IRIS MURDOCH’S “THE NICE AND THE GOOD”: IN PURSUIT OF ‘GOODNESS’

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ABSTRACT

An Irish-born Booker Prizewinner British author, philosopher, poet and novelist, Dame Jean Irish Murdoch was a true humanistic by spirit that makes her a writer of humanistic approach. She knows the ruling power of relentlessness of practical world over humanity and Individuality. Iris was a humanistic free-will writer who wants to moderate her characters having the uniqueness of the whole personage in place of one aspect. Being an author of humanistic approach, this paper reveals her thirst to seek the importance of human goodness in society by exploring human behaviors, feelings, temperaments, deeds, needs and choices to establish humanity in the realm of less humanistic world. Once again Iris Murdoch is trying to teach us much more about the need of love, goodness, morality and humanity.

This paper discusses Murdoch’s grave concern towards the conflict between an individual and society which results in the occurrences of strong human resistance towards the acceptance of sensible reality of human existence and also discloses her favour to the one of the major humanistic ingredient known as ‘goodness’. Murdoch’s closing stages unveil the need of doing actual good than just being nice to people and society because the idea of goodness is centered to her philosophy and her fiction. It argues that people of all time are in great need of ‘concrete goodness of action’ in place of ‘abstract goodness of words’. Murdoch makes known her ability to reach the human heart and to read the human mind and this paper discusses her love to humanity and her thirst for human goodness.

KEYWORDS: Humanism, Humanity, Goodness, Morality, Individualism, Society

INTRODUCTION

Dame Jean Iris Murdoch (1919-99) has been acknowledged as one of the best and foremost novelists of twentieth century. She wrote twenty six novels within the period of forty years. Among all 20th century novelists, Iris Murdoch has established herself in a very strong position through her vibrant and special approach towards society. She had started her career as a writer by her first philosophical work, Sartre: Romantic Rationalist (1953) because she was highly influenced by the philosophers like Sartre, Plato, Freud, Simone wail Raymond Queneau, Samuel Beckett and Wittgenstein. Not only with the philosophers but she was also influenced by the 19th century novelists such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Marcel Proust and William Shakespeare. Her first published novel, Under The Net ,was selected in 2001 by the editorial board of the American Modern Library as one of the 100 best English language novels of the 20th century; followed with The Flight from the Enchanter (1956) and The Sandcastle (1957). In 1958, The Bell was published, considered by many critics to be her finest novels: Her 1960s novels, A Severed Head (1961), An Unofficial Rose (1962), The Unicorn (1963), The Italian Girl (1964), The Red and The Green (1965), The Time of The Angels (1966), The Nice and The Good (1968), Bruno’s Dream (1969); portrays the social and intellectual life of the mid 20th century. She has also been admitted to the Irish Academy, The American Academy of Art and Letters and The American Academy of Sciences. She is a fellow of St. Anne’s college, Oxford, and has been given an honorary D.Litt. From the University of Oxford. Murdoch was at her peak in the novels of the 1970s and the 1980s, notably with A Fairly Honourable Defeat (1970), An Accidental Man (1971), The Black Prince(1973) which was won the James Tait Black Memorial Price, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine(1974)
which won the Whitbread Literacy Award, A Word Child (1975), Henry and Cato (1976), The Sea The Sea (1978) which won the Booker Prize, Nuns and Soldiers (1980), The Philosopher’s Pupil (1983), The Good Apprentice (1985), The Book and The Brotherhood (1987) and The Message to the Planet (1989). After her last novels The Green Knight (1993) and 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, realistic and positive. She explores concepts of self-determination and social justice, the problematic nature of sexual desire, what action constitute goodness, strategies for dealing with intense affliction and she calibrates the redemptive power of spiritualism and true love while illustrating its infirmity. She was not only a mere writer but also a true Humanist. She has social concerns and humanity for the oppressed and deprived. She has focused on the social reality of suppressed people of contemporary society in her fiction.

Murdoch was known throughout her life as an extraordinarily modest human being who was even described as a "saint" and “a living paradigm of the inspiration of goodness” this notion of goodness was central both to her life and her writings. As a creative and morally passionate thinker she witnessed some of the devastating horrors like World War II, social discriminations, sexual restraint, and a strict social code of conduct for female writers etc. of the twentieth century but in spite of facing all these odds, she was always seeking obsolete notion of goodness and optimism and also introduces it in her novels. Hence, the study of this paper is centered to explore an understanding of what the search for goodness can denote to society and individual.

Iris Murdoch’s novel The Nice and The Good (1968) was formerly published in 1968. The novel is all about turning around contentedly married couples. It comprises of a violent death, blackmail, suspected surveillance, black arts, stress and dread over which true love and sense of goodness conquers all. The Nice and the Good has some unconventional pairings in which some are regular and some are unexpected. Manipulation and realism is always common theme for the writer, and in the novel she uses it to explore the real difference between ‘just being nice’ and ‘doing really good’. The real good lies beyond the dominion of ordinary minds and the nice are not necessarily the good. Murdoch hopes for the quest of goodness in human lives ‘a mode of belief in the unique monarch place of goodness or asset in human life’.

AN INTRODUCTION TO ‘THE NICE AND THE GOOD’

The brief summary moves around John Ducane, a senior bureaucrat in the white hall office of Octarian Gray is given the job to investigate whether the suicide of a junior colleague, Joseph Radeechy, did not involve any security risk. John Ducane comes to know that the chronicle may be about blackmailing, through press. He investigates that Peter McGrath, the office messenger who sold the information to the press could blackmail Radeechy. McGrath points out his doubt on Richard Biranne, one of Octavian’s undersecretaries who touched the body after accident. John finds the gun placed on Radeechy’s right side when Raddechy was left handed. Meanwhile the household tribulations are on the increase; Ducane wants to leave Jessica Bird, his lover due to his recent attachment with Kate, Octavian’s wife; Richard’s ex-wife Paula who lives with Kate worries due to the hasty coming of her lover Eric and Mary Cloister, a widow and a mother of teen-age son Pierce highly in need of a job.

Ducane searches Radeechy’s house for the clue but finds nothing. Ducane’s investigation reaches at the result by Richard’s confession. He accepts that he touches the body only to know that Radeechy was alive or not meanwhile he replaced the gun. He shows Radeechy’s suicide note in which he confessed that he murdered his wife, Claudia by pushing her out of a window due to having doubts of her liaison with Richard, who witnessed his act of killing and has since attempted to blackmail him. Now the suspense has revealed to Ducane that Radeechy commits suicide due to guilt to commit a crime and fear from Richard and McGrath’s blackmailing. Meanwhile Kate and Jessica come to know about their
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common affection for Ducane and both leave Ducane. Paula discusses his problem with Ducane and expresses her desire to reunion with Richard. Ducane risks his life to save Pierce’s life from the rising sea-monster. This incident changes Ducane utterly. He decides no to judge and punish anyone. Richard is expected to lose his job but it is Ducane himself who resigns. He helps Paula and Richard to reunitate again after a long separation. Peter McGrath is forgiven and appointed as Ducane’s chauffeur by Ducane. Ducane picks Mary to marry, his equal in morality and goodness.

A CONFLICT BETWEEN ‘INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY’

Once again Iris Murdoch is trying to tell us much more about the quest for love, goodness, morality, reality and humanity and how their deficiency can create conflicts between individual and society. The novel is all about that many individuals of the society who are just value looking like they are good more than they actually value good in conduct. Murdoch shows her worry, “Goodness is simple, it's just very difficult.” Murdoch believed, the idea of goodness must remain alive in human life and human society because Goodness is the utmost medication to egotism for human being and to the real world beyond the ‘self’. Although Murdoch is very much aware about the complete opposite scenario from her ideal picture, yet she believes in optimism. She unveils her worries, “Human beings are far more complicated and enigmatic and ambiguous than languages or mathematical concepts, and selfishness operates in a much more devious and frenzied manner in our relations with them. . . .Our attachments tend to be selfish and strong, and the transformation of our loves from selfishness to unselfishness is sometimes hard even to conceive of.” On the other hand Murdoch is optimistic about the eternal presence of goodness to society that’s why she compares goodness with the ceaseless light of Sun ""The sun represents the Form of the Good in whose light the truth is seen; it reveals the world, hitherto invisible, and is also a source of life.” R. C. Cross and A. D. Woozley, in their commentary on the Republic, describe the analogy between the sun and the good as follows: Just as, then, in the visible world the Sun is the cause of light which enables visible things to be seen and of sight which enables the eye to see, though it itself is neither light nor sight, so in the intelligible world the Form of the Good is the cause of truth, which enables the Forms to be known, and of knowledge, which enables the mind to know, though it itself is neither truth nor knowledge.” Like real people, Murdoch’s characters are also struggling between the acts of ‘Saint’ and ‘Satan’. They omit, they elide, they follow rules in order to show themselves to be, and it makes them at best in ‘being nice’. Being nice is one of the greatest requirements of the methodical society. But following good is a difficult choice to pick for individuals because sometimes individual and society can be contradictory. At times following social rules can be destructive for the human right and sometimes picking individual choices can be dysfunctional for society. The struggle between self and society or struggle between true justice and regular law, it seems, is like a daily routine. Murdoch makes a point that it is possible that justice is more mitigating when offered by one person struggling for good than by obedience to the law and order. According to the Murdoch, the first step is to examine what the Good is like “Christ, Socrates, certain saints ...if we try to contemplate these men we find that the information about them is scanty and vague, and that, their great moments apart, it is the simplicity and directness of their diction which chiefly colors our conception of them as good. ...Goodness appears to be both rare and hard to picture. It is perhaps most convincingly met with in simple people - inarticulate, unselfish mothers of large families - but these cases are also the least illuminating.”

IN PURSUIT OF ‘GOODNESS’

The Nice and The Good starts like a detective novel. At the centre of the tale is a married couple, philanthropic hedonist Kate Gray and her husband Octavian Gray. The Grays’ represents the nice who always regards society more preeminent than any other individual of the so called polished and sophisticated society. Enjoying the “deep superiority of the socially secure.” They are “spontaneous in their efforts to cause happiness in others” (20). The niceness of Octavian
and Kate who are rich, clever, powerful, loving and loved, includes in its hedonistic country circle at their Traceable Cottage, Kate’s friend Pauld Biranne and her twins named Edward and Henrietta, Mary Clothier and her fifteen year old son ‘Pierce’. Paula comes to live with the Grays after her broken marriage with Richard and spoiled love affair with Eric. Mary Clothier is a widow, who takes refuge with the Grays. She is hardly in need of a job because of her economical independence and she hates “self-pity”. Grays court also includes Octavian’s brother Theo, who had been in Indian Civil Service. He had fled India because of a scandal with a boy, while he was in search of love, in a Buddhist monastery. At the farthest edge of this world is the refugee Willy Kost, living in a separate cottage. His demons turn out at the end, to stem from his needless betrayal of two fellow prisoners in Dachau where he spent the war. Each one of the characters except the Gray couple has a demon from the past to haunt him. Octavian and Kate can only provide shelter to them but can not solve their problems because they value the society more than the individual.

A regular visitor to Kate’s court is John Ducane, the legal adviser to Octavian Gray who is a Bureau Chief at the Whitehall. Ducane, a disciplined and virtuous scholar, who is anxious to be good, is assigned to investigate the suicide of the satanic Rodeechy, a junior colleague of Government department. By the virtue of this investigation, Dancane is given power over others. Duncane wants to do justice at any cost but in political pressure, he feels himself imprisoned. He explains to Octavian, “No but you know as well as I do that politicians aren’t concerned with justice being done, they’re concerned with justice seeming to be done as a result of their keen-eyed vigilance” (31). In the shade of her protagonist’s word, Murdoch reveals her major concern that society is struggling for the great need of true justice which is hard to achieve in the pressure of blind law governed by the corrupted politician.

Here, Duncane finds himself in the conflict between society and individual. Society demands for strict implementation of the rules and regulations due to the smooth run of the system on the other hand individual demands for justice because only the guilty person should be punished not the innocent one. In his investigation Duncane comes to know that Peter McGrath, the office messenger, sold the information to the press for money. Duncane doubts on him to blackmail Radeecy too, “it seems to me possible that McGrath himself was blackmailing Radeechy in a quiet way. But that’s not important. There is something else” (70). Duncane knew very well that there is something very deep in the case which he needs to disclose or uncover. McGrath gives him a hint about Richard, Octavian’s undersecretary, Richard did something secretly with the dead-body in the locked room for sometime. Duncane notices something strange in the police photographs of the suicide scene; Radeechy was left handed but the gun was lying by his right. He suspects that Richard could have moved the gun while checking on Radeechy or Richard might have killed him and not remembered that Radeechy was left handed when he went to place the gun. Duncane’s search of Radeechy’s house has yielded nothing. Although there was no result of investigation yet Duncane feels himself confident to do justice. He says, “I alone of all these people am good enough and I am humble enough, to be a judge” (68). Murdoch herself is not supporting the idea to follow strict law to satisfy social norms, false ego, mere religion and superstition in the comparison to support true justice. True justice can’t be achieved only by following the mechanical rules and regulations.

Duncane likes “his life to be simple, did not care for concealments and feelings of guilt” (26). He wants “to lead a clean simple life and to be a good man, and this remains to him as a real, and also feasible ambition” (32). Despite this he guiltily muddles into ambiguous flirtations with Jessica Bird as well as with Kate Gray. One of the Chief ironies of the book lies in Ducane’s flirtation relationship with Kate. He knows that for Kate there was nothing but joy in the prospect of so caging him. He also knows that in order to love Kate in innocence he should be free and truthful and for that he must end completely the muddled compromise with Jessica. Yet the very foundation of his relationship with Kate is based on guilt and concealment. The muddle makes him insensitive and is different to others. He is only interested in himself. This
guilty aspect keeps him from seeing himself accurately. K. K. Bajaj puts, “His quest for goodness is impeded by this demon of guilt. A sense of the impurity of his motives weakens him. Since his own interest is involved in it he gets confused.” More than Jessica, he wants to keep himself free, “he wanted to set Jessica free but he wanted even more to be free himself” (26). He has an image of his own self- a pure innocent, good man. He wants to present himself in this image to Kate Gray also. Despite the fact that he wants to make his relationship with Kate simple and sunny, he is afraid of being caught a liar. Fear of exposure makes him to drift. He admits that he is enervated by all this mess and guilt. He comments, “Human frailty, wickedness in men, has made this situation where I automatically have to behave like a brute” (28). In the course of his investigation and through his relationship with Jessica and Kate, Ducane is gradually forced to recognize himself as a hypocrite. He reflects, “I am the perfect white sepulcher. I’ve fiddled and compromised with two women and been a failure with one and a catastrophe to the other. I am the cause that evil is in a man like McGrath. I cannot pity the wretched or being hope or comfort to the damned. I cannot feel compassion for those over whom I imagine myself to be set as a judge. I cannot even take this girl in my arms. And that not because of duty or for her sake at all, but just because of my own conception of myself as spotless, my quaint idea of myself as good which seems to go on being with me, however, rottenly. I may behave” (25).

Ducane’s investigation moves forward by Richard’s confession. He accepts that he touches the body only to see if Radeechy was still alive and meanwhile he pushed the gun out of the place. He says Judy McGrath, McGrath’s wife is ‘Helen of Troy’ who seems to be in everyone’s lives and blackmails everyone with the help of her husband for money, “he and Judy work as a team. She ensnares people in high places with, shall we say odd tastes, and McGrath follows close behind with his little camera” (30). It seems true to Duncane too because Judy tried to entrap him but he returns her safely with his servant Fivey. Richard shows Ducane Radeechy’s suicide note in which he confesses that he murdered his wife, Claudia by pushing her out of a window due to jealousy of her liaison with Richard, who witnessed his act of killing and had since attempted to blackmail him. Now the suspense has revealed to Ducane that Radeechy commits suicide because of guilt to commit a crime and fear from the blackmailing of Richard and McGrath. Iris points out that how blackmailing can quash the strong structure of the society by demolishing many families. After solving the mystery Ducane gets involved in another problem. Both Kate and Jessica come to know about each others existence in Ducane’s life. Kate leaves him for Jessica because it was intolerable to her to bear the pain of cheat in spite of her own betrayal with her husband. When Jessica knows about Ducane’s extramarital affair with Kate she compromises her love, she decides, “It is all over now with John. It is the end. She paused again to watch herself still no screams, no tears, no tendency to fall down in faint. There was a line of hardness in her, a rigid steely upright as thin as a wire but very strong. She was not going to die after all for John Duncans” (206).

The novel attempts a serious examination of the good and its connection with love- a gate way to goodness. There is a large inter-related cast of characters, all more or less struggling to distinguish the nice from the good. The contrast between the limited ‘quasi-mechanical system of energy’ and the individual ways in which this energy is expressed, lends artistic tension to this tale of love. Duncane faces the paradox of morality. According to Murdoch: “learning to detect the false in art and enjoy the true is a part of life- long education in moral discernment.”8 Ducane thinks in order to be good, it may be necessary to imagine “oneself good”. He feels, “yet such imagining may also be the very thing which renders improvement impossible, either because of surreptitious complacency or because of some deeper blasphemous infection which is set up when goodness is though about in the wrong way” (76). He considers in order to become good one must think about “virtue”. He often feels that of all the people he is “good enough” and “humble enough to be judge”. As P. P. Punja explains, “The difference between the “nice” and the “good” is not made categorically by Murdoch, yet we can draw
certain conclusions in the novel. It appears; the novelist wants that all those actions which are done to avoid hurting the feelings of others and to help others without losing self-interest should be considered mere nice actions. On the other hand, the good actions demand forgetfulness of the self-interest. In the good actions, the doer does not bother about the social formalities about pleasantness and risks even his own life or happiness to safeguard the life of others.”

Although Duncane considers himself to be good and just, he is far away from these virtues. It is only his experience in the Gunnar’s cave that makes him a good man. He risks his life to save Pierce’s life by swimming to Gunnar’s cave. With the rise of the sea-water, their lives are in great danger. When Duncane is face to face with death, his views about himself and he undergoes a change. Instead of “thinking himself a just man and a just-judge”, he thinks, “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 cozy familiar pleasures, to be well though of ….. He though, 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, and not to exercise power, not to seek, seek, and seek. To love and to reconcile and to forgive, only this matters. All power is sin and all law is frailty. Love is the only justice. Forgiveness, reconciliation, not law” (306-307). As Murdoch figures out, “The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness.” One of the major influences on Murdoch, Plato himself describes Goodness as “not the same thing as being, but even beyond being, surpassing it in dignity and power.” Furthermore, Murdoch describes as ‘an enlightening and creative first principle’ to Plato’s description of the Form of the Good in the Republic. (The light of the Good makes knowledge possible and also life).

Wisdom draws upon him he realizes that in fact what he had been doing was only to live easily, to have cozy familiar pleasures and to be well thought of. Duncane ruminates about Mary and Richard, and decides that if he comes out alive he would not judge any person. Now he only wants to kill the “little rat”, and wants “not to judge”, not to seek. In the conflict between society and individual, Duncane prefers freedom and love in the favor of an individual in place of judgement of law for the society. This decision of protagonists results in the happiness of an individuals like freedom of McGrath and Richard, reunion of the divorced couple of Richard and Paula as well as Judy and Fivey and the settlement of Mary’s anxious life.

In The Nice and The Good, Murdoch makes us understand that love is another synonym of goodness. No love is entirely without worth, even when the frivolous calls to the frivolous. In this novel, Murdoch writes, “it is in the nature of love to discern good, and the best love is in some part at any rate a love of what is good”(336). Duncane’s illusion about goodness is shattered, he realizes the uprightness of Mary and other characters. Murdoch herself remarks “no one in the book is good” (Conradi, Iris Murdoch: The Saint and The Artist, 143). Murdoch brings out the fact that true love is the exerciser. Duncane’s love from Mary Clothier moves away from the selfish, self-absorbed love, he earlier feels for Kate or for Jessica. Duncane realize, “Her mode of being gave him a moral, even a metaphysical confidence in the world, in the reality of goodness. Not love is entirely without worth, even when the lighthearted calls to the frolicsome and base to the base. But it is in the nature of love to discern good, and the best love is in some part at any rate a love of what is good.” (192) Murdoch suggests in this novel several aspects of “good” when Willy tells Jessica, “We are not good people, and the best we can hope for is to be gentle, to forgive each-other and to forgive the past, to be forgiven ourselves and to accept this forgiveness and to return again to the beautiful unexpected strangeness of the world.” (192)

Goodness and moral struggle is Ducane’s basic characteristic. Elizabeth Dipple argues that Murdoch does not intend that Ducane be seen as an achiever of the good. Dipple’s argument is based on the premise that “Duncane limits his pursuit of the good to a narrow, logical frame work focused on the possibility of just judgment” (Dipple, Work for the
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Mark Murdoch also favors the concept "Morality, goodness, is a form of realism" (Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 59). The Good is "the light which reveals to us all things as they really are" (Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 70). Seeking goodness declares Murdoch as the humanist writer who wants to establish humanism with the help of her writings and her philosophy.

CONCLUSIONS

Murdoch conveys her message through the brooding of Theodore in *The Nice and The Good* that one should not look at evil but should look at good. This is very important because only this contemplation breaks the tyranny of the past. It breaks the adherence of evil to the personality. Theo broods "In the light of the good, evil can be seen in its place, not owned, just existing, in its place" (346). It may be concluded that the good characters like Duncane, Mary, Theo and Willy are involved in positive goodness, freedom, morality and love for individuals while the nice characters like Kate and Octavian are merely abstaining from doing harm to society by doing no good to others. Murdoch through Duncane shows how the good never use their power over other helpless human beings for their personal benefits. They use their influence on others to enhance the happiness in the lives of those people who lack it. Ultimately it proves that the necessity of the society is doing actual good and follows goodness in actions. Sometimes doing real good is greater than just being nice to people because goodness helps both the society and the individual and their goal to attain happiness. To achieve justice and love, goodness must be attained. It results in that treating people well is not that much important rather than to consider them equal.

The concept of the good exists in the inner side of the consciousness which comes out naturally in man’s preferences, choices, deeds and goals same as the choices picked by the writer for the protagonist of the novel whose exercises of unselfing nature is the true adaptation of human goodness. Murdoch's philosophy of the good starts with realism in which having faith and acceptance of the reality in the existence of goodness is the centre idea. From this way, this article finally gets a conclusion that converting the abstract idea of goodness in to concrete reality is the main sense of duty of mankind. Believing in goodness and doing real good is the key object to get knowledge and moral prosperity which can be the reason to find true happiness, pleasure, freedom, brotherhood, equality and ultimately the supreme goal, humanity.

REFERENCES

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