

Existential Elements in the Select Works of Iris Murdoch

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Abstract: With an emphasis on the philosophical issues of existence, meaning, and morality that recur frequently in Iris Murdoch's novels, this essay explores the existence of existential themes in a few of her works. Through an examination of significant scenes and characters from novels like "The Bell," "The Sea," and "Under the Net," this research seeks to illuminate Murdoch's examination of the human condition and the pursuit of purpose in an apparently chaotic world. This study aims to understand how Murdoch addresses issues of identity, free will, and the nature of reality in her works by closely examining her writing. The study also looks at how existentialist writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus influenced her work, analysing how she incorporates and reacts to their ideas. Ultimately, this paper aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on existentialism in literature and enhance the understanding of Murdoch's significant role and enduring influence within it.

Keywords: Existentialism, Identity, Free Will, Reality, Modern Literature, Murdochian

EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism can be broadly defined as a school of philosophy that professed the idea that humans are free and function by will and choice in an irrational universe using their innate rationality. Existentialism can be understood as the neglect of individuals and negation of morality in the post-World War II era, which gained popularity in Europe, especially in France. It focuses on the individual's experience of life and the world.

Its roots can be found in Soren Kierkegaard's works and later in Nietzsche's. It was however popularized by Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus in France and later Europe.

Existentialism asserted that man is given complete freedom, but such freedom comes with certain dread. Though it seemed to justify the position of humanity in a postwar world, it could not completely explain many aspects of man, especially morals and their origins, in a satisfying manner. It has been succeeded by two major schools of thought—structuralism and deconstruction. Both of these, though they helped to

divert the attention of the mind, could not answer the questions related to man's unique moral sense in a practical way, at least in relation to literature.

Towards the end of the 20th century, literature had increasingly become 'journalistic, where plots are designed in an empirical world with shallow characters. Modern literature attempts to re-romanticize the world with a rational outlook. Literary theory developed during this time emphasized language and semantics. It now aims to bring forth the exotic experiences of marginal and postcolonial traumas of mankind.

The impact of psychology and science on philosophy has made philosophy outmoded to common man and curbed its progress. It no longer could influence the literature like it used to. Existentialism is the last ideological exchange between literature and philosophy. Structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction are essentially linguistic theories.

About Author

Iris Murdoch is a British philosopher and novelist who wrote about the impact of existentialism on the human mind. Existentialism to Murdoch gave an opportunity to assess man's experience with morals. She attempted to portray in her fiction the psychological profile of a man who is aware of the purposelessness of the world and existence and yet is reined by an alien moral conscience. In her novels, many characters come face to face with the void and try to interpret it contextually, albeit failing to comprehend or transcend it. Though she attempted to keep her fiction and philosophy separate, both of them have been interdependent in her progress.

EXISTENTIAL ELEMENTS IN WORKS OF IRIS MURDOCH

Murdoch early felt the necessity of certain philosophical references to be restored. She, in her philosophy, attempted to bring back the idea of good and God. She argues the impracticability of modern

philosophy, as said by Ana Lita in *Seeing Human Goodness: Iris Murdoch on Moral Virtue*:

"Murdoch argues that liberalism, romanticism, existentialism, and linguistic empiricism fail to articulate a criterion for morality that goes beyond choices and will."

Murdoch expresses this loss in *Against Dryness*:

"What have we lost here? And what have we perhaps never had? We have suffered a general loss of concepts, the loss of moral and political vocabulary... we no longer picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world."

The reason for the failure of existentialism is further explained in Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good*:

"I shall argue that existentialism is not, and cannot be made with tinkering, the philosophy we need... Briefly put, (existentialism made), our picture of ourselves...too grand, we have isolated and identified ourselves with, an unrealistic conception of will."

Literature, especially fiction, is, for Murdoch, a place for moral contemplation. Its aim should not only be to offer consolation from reality but also arm us against reality. The writer, therefore, has a special duty to the reader. A novel to her is an art form. Her novels "are not novels for instant consumption and easy judgement, and their effect can be calculated finally only as one thinks about them and studies them." (Elizabeth Dipple, *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit*)

Murdoch was often criticized for lagging behind in her writing for adhering to didactic purposes of the novel, while both American and British novelists are busy with experimentalism. She, however, stuck to her aim of restoring the grandeur and eloquence of 19th century in her novels. Apart from these, her novels are her endeavors to revive the moral sense through her characters.

Murdoch's early works depict her encounter with Existentialism. *Under the Net* (1954), her first novel, depicts the existential misadventures of Jake Donahue. Murdoch also wrote *Satre: A Romantic Rationalist* in 1953, which is considered to be one of the first and best expositions of Existentialism. Still, many consider that her encounter with existentialism was short-lived as she saw its political and intellectual barrenness.

She continued to explore philosophy, especially concerned with morals, while rejecting the philosophy

of Existentialism as it is self-centered and impractical. She called herself a Wittgensteinian and desired to restore the philosophy of Plato, which might be true in her philosophical endeavours, but in her fiction—her philosophical novels—we find a great deal of existentialist perspectives embedded.

The rejection of Existentialism by Iris Murdoch operates along somewhat different lines from that of objective language. She proclaims that existentialism provides us with an image of self in the modern world—a world without God is understood to be contingent. The self becomes the sole arbiter of value, competing against other selves and their values. All have to rely on themselves as sources of meaning, as there is no external guarantor of the "correctness" of any particular one. Murdoch points out the inadequacies of Existentialist philosophers since they present a shallow view of human nature—'a simplified and impoverished inner life.' She considers that novels written under the impact of the philosophies lack a genuine conception of love and freedom, showing a "pointlessness of life."

But Murdoch continued to write novels that are filled with philosophical expositions throughout her career. Murdoch investigated moral philosophy, and this did not stop her from incorporating existential characters into her novels.

"Although Iris Murdoch is a philosophical writer, she is concerned with social morality, and her views do not appear as abstract doctrines in her novels but are part of the action and characterization of her works. She is concerned with ethical or moral problems confronting man in the world as it exists rather than with the solipsistic man created by existentialists like Sartre. Murdoch's characters do not avoid or deny the contingent quality of the world. They do acknowledge a prevailing code of ethics that is affected by their behavior rather than the other way around."

Thus, she is wary of extremes of existentialism that attempt to reduce the complexities of the twentieth century. Murdoch believed that modern philosophy, in general, has not been able to counter Sartre's or the Marxist theory with any other view of man.

She differs in her views on the Existentialism of Camus, though. To her, Camus is aware of the contingency between society and nature. Moreover, in Camus she finds "real people and real situations." She admires this and calls this quality of expressing truth eloquence.

Murdoch turns her hopes toward literature. She believed that literature should attempt to address the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by modern man. She posited that literature gives more "degrees of freedom" than philosophy to understand and resolve these dilemmas. The fact remains that the methods by which the philosopher and the novelist examine existence differ from one another; the interrelationship between the two was an exploration of philosophical ideas through imaginative writing, not their direct illustration in fiction. The achievement of a novelist must finally be judged in terms of literature, yet an evaluation of his/her art must rest, at some point, on an understanding of his/her philosophical ideas. Thus, Murdoch was often categorized as a philosophical novelist.

As a novelist, she transcends classification. Hilda D. Spears aptly voices this opinion when she asserts that Murdoch defies classification:

"She is not a modernist; she is not a postmodernist; she is not, like many of her female contemporaries, a feminist writer; yet despite the fact that she employs many Victorian devices in her novels, no serious reader of her fiction could place her among the traditionalists. She is a thinker, a novelist of ideas, a philosopher who dares to introduce philosophic discussions into her novels" (Pg. 121).

Therefore, some consider her fiction as more obscure and ambiguous than her stance on philosophy.

The fact that Murdoch was a professor of philosophy at Oxford and also wrote novels makes it 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.

Since the publication of her first novel, *Under the Net* (1954), Murdoch has emerged not only as the most prolific and influential British novelist of her period but also as a powerful thinker and original theorist of fiction. In one sense, Murdoch aimed to write as a realist, in an identifiably nineteenth century tradition of English and European fiction.

In her essay *Against Dryness*, she criticized the 'dryness' and the 'self-contentedness' of modern literature and defined the 20th century novel either as 'Crystalline' portraying the human condition and not containing characters in the 19th century sense, or as

'journalistic'—a large shapeless, quasi-documentary object.

The novels of Murdoch had a very obvious link with existentialism and Sartre until about 1968. In her early novels written in the 1950s, she followed the path laid out by the early Sartre, but her philosophical orientation offered no way out for her. The earlier group of her novels (1954–1967) was obviously influenced by Sartre. In those novels, Murdoch intended to present the stark realities of life; she also wanted to convey that evil was so rampant and so very all-pervading that unless one knew it in its uncovered naked form, it was extremely difficult to understand the presence of 'the good.'

Murdoch possessed an uncanny skill in identifying the underlying presuppositions of her times. To the existential hero of Sartrean ethics, freely able to choose his values in an otherwise unauthentic world, she contrasted the so-called mystical hero or saint, who depended not on will but on "genuine intuition of an authoritative good."

Murdoch expected her readers to be patient in her world of 'multiplicity.' The dark characters or a dark plot were not the author's negligence towards her readers. She was always concerned with the ethical problems and moral dilemmas of her characters in the early and later novels.

CONCLUSION

The characters in Murdoch's novels are eccentric and highly impenetrable, but they are also independent. She does not simply convey facts and experience but tries to construct a world where characters slowly evolve to their true selves. The heroes in her fiction, however, are disillusioned by the world around them. They have no guide other than the deep anguish of existence. Yet they, in their own way, attempt to analyse and accept the world while not tempted by any transcendental and metaphysical console.

The great pessimism that the characters suffer emanates from their experience with the evil. The evil does not create fear but instills in them certain hopelessness. However, this does not mean that they are weak. They, having accepted the fate of man, saw the evil in him and simply waded through reality untouched. Murdoch consciously refuted the ideas of existentialism in order to restore the necessity of morals and virtues, however alien they seem, through her fiction.

The Message to the Planet (1989) is one of her last novels where she finally reconciles many different ideas of philosophy to arrive at a composite one, one that is remarkably similar to existentialism but is also a reaction and variant to the classical existentialism. The writer psychologically evaluates her characters from cultural, religious, and philosophical perspectives to arrive at this new avenue of thought.

Murdoch's exploration of human goodness and moral virtue is evident in her works, as she delves into the complexities of human nature and behaviour. Through her writings, she challenges readers to consider the importance of spirituality and ethics in shaping one's character and actions.

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