

Psychoanalytical Criticism: A Critical Study with reference to Iris Murdoch's *A Severed Head*

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Abstract

This paper presents psychoanalytical criticism in Iris Murdoch's novel *A Severed Head*. It deals with the introduction which includes background of Iris Murdoch's life, her works, theory of psychoanalysis and also the issues presented by Murdoch regarding incest, extramarital relationship, marital absurdity, switching of partners in almost every conceivable way, multiple falseness and Freudian views. Murdoch presents her positive views regarding these issues. It is a satirical novel which presents comedy of manners. The absence of children in the novel also advances the theme of sterility. One of the most important questions which Murdoch presents is Oedipus complex. She has also illustrated how power controls bodies in case of incest through her wit and humour. People's attempt to achieve a state of happiness is been presented through a rich canvas in her stories.

Keywords: Marital absurdity, incest, psychoanalysis, Oedipus complex, comedy of manners

Introduction

The full name of Irish born British writer and philosopher, Iris Murdoch, was Dame Jean Iris Murdoch (1919-1999). Murdoch was the daughter of Wills John Hughes Murdoch who was an English government servant and Alice Richardson, an Irish woman. Her father was a cavalry officer in World War I. Murdoch was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1919. She studied classics, ancient history and philosophy at Somerville College, Oxford University during 1930s. She held a postgraduate fellowship in philosophy under Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1947. During the World War II, Murdoch was an active member of the Communist Party but soon she became disappointed with its ideology and resigned. She worked as an assistant principal at the Treasury and then for the United Nations Relief Organization (UNRA) during 1944-46 in Austria and Belgium. In the year 1948, she was selected as a fellow of St. Anne's College, Oxford. There she worked as a tutor until 1963. She received Honorary Degree of D.Litt from the University of Bath (1963), University of Cambridge (1993) and Kingston University (1994).

Though Murdoch had an affair with Conetti, in 1956 she married John Bayley. Murdoch was a very prolific author and authored 26 novels, 5 books of philosophy and countless articles, published lectures and reviews. The first novel written by Murdoch was *Under the Net* (1954). Several of her works like *An Unofficial Rose* and *The Bell* also *A Severed Head* have been adapted for the screen. She received major prizes like The James Tait Black Memorial Prize

(1973), The Whitbread Literary Award for *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974) and the coveted Booker Prize for *The Sea, the Sea* (1978). She delivered lectures based on philosophy at the University of Edinburgh and these were published under the title *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* in 1992. She was awarded with The Golden PEN Award in 1997 by English PEN for “a Lifetime’s Distinguished Service to Literature”.¹ *Under the Net* which was Murdoch’s first published novel has been selected as one of the modern library’s 100 best English language novels of the 20th century in the year 1998. The Times ranked Murdoch twelfth on a list of “The 50 greatest British Writers since 1945”² in the year 2008.

Murdoch’s novels follow the tradition of the novelists like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, George Eliot and Proust. Apart from this, her novels/writings reflect an abiding love for Shakespeare. In 2001, after long research and authorized access to journals, Peter J. Conradi published a biography of Iris Murdoch. John Updike observed that “There would be no need to complain of literary biographies.....if they were all as good.” Murdoch was once asked a question in an interview as to whether a novelist should be a teacher or a moralist. Murdoch’s response was that a novelist must be a moralist because ‘teacher’ suggests something rather more didactic in tone. On the other hand, she argued, a novelist is bound to express value. The novelist should be conscious of the fact that in one sense he/she is compulsory a moralist. They differ in the extent to which they should reflect morals in their work. Further she says:

“I certainly do reflect and put this reflection into my works, whether or not with success. The question is how to do it. If you can do it well, you had better not to do it at all. If you have strong moral feelings, you may be in difficulties with your characters because you may want them to be less empathetic than you are yourself.”³

So, she believes that a novelist must reflect some moral values through his/her work. She also admits that it is difficult to portray goodness in art.

What is Psychoanalytic Criticism?

Psychoanalytic criticism is a theory begun by Sigmund Freud. In recent years, this theory has also been made by feminist scholars like Juliet Mitchell, Julia Kristeva and so on. Basically, the two prominent figures of this theory were Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Psychoanalysis theory describes human mind and the mechanisms by which sexes are formed and divided. The most influential theory of Freud is Oedipus complex. It refers to the development of sexual identity in young boys. The male child develops a desire to eliminate the father and he also wants to become the sexual partner of the mother. Thus, due to jealousy they even unconsciously wish for the death of their father. This concept is considered as “a desire for sexual involvement with the parent of opposite sex, which produces a sense of competition with the parent of the same sex and a crucial stage in the normal development process.” Many of the modern writers are also greatly influenced by Freud’s theory. Further, Lacan developed psychoanalysis theory based on Saussure’s theory of language. Lacan re-interpreted Freud and stated that Freud should not be taken literally but should be interpreted symbolically. Lacan describes psychoanalysis as “the study of the traces left in the psyches of individuals as a result of their conscription into systems of kinship.”

There are certain works based on this theory like *Hamlet* by Shakespeare, *Oedipus Rex*, *Alice* by Lewis Carol, *Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence etc. Freud also states that the play *Hamlet* is a classic example of dramatizing a psychopathological character. In the “closest

scene”, Hamlet is presented as scolding his mother because of having sex with Claudius and at the same time he wishes that he can be at Claudius’ place. Here, we observe that adultery and incest are the things which he loves and hates about his mother. Ophelia’s madness after the death of her father is also her reaction to the death of her lover, her father. According to Norman Holland:

Freud’s “most famous contribution to Shakespeare scholarship was to point out Hamlet’s Oedipus complex” whereas *Hamlet* “seems almost to have helped Freud to formulate the conception of Oedipus complex which turned out to be the cornerstone of orthodox psychoanalysis.”⁴

This theory of psychoanalysis can also be applied to *Alice* by Lewis Carol. According to some psychoanalysts, in *Alice* Carol focused on sexual symbolism which reveals his own repressed sexuality. According to Goldschmidt, there are some events in *Alice* like, “penetrating” the rabbit hole, the small door, the lock and the key. These are all “colourful” symbols of the act of sex which can be interpreted as proof of the “presence, in subconscious of an abnormal emotion of considerable strength.” Through this psychoanalysis theory the complexities of Carol’s relationship with his fiction is reflected. Thus, we cannot deny that psychoanalysis remains a milestone in the interpretation of the work *Alice*. The work of D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, is also a remarkable work based on Freud’s theory. Lawrence tried his best to universalize the Freudian concept. In *Sons and Lovers*, Paul’s emotional dealings with his mother show Freud’s psychological theory- Oedipus complex. The novel is divided into two parts. In the first part, Lawrence portrays the family life of Morels, childhood growths, problems etc. The split between father and mother is also portrayed. The later part focuses on the theme of struggle for Paul’s soul between his mother and Miriam. Paul tries to escape from the labyrinth of Oedipus complex but he fails in the same way as mythical Oedipus fails. Lawrence also tries to universalize the theory by providing a link between two worlds- modern and ancient.

The dominant theme of Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* is Oedipus complex. The concept centres round the protagonist Paul Morel and his mother’s relation. Mrs. Morel has three sons among which Paul is shown to have most serious Oedipus complex. When Paul grows up, he fails to establish a healthy relationship with any of the girl who comes in his life. He begins to fulfil his mother’s wish and remains with his mother like a shadow. As if Paul is a romantic hero, he watches every physical movement of his mother. He also enjoys her dressing up with plenty of delight and sensual pleasure. Lawrence states, “Paul loved to sleep with his mother, sleep till most perfect in spite of hygienists, when it is shared with a beloved....”⁵ Through these examples we can say that a person’s suppressed desires and dreams lead to develop the Oedipus complex. Unconscious desires motivate people to act accordingly. Freud believed people are “simply actors in the drama of (their) own minds, pushed by desires, pulled by coincidence. Underneath the surface, our personalities represent the power struggle going on deep within us.”

A Severed Head

A Severed Head, the fifth published novel of Murdoch, chronologically lies between *The Bell* and *An Unofficial Rose*. The novel uses a first person narrator to track the journey of the protagonist. The novel presents highly materialistic Western family. The author has used the elements of suspense and surprise and thereby keeps both the reader and narrator in the dark about the route’s course, its landmarks and its likely end. The characters who are involved in the

novel represent a strong urge for liberty, life and love. Due to this strong urge, the relationships keep on changing between the characters. The book demands intellectual reaction rather than emotional response. According to Bran Nicol, it is “a story of disempowerment.”⁶ The main concepts that Murdoch has presented in *A Severed Head* are - art and morality, freedom, love biography, failure of marital relations/marriage etc. Murdoch has woven these concepts with the help of wit and humour. She has depicted the story of the novel with the use of symbol and characterization. She wishes to present a novel concept and a new description for each of her novels. Honor Klein, an anthropologist, is the ‘severed head’ of the title. According to R.Rabinovitz and A.S.Byatt,

“Moral behaviour is perceived differently by each proselyte in the novel. Murdoch shows that the responsibility for moral action lies with an individual’s acceptance of love which frees him for power as victim or victor.”⁷

In Iris Murdoch’s literary fiction, love is considered to be one of the central themes. Murdoch is also “best known for her stories regarding ethical and sexual themes”. In her novels, love is reflected in various forms and extents. The primary focus of Murdoch in her novels is – human relationships. For modern man, relationships are lesser important. Every relationship of modern man is based on either ‘give and take’ or ‘profit and loss’ strategy. Murdoch presents her inner worries through one of the characters of the novel- Georgie, when she says, “No one is essential to anyone”.

Moreover, Oedipal motives are also reflected in her novels “where the people are tied up in various relationships which are half dark to them.”⁸ The Encyclopedia defines “incest” as: “Any sexual activity between closely related persons [often within the immediate family] that is illegal or socially taboo. The type of sexual activity and the nature of relationship between persons that constitutes a breach of law or social taboo vary with culture and jurisdiction. Some societies consider it to include only those who live in the same household, or who belong to the same clan or lineage; other societies consider it to include those related by adoption or marriage”.⁹

A Severed Head can be considered as the first novel where incest has been openly handled. Some critics believed that in her novels, Murdoch has depicted her own experiences as well as thinking about Freudian knowledge. Sigmund Freud had coined the word psychoanalytic criticism – from his own theory of psychoanalysis. It is modified in the 20th century to discover connections between the artist and what he or she actually creates. In her philosophical and literary works Murdoch has explored Freud’s ideas. Freud referred to Oedipus complex – the terms which has been coined from the classical Greek tragedy Oedipus Rex by Sophocles. This complex shows desire for incest and incest is always a socio-moral taboo. In *A Severed Head*, Murdoch presents oedipal complex. The work also deals with a deeper moral inquiry. In this novel, author presents relationship between siblings as well as other forms of relationships. Incestuous relationships have been presented through various relations in the novel.

1. The relationship between Palmer, a psychologist and his half-sister Honor, an anthropologist. They share a sexual relationship.
2. The relationship between Antonia and her brother-in-law is also one such example.
3. The Oedipal complex is also reflected through the relationship between Antonia and Martin.

Martin, the protagonist of the novel, is forty one years old. He is an Anglo Irish wine buff and an amateur historian. In the character of Martin, Murdoch has woven the instincts of

modern man. Martin is under the impression that he can seize a beautiful wife like Antonia and also a delightful mistress like Georgie. He accepts Georgie as “a mistress not a master.” But for Martin, Antonia, Georgie or his illegitimate child, none is important. Though he is childless, there is no sympathy in him as a father or as a human being. Martin is a man who can love two women at a time. He says, “I do love you so much, I just loved Georgie too.” (*A Severed Head*, p.77)

It proves that he is truthful to none. Though Martin has married to Antonia, he misleads Georgie about the success of marriage. He admits himself:

“In almost every marriage there is a selfish and an unselfish partner. A pattern is set up and soon becomes inflexible, of one person always making the demands and one person always giving way. In my 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.” (*A Severed Head*, p.11)

Antonia is five years elder than Martin and she is like a mother figure to him. It represents the first type of incestuous relationship - “metaphoric”. It is because Martin and Antonia are not blood relatives. They don’t have children and enjoy their quiet marriage. Antonia takes care of Martin like a mother. Actually, Antonia substitutes his mother for Martin. This is also reflected in Antonia’s speech when she utters;

“... It’s a partly my being so much older and being a sort of mother to you. I’ve kept you from growing up...” (*A Severed Head*, p. 24)

Martin’s marriage with Antonia was without emotional understanding and it is described as “simply at a standstill.” It is because both of them don’t want to sacrifice their own selves and give time, love and trust to another. For Antonia, it becomes the reason for her emotional dissatisfaction. It provokes Antonia to establish a physical relationship with her psychologist, Palmer Anderson. According to P.P. Punja:

“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. Someone 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 extra-marital relationships.”¹⁰

Due to this emotional dissatisfaction, Antonia demands divorce. It is the only way for her to get the licence to liberty.

“A Marriage is an adventure in development”. (*A Severed Head*, p.24)

Murdoch breaks the taboo of incest through various relationships. She has portrayed incestuous relations within a group of educated as well as civilized people. For instance, Honor Klein who is like a teacher figure, shares bed with his half brother Palmer. When the novel begins, we find that Honor has control over his half-brother Palmer. On the other hand, Palmer has control over Martin and Antonia. Here, we also find that psycho-analyst himself luxuriates in incest. Honor refers to alchemist when she describes herself as a “severed head.” It is because alchemy converts base metal into gold and ultimately to philosopher’s stone. For Martin, Honor becomes a taboo. Here, to cite Freud:

“Persons or things which are regarded as taboo may be compared to objects charged with electricity; they are the seats of tremendous power, which may be liberated with destructive effect if the organisms which provoke its discharge are too weak to resist it; the result of a violation of a taboo depends partly on the strength of the magical influence inherent in the taboo object or person partly on the strength of the opposing “mana” of the violator of the taboo.”¹¹

As the novel progresses, Martin falls in love with Honor. She becomes goddess for Martin but Honor opposes his confession of love saying that it will not last in the real world. Honor compares herself to a severed head. It is the Freudian image of Medusa’s head for feared female genitals. The head which is the representation of conscious part of human body, has been severed from “the sexual impulse of which we are not fully conscious.”¹² When Martin goes to Remembers, Alexander, in his studio, shows him a bronze head of Antonia. At this particular juncture, Martin describes Antonia thus:

“It was in a light golden bronze and showed a youthful forward – darting Antonia that was not quite familiar to me: a champagne – toasted dancing- on-the-table Antonia that seemed to belong to another age. The shape of the head was excellent, however, and the great flowing pile of hair at the back, wildly tressed and somewhat Grecian: and the big rapacious slightly parted lips, these I knew. But it was a younger, gayer, more keenly directed Antonia than my own”. (*A Severed Head*, p. 42)

Murdoch, here, represents Antonia’s beauty and Alexander’s adoration for Antonia’s beauty. But Martin does not like Antonia’s head without body. Martin sees Alexander’s sculpted heads, “a technique for discovering more about what is real.” Alexander answers, “So have you. It is called morality.” Their conversation follows: “I don’t think I like a sculpted head alone,” I said. “It seems to represent an unfair advantage, an illicit and incomplete relationship.” “An illicit and incomplete relationship”, said Alexander. “Yes. Perhaps an obsession. Freud on Medusa. The head can represent the female genitals, feared not desired.” (*A Severed Head*, p. 42)

Here, we can see a clear influence of Freud on Murdoch. Byatt states that, “Murdoch uses the contrasting Freudian and Sartrean concept of the images while Freud saw the severed Medusa’s head as a symbol of fear of being observed.”¹³ (Byatt, 1976:27)

Martin has an extra marital relationship with Georgie. He told Georgie not to tell anyone about their relation and when she becomes pregnant she had an abortion. She suffers silently but she loves Martin and lives with a hope that someday he will acknowledge her publically. Martin talks to Georgie about Palmer and says that Palmer is good at setting people free. Georgie replies:

“Anyone who is good at setting people free is also good at enslaving them, if we are to believe Plato. The trouble with you, Martin, is that you are always looking for a master.”

From these words, we come to know about Georgie’s judgement about people, her observation, her individuality. Martin sees himself as a kind and good person but he is unable to see this side of his nature. According to Milada Frankova:

“Love, thus defined as seeing the other is also necessary for freedom, which Murdoch understands as the experience of accurate vision free from fantasy rather than exercise of will. Attention for Murdoch means unselfing, while attention to self in order to gain self knowledge amounts to indulging in a delusion.”

After getting divorced from Martin, Antonia establishes relationship with Palmer. Yet Martin has not revealed anything about his relation with Georgie to Antonia. One day Honor Klein reveals this secret to Antonia and Anderson. When Antonia and Palmer ask Martin about Georgie; he protects himself thus:

“I won’t be guilty or worried, I’ll be raving mad”, I said, “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?” (*A Severed Head*, p.78)

Through above mentioned comments of Martin we can see that he lives in his own dreamy world but it is fictitious and far away from reality and truth. Martin gets angry on Honor and come to scold her. When Martin comes, he finds Honor with a Japanese Samurai Sword. Honor doesn’t allow him to touch the sword as it is spiritually symbolic to her. When Martin asks her to show her skill with the use of that Samurai Sword, she takes two table napkins, throws them in the air and cuts the napkin. This episode is also very symbolic. Through the use of sword and neatly cut pieces of napkins, Murdoch presents the splitting relations between Antonia and Anderson, Martin and Antonia and Martin and Georgie. During this physical assault Martin comes closer to Honor. He feels a great desire of love for her. From that very moment he starts loving Honor desperately. Martin feels that he is completely a changed person and he is under the impression that now he is able to differentiate between real love and shadow love. He says:

“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, troubled me comparatively....None of this, on the other hand, made me doubt that now I loved her. Yet it was in truth a monstrous love 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 humour, a love practically devoid of personality.” (*A Severed Head*, p.p. 125-126)

Martin cannot resist himself and wants to see Honor. As he completely falls in love with Honor, he goes to Cambridge at Honor’s house. Martin thinks that she will be alone at her house. He wants to surprise her with her appearance. As he reaches there, he rings the bell but no one responds. From a French window, he enters into Honor’s house with a great difficulty. He opens the door of Honor’s bedroom and finds that she is sharing her bed with her half brother Palmer. Murdoch describes the scene thus:

“... She was sitting side ways with the sheet over her legs. Upwards she was as tawny and as naked as ship’s figurehead. I took in her pointed breasts, her black shaggy head of hair, her face stiff and expressionless as carved wood. She was not alone. Beside the bed a naked man was hastily engaged in pulling on a dressing gown. It was immediately and indubitably apparent that I had interrupted a scene of lovers. The man was Palmer.” Seeing this, Martin realizes that Honor does not exist only in relation to his dreams, “As free and alone, as waiting in her still slumbering consciousness for me, reserved, separated, sacred” (*A Severed Head*., p. 170)

Martin finds stark reality and i.e., the incestuous love scene between Palmer and his half sister. This shock has an amazing effect on Martin. Earlier, he was imagining Honor as a goddess but now he sees her as a woman, an individual, separate from his fantasy. This scene has woke

him up to reality. Murdoch in her essay "Against Dryness" states, "reality is not a given whole and reality is incomplete." Throughout the novel, we see that in each of his relationship, Martin has to come out of his fantasies and has to accept the reality. Now Martin actually perceives the interpretation of Honor's words, "everything in this life has to be paid for, and love too has to be paid for." Palmer, being a Freudian analyst, gives sympathy to Martin:

"The psyche is a strange thing and it has its own mysterious methods of restoring a balance. It automatically seeks its advantage, its consolation. It is almost entirely a matter of mechanics, and mechanical models are the best to understand it with."

According to Byatt, "He seems to be unaware of what lies outside this mechanism, what can save the man from being captured by an absolute form or purpose."¹⁴ (Byatt, 1976:25)

As Martin has caught Palmer with Honor, Palmer feels guilty and it makes him rude towards Antonia. Antonia finds a drastic change in Palmer's behaviour and she decides to leave palmer. Now, again she wants to live with Martin. When Antonia returns to Martin, Martin feels "All's well that ends well." When Anderson comes to take Antonia with him, a small quarrel takes place between Martin and Anderson. Anderson returns without Antonia. According to P.P. Punja,

"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 goddess of desire) husband Hephaestus (the lamesmith 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."¹⁵

Meanwhile, Georgie develops her feelings for Alexander. Martin hurts a lot and tries to mislead Georgie by giving her mendacious hope of marriage. Martin feels desolation at Georgie's decision. Martin was not ready for another betrayal. Georgie craves for her freedom and petitions:

"Martin, I'm miles nearer the edge than 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 let me be. The untruthfulness infected everything. I must breakout a little. Do you see at all?" (*A Severed Head.*, p. 103)

After this, once again we find a twist in the novel. Antonia informs Martin that she loves Alexander deeply. Martin is shocked with her words and says:

"What a fool you must both think me. No I didn't know of course I realized you were very fond of each other. But I didn't know this. Do you imagine I would have tolerated it? How little you know me." (*A Severed Head*, p. 190)

At this point, Antonia reveals everything to Martin that Alexander was his lover before marriage. They have been in contact after marriage also but when Antonia falls in love with Palmer, Alexander feels depressed and hurt. To revenge on Antonia, he has decided to marry Georgie. But Alexander realizes that he can only love Antonia, no one else. When Georgie comes to know all these, she tried to kill herself. From all these, Martin comprehends that both the women – Georgie and Antonia only love his brother not him. He contemplates:

"I was becoming dazed and stupid. I felt like an empty vessel that is struck again and again. Even Georgie's love was being taken away from me. It would take little now to make me believe that

Georgie had loved Alexander all along. At any rate, she had been waiting for Alexander all along. Yet she sent me her dear hair.”

Martin’s relationship either with Antonia or Georgie not worked because it was profane sex. He never knew with whom to unite. Isaiah Smithson describes Martin-Antonia relationship as “uroboric ego” to “great mother”. Instead of husband wife relationship, it looks as if it were a mother child relationship because Antonia is five years elder than Martin. Martin always sees a mother image in Antonia. That’s why Antonia never feels emotionally and spiritually satisfied with him. The failure of marital relationship drives both- Martin and Antonia to establish extra – marital relationships.

After the realization of true love, Martin who was not ready to take responsibilities of what he has done, commits everything in front of Honor. Martin says at last: “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 convention about where it is to be found.” (*A Severed Head*, p.185) But Honor says that this love is not reality of their life, it will not last in the real world. 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 reality.” 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

From this very point, Martin’s whole world started disintegrating. Suddenly Martin feels 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.”¹⁶

A free human being is the one who has an ability to face the reality and accept the reality. At the end, Alexander and Antonia have confessed their secret love in front of society and they move to Rome with a view to start a new life. Palmer, Georgie and Honor are also leaving. To confirm whether Honor is leaving or not, Martin comes to London airport. Martin describes his last moments thus: “It was like a waiting room for The Last Judgement”. (*A Severed Head*, p.200) Now 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.” When Martin returns home, to his surprise, he finds Honor there, waiting for him. In shape of Honor, Martin finds his true soul-mate.

As the novel is comedy it ends with the union of two lovers. It shows real human freedom. In Murdoch’s novel, what is freedom at the beginning can be imprisonment after. The real freedom for mankind is the realization of inner truth. Murdoch’s protagonist has spent his whole life in a fake marriage bond as well as in a shadowy extra marital affair to know the real meaning of true love and also in search of faithful relations. According to Murdoch, the real human freedom is the journey of every character from illusion to reality, from lie to truth and from bondage to reality.

Conclusion

Thus, the novel is full of cross-structured human relationship. Murdoch has presented intimate relationships in a very complex manner as a part of human relationship. Though Murdoch discusses sex, she has also presented the darker side of sex including promiscuity and incest. According to Peter Conradi, Murdoch is an “anti puritan” and Puritanism for her is by no means sexual. She has presented complexity of sexual relationships. As a true humanist, Murdoch presents human freedom, freedom of thought, freedom of civil liberties, freedom of speech and freedom of choice but at the same time she has also presented the harsh realities of the human life and relations. Human freedom means not only physical freedom but also emotional independence and psychological and mental freedom. Though she has written about homosexuality and incest, she neither offered an explanation or solution nor judged it. According to Elizabeth Dipple,

“Under the amusement of the game, the sliding untrustworthiness of all the characters projects the reader into a terrifying world where he learns the frailty and vanity of all people by laughing, if he can.”¹⁷

A Severed Head “was a harbinger of the Sexual Revolution that was to hit Britain in the 1960s and 70s”.

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