades through the analysis of the plot, situation, character and the humanist perspective of Iris, as implicit in them, will be highlighted.

II. Under The Net (1954)

Under The Net (1954) presents the picaresque adventures of Jake Donaghue, an unsuccessful failed artist who searches for true self, meaning of true love and the definite sense of authentic salvation. His ambition in life is to become a true novelist by writing an original work which is realization of ‘true self’ and sense of ‘liberty’ for him. Under the Net is known for strong plot, realistic characters and reflection about moral and philosophical issues with its emphasis on love, truth, and liberty. Like her protagonist, Murdoch expressed her wish to create a realistic and practical novel and free characters in her interview with Frank Kermode.

……to create characters who are free and independent…yet often it turns out in the end that something about the structure of the work itself, the myth as it were of the work has drawn all these people in to a sort of spiral or in to a kind of form which ultimately is the form of one’s own mind.1
Jake asks to his friend, Dave Gellman to help. Dave suggests him to do a job in a hospital so that he can help others, sharing their sorrows and proved helpful in making him a responsible and real selfless person. Dave suggests him, “Always you are thinking of your soul. Precisely it is not to think of your soul, but to think of other people.” (p. 29) Jake is imprisoned by his own ideas, views and values which are based on selfishness. Through Dave, Murdoch’s massage is that the true salvation is not centered in one’s own salvation but in the salvation of others from miseries and when he will be able to understand the society around him and their human beings only after that he can find purity and real freedom. Dave comments “Society should take you by the neck and shake you and make you do a sensible job. Then in your evening you would have the possibility to write a great book.” (p.30)

For Dave it is the only way to save his self and soul “freedom is only an idea.”(p. 27) Iris Murdoch clears here that physical freedom is not the signature of true liberalism. In the matter of love, Jake loved Anna very much but he does not want to marry her. He wants to be loved but without any commitment and desires for freedom by running away from all his responsibilities. It is another sign of his inner enslavement, he misinterprets the real meaning of freedom. Like Murdoch’s protagonist Martin Lynch-Gibbon in A Severed Head, Bradley Pearson in The Black Prince, he also misinterprets the meaning of marriage and questions against the existence of marriage:

Marriage remains for me an idea of reason, a concept which may regulate but not constitute my life. I cannot help, whenever I consider a woman, using the possibility of marriage as an illuminating hypothesis which is not in any serious sense an instrument of the actual. With Anna, however, I did come near to taking the thing seriously; and that, although I am sure she would never have said yes, was perhaps why I let myself drift away from her in the end. I hate solitude but I am afraid of intimacy. The substance of my life is a private conversation with myself which to turn into a dialogue would be equivalent to self-destruction. The company which I need is the company which a pub or a café will provide. I have never wanted a communion of souls. (p. 34).

Jake is the representative of the modern man. He is considered to be rational land and totally free, nothing transcends him. About modern man and marriage, Mr. P.P Punja gives a very graphic remark:

Religion binds a man and a woman permanently in marriage, and they are not supposed to think of other objects for sexual gratification, yet it is not always practically possible for them, to experience united in soul but divided in body. Most of the time, they feel that they are distinct in soul and distinct in body. This incongruity between the religious view of marriage and the actual experience of marriage was realized centuries back. But his acute realization has dawned upon the modern man due to his rationalistic approach to life.

Murdoch wants to convey modern man’s views on marriage through her character Jake who is in love with Anna but not ready for long lasting commitment known as marriage. In reality Jake is only physically free but internally he is in the cell of illusory love and false relations, from which he needs to be liberated.

While working in hospital for money he met his true guide Hugo. Hugo personifies respect for fortuity. He refuses to assumptions and pays a unplanned and natural thought to life. He educates Jake twice that preconception only leads to chaos and the spirit of true love should not be affected by defeat or triumph of relations. He symbolizes Jake’s urge for truth. Jake in this relationship acquires an objective perception to seek the truth because Hugo represents the harmlessness of truth itself. Further Hugo clears his views:

All theorizing 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. (p.81)

He accepts, “Action don’t lie, words always do” but now I see that this was all a hallucination.” (p.257) Hugo’s injections emphasis man’s vital need to understand himself the supremacy of ‘self’. One must accept the reality and knows oneself in the true context of the worlds as it naturally exists and it’s the true essence of human freedom for Murdoch. Hugo’s departing words have a salutary effect on Jake. Hugo’s withdrawal from the terrestrial field brings to light the power of renunciation, rescission and self abnegation as a gateway to knowledge from ignorance, to salvation from imprisonment, to truth from lie and to reality from illusion. Murdoch emphasizes on the truth of spirit which can be detained only by disciplined and rigorous people. To be free from desire and from the illusion of personal interest is the true renunciation according to Indian thought described in The Gita:

Free from desire and attachment, one with all beings, the true renounce acts out of the profoundest depts. Of the inner being governed by his immoral divine highest self. When one’s egoism, prejudice and selfishness are removed, action springs from the depths and is governed by the supreme secretly seated in one’s heart as Jake which is for the welfare of humanity.
III. A Severed Head

All A Severed Head deals with the western bourgeois society and highly materialistic west family. All the characters in A Severed Head are involved in illusionary relationships for the strong urge for love, life and liberty. This becomes the cause of changing of human relations which affects the life of the protagonist Martin Lynch-Gibbon, related characters and their journey from imprisonment to human freedom. Bran Nicol explains it as “a story of disempowerment.”

A Severed Head moves around the protagonist Martin Lynch Gibbon, a forty-one years old Anglo Irish wine buff and amateur historian who believes that he can seize both a beautiful and elder wife, Antonia and a delightful mistress Georgie. He finds his extra marital affair a fine option to replace the enjoyment of his childless marriage. Martin accepts Georgie as “a mistress not as a master.” He considers himself a fortunate free individual who is far away from any social pressures, rules and regulations, commitment and responsibilities. When he comes to know that Georgie is pregnant, it looks to him that freedom and innocence of their relationship has gone. Martin’s love for Georgie is completely physical and he himself discloses his feelings devoted to sexual love or desire, “I promptly fell in love with her. It may sound ludicrous but I think I fell in love with her as soon as I saw her bed.” (p. 28)

Murdoch points out that human relationships are lesser important for modern man. Relationships are like trade based on ‘profit and loss’ and ‘give and take’ strategy. Through Georgie, Murdoch shows her worries, “No one is essential to anyone.” Antonia, Georgie and her unborn child, none is important for Martin, he is childless but he has no affection as a father and no sympathy as a human being for his own illegitimate child. Georgie’s abortion cannot produce mercy in his heart for his unborn child. It is hard to believe that a man can love two women at one time as Martin declares “I do love you so much, I just loved Georgia too.” (p. 77) It means he is truthful to none. Martin misleads Georgie about the success of his marriage. Although he married Antonia for social reasons yet apart from being childless, their married life is perfectly successful. He admits it himself:

In almost every marriage there is a selfish and an unselfish partner. A partner is set up and soon becomes inflexible, of one person always making the demands and one person always giving way. In any own marriage I early established myself as the one who took rather than gave. Like Dr. Johnson, I started promptly upon the way in which I intended to go on. I was the more zealous in doing so in that I was counted by the world and counted myself, very lucky to have got Antonia.” (p. 11)

Martin lives in an illusionary world about his marriage. Martin- Antonia relationship is important because it proves that the marriages without emotional understanding and complete devotion are going to fail. In reality their marriage is “simply at a standstill” because no one wants to sacrifice of ‘self’ and to give time, love and trust. In place of husband wife relationship, it is more like a relationship between mother and child because Antonia is five years elder than Martin. The relationship of Martin with Antonia has been described by Isaiah Smithson as that of “unoboriceg ogo of great mother.” It becomes a great cause of emotional dissatisfaction for Antonia. This provokes her to make physical relationship with Palmar Anderson, her psychoanalyst in search of satisfaction, freedom & love. Their marriage proves unsuccessful. As P. P. Punja remarks:

Marriage has been evolved as an institution. It has become a social convention, and is a social, legal and moral permission to have sexual relations to produce children. But men and women marry for different reasons. Some one marries because he has been attracted by the skin deep beauty of the other person. Another person marries for the sake of money and social status. All those marriages which are performed without emotional compatibility and intellectual understanding are likely to fail. They are likely to result in divorce or constant apathy or quarrels or in extramarital relationships.

Antonia demands for divorce, “Marriage is an adventure in development.” (p. 24) Now only divorce is the only choice for her to obtain license to liberty. She admits, “Now I just want to tell you the main truth, to tell you that you’ve got to set me free. This thing has overwhelmed me, Martin. I’ve simply had to give into it. Honesty, it’s all or nothing.” (p. 23) But Martin prefers to lie due to feel free from the burden of cheat and a sense of guilt. Martin brings Georgie to his home only for a glimpse of freedom. As he says to Georgie, “I need to recover a sense of freedom. Seeing you there will open up a new world.” (p. 67) His attempt to show himself free proves a false acknowledgement when he pulls down Georgie out of the window in doubt of his wife’s uncertain arrival. His action proves that he is still thinking of getting back his wife in life. When Palmer and Antonia ask about Georgie, he does not agree to take the responsibility about what he has done. He protects himself by saying that:

‘I won’t be guilty or worried, I’ll be raring mad, I don’t want you to see me through. I want to be left alone by both of you at long last.’

‘You are mistaken about your wishes,’ said Palmer.
‘You don’t so easily escape the toils of love. The fact is that this discovery has cast a shadow on us all, and we must all work to remove that shadow.’
‘You mean I must be tied up so that you and Antonia can go ahead?’ (p. 78)

Martin’s comments prove that he lives in his own dreamy world which is nothing but fictitious and hallow far away from reality, truth and rationality. He is driven by an intense desire to control his world and the people around him.

Georgie attracts towards Alexander, Martin’s brother. Martin hurts a lot so he misleads her by giving mendacious hope of marriage because he was not ready for another betrayal. He plans, “It was, with a vengeance, the intimate talk which I had promised Georgie, I would never have, and as I thus betrayed her, I felt on invigorating increase of my freedom.” (p. 98) Georgie hazes that Martin’s inclinations are fatal. She craves for her freedom from his fabulous filtration. She petitions:

Martin, I’m miles nearer the edge that you’ve got any notion of I can’t tell you how much I’ve suffered not only from the lies but from feeling so paralyzed. I had to do something of my own. I feel twice as real now. I was just stopping being free. And for me that’s stopping existing. I was getting to be no good to either myself or to you. You’ve got to see me, Martin. I’m to blame. I’ve never been quite and entirely myself with you. The situation didn’t tell me be. The untruthfulness infected everything. I must break out a little. Do you see at all? (p. 103)

Martin comes to know that he has been exposed to his duplicity by Honor Klein, Palmer’s half sister and a Cambridge anthropologist. He meets Honor in the cellar to take revenge. Martin’s terrible fascination for Honor brings terrible revelations and disastrous consequences. During the physical assault he comes closer to Honor and feels a great desire of love for her. From that moment he starts loving her desperately. He feels extreme love, once it is recognized has the stamp of the indubitable… I had no business, with two women on my hands already, to go falling in love with a third, trouble me comparatively… None of this, on the other hand, made me doubt that now I loved her. Yet it was in truth a monstrous loves such as I had never experienced before, a love out of such depths of self as monsters live in. A love devoid of tenderness and humor, a love practically devoid of personality. (pp. 125-126)

P. P. Punja explains this love relationship in terms of “sex biology.” Later Martin catches Honor in bed with her brother Palmer. The degree of narrative contrivance reaches its climax, “....the whole Murdochian swindle becomes evident.” The scene jolts Martin into shocked realization that Honor does not exist only in relations to his dreams, “As free and alone, as waiting in her still slumbering consciousness for me, reserved, separated, sacred.” (p. 170) Now he perceives the real interpretation of Honor’s word, “everything in this life has to be paid for, and love too has to be paid for.” (p. 63) He decides to be silent due to Antonia’s happiness. From that day, Palmer behaves violently with Antonia. She violates her relationships with Palmer and reunites with Martin. They are together again not because they love each other but they feel secure, free and real with each other. Martin feels, “All’s well that ends well.” (p. 149) P. P. Punja right to say:

Palmer-Antonia relationship fails because it is not based upon reality and freedom. It is said to be that of “Aros and Aphrodite,” In Greek mythology, Aphrodite’s (Greek goodness of desire) husband Hephaestus (the lame smith god) on catching Aros and Aphrodite in bed, feels offended. On the other hand, Martin accepts this relationship because Antonia and Palmer have made him rationalize everything.

Martin who was not ready to take the responsibilities about what he has done now ready to commit everything in front of Honor after realization of true love, “I love you and I desire you and my whole being is prostrate before you. This is reality. Let us indeed not be blinded by and convention about where it is to be found.” (p. 185) But Honor is not regarding this love as a reality of their life. She argues:

‘Return to reality’. She said, ‘Return to your wife, return to Antonia. I have nothing for you.’
‘My marriage to Antonia is over’, I said. Palmer is right. It is dead.
‘Palmer spoke out of his own conventions. You are not a fool. You know that there are many ways in which your marriage is alive. In any case, do not think that this is more than a dream. And she repeated, ‘Return to return.’ Yet still she did not dismiss me (pp. 184-185)

She goes on to say:

Your love for me does not inhabit the real world. Yes, it is love, I do not deny it. But not every love has a course to run smooth or otherwise, and this love has no course at all. Because of what I am and because of what you saw I am a terrible object of fascination for you. I am a severed head such as primitive tribes.....And who knows but that long acquaintance with a severed head might not lead to strange knowledge. For such knowledge one would have paid
enough. But that is remote from love and remote from ordinary life. As real people we do not exist for each other. (p. 185)

Martin’s whole world starts disintegrating. Martin’s ego is bruised further when Antonia admits him that she feels held back by their marriage. Her views of marriage as progress conflicts with Martin’s static views on marriage but she is nevertheless racked the existence of their marriage. He feels shock and says, “You mean our marriage never really existed at all.”(p. 191) All of a sudden it looks to him that everything has near to finished. Hilda D. Spear observes.

Martin considers his present in the light of the event of the post weeks….. From a position outside himself he looks upon his role as husband. His role as betrayer of his marriage, his role as cuckold and recognizes that they were only parts he was playing. Now the play is over and he is no more and no less than his own real self.11

A real person who has an ability to face and to accept the reality is a free human being in a true sense. After accepting their secret love in front of society Antonia and Alexander has moved to Rome to start a new life. Palmer is also ready to leave,s Georgia and Honor are with him in the airport. Martin comes to London Airport to confirm about Honor’s departure. He defines his last moments of waiting as his toughest inquisition; he says “it was like a waiting room for The Last Judgment.”(p.200) He understands, “there had been a drama. There had been some characters but now everyone else was dead and only in me a memory remained of what had been.”(p. 206) Martin returns to home and finds Honor there, waiting for him. In shape of Honor, he finds his true soul mate.

The novel is essentially a comedy, however and is to end happily through the two remaining lovers to come together. It is the sign of real human freedom. In Murdochian world what is freedom in the beginning can be imprisonment after, so the realization of inner truth is the real freedom for mankind. According to realistic vision of Murdoch, his protagonist has passed his whole life in a fake marriage bond and in a shadowy extramarital affair to understand the real meaning of true love and in search of everlasting and faithful relations. For Murdoc the journey of every character in the novel from illusion to reality, from lie to truth and from bondage to liberty is real human freedom.

IV. Conclusion

Being a true humanist, Iris Murdoch stands for human freedom, freedom of thought, freedom of choice, freedom of speech and freedom of civil liberties but also aware of the harsh realities of the human life and relations . According to her, freedom is progressive disappearance of all restrictions unfolding the potentialities of individuals, as human being, not as cogs in the wheels of mechanical social organism. Human freedom consists not only physical freedom but also mental, psychological and emotional independence. Humanism tries its best to break the chain connecting man with the outer world in order to enjoy true freedom. Thus, humanism inspires man to be honorable and merciful, to be untiring in working for his own well-being and the emancipation of others living in society. A genuine type of man can be formed only in a society based on truly humanistic foundations. There is no progress of society without the progress of man.

V. References