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DISCOVERING ONESELF THROUGH ART: CONCEPT OF GOODNESS IN MURDOCH'S "THE GOOD APPRENTICE"

MANJU JANGID
PhD Research Scholar, Department of English
Maharaja Ganga Singh University, Bikaner, Rajasthan

ABSTRACT

The main aim of the present article is to show how Iris Murdoch's works, both philosophical and literary, deal with finding out what is really held to be Good and explore the relation between art and morals. The essence of moral philosophy is her idea of the good in her novel *The Good Apprentice* because human beings are free creatures. This good is indefinable precisely because it differs for each person. The idea of good has in common for all human beings is that, in order to be true and it must be pursued for its own sake, without hope for any individual gain. As the central concept, goodness is the human's ultimate state of being good in her philosophy. This article is an effort to show that though Murdoch has a belief that all people should be good, this is in contrast to a lack of belief in evil. She does not believe in Christian God instead she prefers to be morally good which exists better without God. She considers goodness as an ideal form to strive for and hope to achieve.

Keywords: Good, Morality, God, Art, Realism, Illusion, Self etc.

Iris Murdoch says that all people seek after the good according to their own understanding of what good is and that it does not matter how we seek after it as long as we do. It is difficult to define what is good but being good is to accept the reality of people and the importance of other things beyond egoism and illusion. The essence of goodness and good art is the same; it is precisely the act of clear vision, the acknowledgement of the other people's existence. As Murdoch underlines in *The Sovereignty of Good*, the exercise of morality is a form of realism, in the sense that "we cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need" (78), then "the chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy… which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one" (78). In an interview with Jonathan Miller, Murdoch explained the importance of goodness and how to achieve it as follows:

> [T]he more positive notion of goodness and virtue … is the duty of the human being, it is the function of the human being, his form of being demands, a kind of change, a pilgrimage (like the pilgrimages in Plato's cave where the people go through a period of realizing that what they took to be real objects are actually shadows or icons or images, and then they emerge into the daylight, into reality), this image of the human pilgrimage, which is a pilgrimage from

> illusion to reality, and falsehood to truth, and evil to good, and that this tension in human affairs is something which cannot be explained by science and can't be dismissed by philosophy and … cannot [be] explained by theology, Christian theology, because it is still bound to the idea of personal God which I regard as an image (Dooley 212).

The only way to approach goodness is to be contingent and eliminating selfishness by the psyche. In this process art helps us to question and to discover ourselves in a new way. This is the theme of *The Good Apprentice* and shows Murdoch's continuous efforts to investigate the artist's realization that art cannot reach perfection, although this is no reason to give up striving for it. According to Gordon, "this ongoing process of searching, questioning and struggling against the self can be viewed as the strongest aspect of Murdoch's achievement" (117). But when the vision of external reality is disturbed by the interference of the self, then the goodness and therefore art become mediocre, as the character of Jesse shows in *The Good Apprentice*:

> We can see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world (98).

Murdoch's philosophical works deal largely with the relation between art and morals, and she sees both of them as attempts to find out what is meant by, what is really held to be, Good. In the novel, Murdoch shows two different attitudes by telling the story of guilt ridden Edward and of his brother Stuart who are determined in doing good to the other people at any cost. Stuart's ability of putting himself apart and of focusing on the others' problems represents the attention and goodness. Edward's exclusive focusing on himself, instead, prevents him from seeing the other people around him, in other words, from seeing reality. Being good and doing good inevitably implies to recognize the existence of other people outside oneself, and by doing this, real action is made possible. She responds that very few people could achieve goodness, because saying, "Even so-called saints are imperfect. But to come back to the ideal, the human task is to become unselfish, to unself." As for her, unselfing is "something that's got to become a way of life" (Dooley 200). For Murdoch, true good is its own end; in fact, the one often is unaware of his or her goodness. Goodness ultimately occurs when one is able to abandon the concerns of the self. This liberation of the self means to be freed from all worldly and sensual attachments as selfish desires, egoism, malice, etc. When we detach ourselves from all these desires and wishes then only liberation can be attained. In the novel, Murdoch also takes effort to illustrate the truth of life and goodness as well as the difficulty in achieving them as follows:

> Life is a whole, it must be lived as a whole, abstract good and bad are just fictions. We must live in our own concrete realized truth and that's got to include what we deeply desire, what fulfils us and gives us joy. That's the good life, not everyone is capable of it, not everyone has the courage (91).

Murdoch's pursuit of the good, in art and life, is itself a form of attention to the particular. At the centre of the novel, there is Edward, is defined as the "murdochian example of the 'accidental man" (Nicol 45), the representation of a person who sees the course of his life changed forever by a tragic accident. He feeds his friend Mark with a sandwich filled with drugs out of mere curiosity and fun then leaves him alone for a while. This is the pivotal event which opens the novel, and which affects Edward's existence from now on, haunting him with the awareness of being guilty of his friend's death. He says to his stepbrother Stuart, "I say the same things to myself a thousand times a day, I see the same things, I enact the same things. Nothing can help me now, nothing" (46). Desperate for what he has done, shocked and obsessed with feelings of death, Edward tries to come to terms with what happened and to face it, in order to find peace but neither is able to forget the past, or to redeem himself. Here Murdoch portrays with painful accuracy the dark and stifling mental world of depression. Acceptance of Mark's death would involve

him in another painful death, the death of his own self-conceit and his illusions. The continuous, unrelenting letters full of hatred and contempt that Mark's mother sends to Edward represent the impossibility to change or redeem the past:

> Think what you have done. I want you to think of it every moment, every second. I would like to stuff it down your throat like a black ball and choke you. […] May you pay for this with your life's happiness. […] I curse you, I condemn you to a haunted life (9).

Edward's predicament, his desperate need for atonement is shown in the novel. Stuart is perfectly conscious of the fact that the only way for his brother to achieve redemption, and therefore recover, is to remain united with the reality and the people around him. Thomas McCaskerville, Edward's psychiatrist, also tries to make him understand that his grief represents a sort of desperate cherishing of the damaged self, as he is concentrating exclusively on his personal suffering and does not see what exists around him. Edward replies in a way that undoubtedly shows his blindness:

> 'The whole of creation is innocent as far as I'm concerned, I forgive it, everything except me.' 'So you think you're alone in hell?'
> 'You want to interest me, to make me think of other people, but I don't want to be cured, and have it all turned into cheerfulness and common-sense by your magic.
> Your magic isn't strong enough to overcome what I have, it's weak, it's a failing touch. I am permanently damaged' (70).

It is clear from these words, that Edward's tormented situation, his sense of guilt is caused not only by Mrs.Wilsden's persecution through enraged letters, but also and primarily caused by himself. Murdoch shows the lowest point a person haunted by such grieving can reach. In his despair, Edward even goes to the point of considering suicide, but as Nicol well explains, "his author will not allow him the comfort of committing it" (48). He endows his natural father, Jesse with the power to grant him absolution, and sets out to be reunited with him, "here was no accident [. .] he had come to Seegard as to a place of pilgrimage, carrying his woeful sin to a holy shrine and to a holy man" (119). During a séance to which he participates in London, Edward hears a voice telling him to look for his roots, and thus decides he has to go and meet his natural father. Jesse is an eccentric and visionary artist who lives in a manor called Seegard together with his wife May and their two daughters, Edward's step-sisters. When he decides to go to Seegard, Jesse becomes for Edward "a most ambiguous love-object" (Johnson 15). At the beginning, he sees Jesse as a leading figure, "a prophet or sacred king whose presence would purify the state, making what seemed good be good, and what was spiritually ambiguous into something altogether holy" (165). In his search for redemption and forgiveness, he hopes his natural father will free him from the sense of guilt and the suffering of his life.

Despite this, however, the place Seegard seems to Edward a pastoral shelter, populated by seemingly ageless women - Mother May, Ilona and Bettina. The "three taboo women" (105) at Seegard leave Edward a very deep impression for "their beauty, their youth, and their resemblance to each other" (100). They seemingly enjoy this monastery - like a daily routine of "times of silence, times for rest, times for reading" (108) since they "follow Jesse's example … his rule of order and industry" (108). He doesn't find Jesse in the house and gets his father's absence suspicious. Mother May tells him that Jesse will be back soon, but he gets these three ladies' attempts to recover him from his misery doubtful. He finds that:

> They, as the days went by, began to appear different to him. They were still, as he had first apprehended them, taboo, holy women, and endowed with arcane skills. They had not healed his wound but they had a little soothed it (152).

Slowly Edward comes to know that all the power of Jesse has been taken away by these three "elf maidens" (152) and Mother May becomes the real controller of this family. When they work at day time, they all perform absent-mindedly: Mother May repairs

the clothes with her blank beautiful eyes, Bettina keeps herself busy in studying African crafts and Ilona paints beautifully sketch pads of different sizes which makes Edward feel "rather distressing" (111). He is informed by Ilona the real situation of them that is contradictory to their outward appearances and reveals the true state of their lives. Although they "had to be happy" (200) before, they have no happiness even like that now, but to "pretend to be happy, like nuns who can never admit that they made a mistake and that it has all become just a prison" (200). What these three women do every day is just the inane repetition of the meaningless routine. It appears from far that this family is under the traditional male-domination which is even reflected in Jesse's paintings where are full of "big grotesque heads of women, mournful, tearful or vindictive" (180) and "the features of the women of Seegard" could be recognized in "the mourning heads of women" (181). Edward is told by Mother May that earlier Jesse was the head of the family and stops Bettina from falling in love with a young man and from going to the university, and forbid Ilona to become a dancer. Instead, they turn out to be "bad painters, pretend artists" (200) and Mother May has suffered a lot from Jesse's dissolute life with many women. He discovers his father as the powerless magician having no control over the family and also exposes him the real world of these women, especially that of Mother May. He finds out clearly that now the power has shifted into the hands of Mother May and she becomes the real power figure in this family. Her authority is fully revealed when she burst into the room where Edward was kneeling beside his father Jesse and ordered him to go, "gorgon-faced with anger" (85). Later on it becomes more clear in another incident when he finds himself alone at Seegard and starts exploring the house curiously. Surprisingly, he gets his father, Jesse locked in a room at Seegard, physically ill and powerless, which reveals the true nature of Mother May, as Jesse's wife and Edward's step-mother. All of a sudden, he finds it very difficult to judge Mother May's real face, her age and her psychology who at first seems so charming, innocent and welcoming.

Here, Murdoch portrays Mother May as a revenging wife who tries to establish herself in the patriarchal household despite all the odds. She lived under Jesse's powerful restriction and suffered from his frequent love affairs with both women and men when Jesse was in the peak years of his life. In retaliation, she eloped with his gay partner, painter Max Pointe, and bore him a child, Ilona. When Jesse's power decays in the physical and spiritual sense, Mother May chooses to maintain the life order in his way as usual, instead of getting rid of him and starting a new life. But the difference is that she replaces Jesse as the power figure in the family, puts Jesse under her control and takes advantage of him as a chess piece for her following plan. In order to maintain the old order, she brainwashes her two daughters to endure the boring life at Seegard through the enhancement of Jesse's god-like image as "a conqueror of the world" (186) and his specious and vacuous philosophy. Faced with Edward's doubts and confusion, Bettina explains that, "He was a god in our lives.… Then he became a cruel mad god, and we had to restrain him" (198). In their eyes, Jesse is "full of impotent rage" (197) since there are "no sane limits to the desire to conquer the world" (197), which is the reason for his trance-like sleeps when he can't stand his own consciousness:

> Naturally at times he resents us, … We appear as an alien authority, we represent the diminishing of his world, the loss of his talents, his dependence on others. We told you he once tried to destroy his paintings, break his sculptures (198).

Mother May refuses Edward's proposal to send Jesse to the hospital for the reason that Edward doesn't know Jesse's power and has "no conception of the greatness of his being" (198). Influenced by the spiritual energy of the place, earlier Edward is convinced that at Seegard he will make amends for Mark's death, but soon he is forced to acknowledge that Jesse cannot do anything for him. His real father no longer paints, lives in a state of trance, of senile dementia, is kept locked in a room to avoid him wandering around Seegard in trance and has lost the energy that, in the past, made him "so alive and full of

power and wonderful as he used to be" (200). Then Mother May persuades Edward "with insistence, with authority" (315) not to give them up for they have changed him and they need each other. Later on, Jesse's sudden death functions as a huge change in the family. Although the two daughters, almost the copies of Mother May, act and react alike, regardless of their individual faces, their fundamental difference makes them choose a different way of life after Jesse's death. But the women's happy life won't come in time, even after Jesse's death because they all fail to consider and care for others. On the contrary, each one is only concerned with herself. For example, none of them gives Edward and his tormented soul a real consideration. The invitation to him is just to do them good regardless of his guilty soul. Once Jesse has gone, Edward seizes upon a new quest, imagining himself to be in love with Brownie Wilsden, Mark's sister. She is "a mature and absolutely realistic young woman who plays an important part in Edward's quest for purification as Mark's sister" (Khogeer131). When he meets Brownie first time, she just inquires about what happened that night when her brother died "in a firm clipped no-nonsense tone" (226) instead of reprimanding him as the murderer of her only brother. It is also noticed that Brownie, is the first person to ask Edward the two simple questions - Why did he give Mark the drug? Why did he leave Mark alone in his drugged sleep? - which enables Edward to face the simple truth of his guilt and its consequences. He becomes the good apprentice; he has learnt from death something about life. When he is suffering from grief, "Brownie absolves him from complicity and urges him to stop ruining his own life, a useless deed of remorse which does not bring back her brother" (226). Finally, Brownie writes to Edward a letter full of "loving forgiveness" (Rowe 145) and her best wishes for him:

> … And I hope you too, dear Edward, will be at peace, feeling no guilt or self-destructive distress about the past. No one was to blame. Life is full of terrible things and one must look into the future and think about what happiness one can create for oneself and others. There is so much good that we can all do, and we must have the energy to do it" (506).

Brownie's tolerance and attention to others, which is rooted in her love of the people around her, help both Edward and herself out of the difficult position. The "painful necessary extraordinary relationship" (410) between Brownie and Edward is rather consolable for both of them to escape from the shadow of Mark's tragic death. Here Murdoch shows us through Edward that picturing the world in terms of one's own desires has a dangerously distorting effect. She endows Brownie with a complete self and the capacity for love to transcend egoism and recognize the reality of other people and the importance of other things, which makes her pilgrimage to goodness possible. This is just what Murdoch advances in her philosophy as the way to achieve goodness. As Suguna Ramanathan states, "Goodness is not just one of her preoccupations, it is the central preoccupation of her later novels" (2).

As Edward is involved in a personal journey towards redemption and towards an increasing awareness of his past, his step-brother Stuart equally plays an important role, concerning the central idea of goodness. Stuart is on a personal quest of goodness. Murdoch shows the quests undertaken by her characters as contingency and absurdity always block their goal. They never reach, but understand very often what the quest should be; as opposed to their earlier selfish concerns. By seeing the otherness of people they achieve this understanding. Their journeys move from confusion to acceptance. Stuart is able to accept, but Edward moves from one illusion to another. Edward is constantly searching, questioning and struggling against his self. His desire to find absolution from Mark's ghost was his first illusion; which takes him to the séance, from there he is led to second illusion; Jesse. Then he moves to Brownie, feeling that her love would cure him. He seemingly moves a little closer to his quest to, "I've got to survive" and thinks about writing a novel someday (519). He falls in his latest illusion in the end when he sees "his mother Chloe, as she had stood beside the path and opened out her arms and shrieked…I'll talk to

Harry about her, I'll find out all about her, I've never done that. Perhaps I am responsible for her too" (519). Edward is representing Everyman here: the finders of substitutes. When the reality becomes too harsh for human consciousness to bear, the unconscious comes in and provides a place for the generation of illusions and dreams which provide protection from this pain. We can move out of this unconscious rut if we pay close attention to certain signs, particularly outside us which open up our consciousness and brings us nearer to reality. Murdoch implies in the novel that it is extremely difficult to free oneself from the power of the unconscious as it traps us in a repetitive pattern. It requires a strong will to come out of it; to look at the otherness of the other, free from solipsism. Similarly Stuart's world has also arisen from the same elements, but his ability to love and seeing the other as a separate entity has made him the centre of good in the novel. Stuart is also harassed and trampled upon by the society, but he comes out of it like a hero and is helping others also. He is a character who can't give up his principles from the beginning to the end of the story. He wants to see the truth. He does not approve of telling lies because he feels that these lies would gradually detach a person from reality. During a conversation with the psychiatrist Thomas, Stuart stresses that his choice of life, the effacement of oneself and focusing on helping other people, cannot be done with partial commitment or part-time:

> 'It's got to be everything, my whole being, not something part-time, not something optional – Just to try to be good, to be for others and not for oneself. To be nothing, to have nothing…(140).

But Edward, remarks it clearly, "He's not part of the thing at all, he's just an external impulse, a sort of jolt, a solid entity, something you bump into" (469). Everybody is talking about Stuart's decision to leave prestigious Cambridge university in order to dedicate himself entirely to the pursuit of goodness and to help people, a sort of giving away of all worldly success and fulfillment to live a spiritual life. He has no faith in God, so he invents his own methods which include celibacy and chastity. His friends, family and relations question his intentions. Stuart's father Harry and his aunt Midge are against his vision of things, 'Don't you see you can't do this all alone? …without a general theory or an organization or God or other people […] A religious man has to have an object and you haven't one" (242). As underlined by Ramanathan, in the opinions stated by Harry, Midge and the other characters to contest Stuart's vision:

> The respect for facts, the supremacy given to a valueless, blank and neutral investigation of the external world are precisely what Stuart, student of mathematics, the most abstract and valueless of all subjects, resists (149).

Stuart wants to be good and has given up a promising career in order to seek out the best way in which to achieve this. He is one of Murdoch's eccentric, saintly figures, who often inspire antagonism in others and tries to assert the importance of human beings as the only agents able to distinguish between good and evil. According to Stuart, "Human minds are possessed by individual persons, they are soaked in values, even perception is evaluation. Making right judgments is a moral activity, all thinking is a function of morality, it's done by humans, it's touched by values right into its centre…"(29). If, on the one hand, he asserts the importance of recognizing and doing good, and therefore the relevance of religion in human life, on the other he underlines the fact that his concept of religion has to be freed from the idea of God as a supernatural, absolute creator.

There are several episodes telling of his attempt to make the other characters act for the good, as for example when he asks Mark's mother to stop sending letters full of hate to desperate, guilt-ridden Edward. The woman outbreaks against him, "We've heard about you, pretending to give up sex and going round being holy. Don't you realize what a charlatan you are? What you really enjoy is cruelty and power" (387). Midge as well accuses him to "influence the feelings and attitudes" (Ramanathan 153) of her teenage son Meredith, with whom, however, Stuart has an unclear, controversial friendship, "You want him in your power, and you dress it up as morality, as if you were a kind of moral

teacher or example" (329). Although Stuart is sexually attracted to Meredith, he consciously keeps a check on himself and controls his mind. Later on, he comes to know about aunt Midge's illicit relationship with his father Harry at Seegard when their car has got stuck in the mud on their way back home. After this embarrassing moment, Midge feels that "[e]verything [she]"d wanted just became worthless, as if [she] didn't want anything anymore" (367) and decides to change her life and "do some good in the world" (367) just like Stuart. Back in London and after having reflected on her situation, she realizes that the presence of Stuart has helped her to see the moral mess she is in, thus considering for the first time her husband Thomas and her son Meredith as a real part of the choice she has to make. This show an important and difficult aspect of Stuart's selfless pursuit of the good, that is the risk of degenerating into arrogance and complacency through the very process of trying to help people in such an unselfish way. Murdoch wants to underline through the role of Stuart is that the balance of doing good stays in the middle between the excessive assertion of the ego and its total denial. Compared to Edward, who represents the suffering self, only able to see and feel his own grief, Stuart is the exact opposite, and precisely represents the unselfish process of goodness. Despite being the character to whom the title of the novel refers as a figure of good, Stuart is marginal in the plot, as much as he is present in the main scenes and often involuntarily involved in the twists of the plot, but does not act concretely. With regard to this kind of characters in Murdoch's writings, Ramanathan observes, "The marginality of these figures is crucially connected with the nature of good. It is as if good can be itself only if it is on periphery of the world of behavior" (3).

It has been said that there is not only one good apprentice in this novel, but two, precisely identical with the two brothers Edward and Stuart. Edward's experience of guilt before, and of desperate search for redemption after, can be compared to a journey from life to death, and then back to a new, different life. In all this, Murdoch clearly underlines and narrates the evolution of the character. All the events Edward goes through in the novel (the stay at Seegard, the encounter with Jesse and the help he gives to Midge) leave a mark on his path towards redemption and self-forgiveness, enabling therefore, the evolution of his character, "I haven't any being left, it's all been scraped away. I'm a raw rotting wound. It seemed as if something was happening, but I was having a dream, now I'm back in reality" (511). If frenzied, tormented Edward can be seen as the Prodigal son of Christian mythology, then Stuart embodies his eldest, unselfish brother. But, as Murdoch well shows at the end of the novel, it is thanks to Stuart's direct or indirect intervention that things come to place again, for Edward, Midge, Harry and Thomas as well. One of the most important aspects, therefore, is the relationship Stuart has with Edward and in particular the way in which Murdoch has been able to demonstrate how being and doing good, in the end, works. By setting Stuart against the story of Edward's dark guilt and suffering, Murdoch makes room for all that escapes the attempt to control or modify. Through the opposition between Edward (the suffering self, the prodigal son) and Stuart (the disciple of the good, or, better, the good apprentice), Murdoch thus leads us into "a full examination of human consciousness", a consciousness that, through guilt and suffering, "progressively follows a path toward inward and outward awareness" (Dipple 208-9). Murdoch's belief in the non-existence of God, a concept that has to be replaced with that of good, and her steadfast faith in the contingent are a fundamental part of the never ending power of the good, which is shown and described in this novel, especially through the figures of the good apprentices, Edward and Stuart:

> There is no hope […] Life is horror; suffering and meaningless pain are real. But despite that, a pure good walks through the world, broken by it over and over again, but not degraded or changed (161).

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