

A Quest for Enlightenment: An Indian Philosophical Reading of Iris Murdoch's *The Green Knight*

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Abstract

Spiritual crisis seems to be the problem of the post-modern psyche, in general, and Murdoch's characters, in particular. This paper intends to highlight the influence of the Indian text, *The Bhagavad Gita*, on Iris Murdoch's penultimate novel, *The Green Knight*. The authors have attempted to study Bellamy James in detail. The central concept analyzed in this paper is Bellamy's erroneous notion of spirituality. He decides to move into world of solitude in a mistaken effort to achieve enlightenment. Many critics highlight Murdoch and novels as pessimistic and her characters representing hopelessness. On the contrary, this paper, using the concept of the Bhagavad Gita, will prove how Murdoch's voice resonates with the profound truths irrespective of her seemingly existential plots. This paper aims to make a novel contribution to Murdoch's studies, drawing on some fascinating sources (including the original commentary from the Iris Murdoch Archives, London).

Keywords: Spirituality, Realization, Knowledge, illusion and *Bhagavad Gita*

Introduction

Iris Murdoch is one of the most well-known British novelist-cum-philosophers. She is known to have written twenty-six novels and five major philosophical works during her literary career. *Green Knight*, Murdoch's penultimate novel, is considered one of the most outstanding works in her writing career. It is known for its complex plot and also its closeness to the allegorical medieval poem, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.' It is said that art, in its highest form, is one of the ultimate means to spirituality. Iris Murdoch says "These arts, especially literature and painting, show us the peculiar sense in which the concept of virtue is tied on to the human condition" (Murdoch *SG* 77). As an avid Murdochian reader cum researcher I believe that Murdoch consciously furnishes 'good art' which according to her makes the readers attend to the 'minute and absolutely random detail of the world.' Murdoch also proves to her readers (through many characters in her novels) that it is sometimes the most uncommon or the normal that has in it the highest form of good.

Certain characters in Murdoch's novels are either on the periphery or the brink. Most of them are unable to strike a chord of balance. They always seem to be in a dilemma about which path they need to take. The minor characters, mostly, are the guiding light for the others in

the novel. This paper intends to study one such minor character, Bellamy, in the novel, *The Green Knight*.

Bellamy wants to lead a spiritual and ascetic life away from the hustle and bustle of the mundane world. He, therefore, writes many letters to Father Damien, seeking the true meaning of spirituality. He wants to renounce the world, give up this comfortable life, and lead the life of a mendicant. Though he portrays to be a holy saint, most critics consider him a failed character who does not understand what spirituality is all about. Conradi says that “he is an endearing holy fool who is not at home in the world” (Murdoch, SA 358). Nevertheless, in the end, he acquires the knowledge and wisdom of true spirituality.

Sometimes, the most challenging thing in life is to be simple. There is abundant beauty in simplicity, which we generally miss out on. Simple living and high thinking are what we should aim for. On the other hand, human beings primarily strive for success, happiness, fame, and sometimes spirituality (which are only temporary), and when they do not achieve what they want, it is a matter of immense sorrow, regret, and unhappiness. This regret and unhappiness drive them to retreat into spirituality, which they assume is happiness's pinnacle point. In the novel *The Green Knight*, Bellamy James is one such character. At the beginning of the novel, Murdoch describes Bellamy James as a character who was “. . . by no means 'old', but had decided in the middle of life's journey to abandon the world and become some religious person” (Murdoch, *TGK* 1).

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna says that renouncing the world does not attribute to true spirituality. He says, “Those ignorant of the true self may attempt to renounce worldly actions, but at the inner level, they still have the turmoil resulting from their attachment and desires” (Hawley 43). Similarly, Bellamy wants to lead a religious life but does not want to give up worldly pleasures. While discussing Bellamy, Louise says, “He can give up the world but he will not miss a free jaunt!” (Murdoch, *TGK* 2). He aims to attain spirituality while satisfying his worldly desires and attachments. Many characters in the novel refer to Bellamy in a seriously mocking tone. Moy says, “I'd rather become a nun.' 'Like Bellamy.’ (Murdoch, *TGK* 19). He does not take his spirituality seriously, and therefore he becomes an object of mockery by others. Bellamy, as mentioned earlier, found simplicity amazingly difficult. He makes half-hearted attempts to find the truth of spirituality and thereby fails. He plunges headlong without even trying to make even a half-sincere attempt to find out the true meaning of spirituality or religion. Murdoch says

“Bellamy found simply living a task of amazing difficulty . . . he had never really mastered the art, apparently so simple for others, of passing the time. His failure to find a *métier*, to find a task which was his task, caused him continuous anxiety, nor did it occur to him to emulate the majority of mankind who positively resign themselves, seeing no alternative, to alien and unsatisfying work”.

Throughout the entire novel, Bellamy never intends to find a genuine reason for his life. Instead, he unknowingly accepts that giving up the world is what spirituality is all about. In Murdoch's novels, these characters, like Bellamy James, James Arrowby, Henry Forbes, and Cato Forbes, are significant, though they sometimes turn out to be minor characters because they have a great insight to give us (as readers) into Murdoch's thoughts. They help us delve deeper into the psyche of the human mind and the reason for performing specific actions, sometimes knowingly and sometimes unknowingly. In Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha: An Indian Poem*, Govinda echoes Bellamy James. He also renounces the world and gives up

all his worldly possessions to seek the path of self-realization, along with his friend Siddhartha, though he is initially hesitant about it.

Bellamy, while conversing with Father Damien, expresses his concerns about spirituality. Father explains the true nature of spirituality. He says, 'You speak of 'preparing yourself,' but the surrender of a few worldly pleasures conveys no picture of the austerity of the monastic life' (Murdoch, *TGK* 39). Merely giving up worldly possessions does not amount to any religiousness. Father Damien also cautions him, saying, "The pride you so evidently feel in these renunciations may render them valueless" (Murdoch, *TGK* 39). In the *Gita*, Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that actions performed with any desires render themselves valueless. We are always looking for an external means or sign to guide us on the path of spirituality without realizing that the truth is that the true guiding light lies within. Father explains to Bellamy, saying, "Your wish for a revelation or a 'great sign' should be put away, it is a mere stumbling block" (Murdoch, *TGK* 39). We should perform our daily actions without expecting any results thereof. In the novel, Father Damien also explains the importance of performing actions without having any expectations or desires in his letter to Bellamy. He says, "You say you desire its peace and its joys – but this peace is quite unlike worldly peace, and its joys unlike worldly joys: such things are won only through deep pain in which there is no element of self-satisfaction" (Murdoch, *TGK* 39-40).

By abandoning his beloved dog, Anax, and giving up his home, Bellamy assumes that he is on the path of spirituality. However, his mistaken desire for the so-called spirituality, which according to him, lies in giving up selective worldly possessions, does not allow him to look at the world beyond himself. He lives in his private dream world of his mistaken notion of renunciation. He is pretty certain that he wants to give up the world, but he is certainly unsure how to do it. He wants to tread the path of enlightenment but does not seem to find a guiding light. Ultimately, he finds solace in Father Damien as the source of guidance. Even after taking refuge in Father and considering him as his spiritual mentor (*guru*), he is still in doubt. Sometimes, he wonders if he is on the right path to realization. This can be seen when he reads the letters that he has written to Father Damien. He realizes that his replies to Father Damien were written in haste which now seemed stupid and silly. He wonders, "Was not his letter 'picturesque,' itself a case of 'romanticism' and 'neurotic erotic self-indulgence'? It showed no evidence of hard thinking (Murdoch, *TGK* 42). He slowly becomes aware that only when we look beyond the self can we perceive realism. In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch says, "The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one" (Murdoch, *SG* 42).

Bellamy realizes that he never really cared for anyone except himself. He says, "He had not thought enough about Harvey. Perhaps he hadn't really thought about anyone except himself" (Murdoch, *TGK* 76). In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna also talks about the deceiving illusion that binds us to the world. It conceals reality and projects the world, an illusion as the real. The wise are those who can distinguish the real from the seemingly unreal.

Bellamy's spirituality and seeking enlightenment are questioned due to his duplicity. He cannot give up his desires but seeks the light of spiritual knowledge. He seems to be an ignorant person who wants to abandon actions as they cause suffering and attain self-knowledge through inaction. Swami Nikhilananda, in his commentary on the *Gita*, says that "Such a person, though inactive, is active, since his mind is full of ideas. A wise man sees inaction in action" (Nikhilananda 132). On the other hand, Bellamy, by giving up his job, flat, pet dog, and most of his other belongings, foolishly assumes that he is on his upon 'the

spiritual road of no return'(Murdoch, *TGK* 45). He later realizes that one can achieve happiness even while performing actions and serving society. He thought the ultimate happiness could be sought only in religion, or the Absolute could be found in mundane activities done with utmost care and selflessness. He thinks about his happiness. He says, "Had he ever really been happy? Perhaps in his very early days as a social worker . . . Why had he given up his work? Because he had been disturbed by religion, by the Absolute". Bellamy was disturbed rather than uplifted by religion, and therefore most characters referred to him as a 'fool.' Some even called him a 'holy fool.' He sometimes wondered what people thought about him. He says, "what's the matter with me, what do people take me for, what do I look like?. . . Harvey had just told him he looked weird" (Murdoch, *TGK* 74). The illusory nature of spirituality that he accepts as reality makes him an eccentric character among the rest. Murdoch says that "The self, where we live, is a place of illusion" (Murdoch, *SG* 66). We are constantly under the spell of illusion, as we often live in the reality of the false reality. In the context of spirituality, we assume that 'giving up the world' is holiness. Father Damien writes to Bellamy, explaining his mistake, which he keeps repeating. Father says, "Your 'yearning for holiness' and 'giving up the world' are still, I fear, mere expressions of feeling, fancies which give you a 'thrill'" (Murdoch, *TGK* 95).

Through her characters, Murdoch makes us realize the inherent goodness latent in all of us. Though most of her characters are failed characters, who do not have a remarkable transformation, they are undoubtedly good characters as they too have at least a spark of enlightenment subtly latent in them, which is the pathway to liberation. Although, of course, they may not achieve liberation or take up renunciation. However, they do attempt to pursue the path of self-knowledge.

Father Damien Damien, by urging Bellamy to seek God only in his soul, insists on finding out the soul's true nature. In the Gita, Krishana enlightens Arjuna on the reality of the *ataman* (soul): He who knows the Self to be indestructible, eternal, unborn, and immutable" is an enlightened one who can seek God within (Nikhilananda 120). Bellamy is mistaken about the notion of spirituality, holiness, and meditation. Thus, he lands himself in a world of self-indulged fantasies rather than a world of morality and virtues. That's the reason Father advises Bellamy to find where his interest in the vocation lies because one can certainly attain realization even through duty. Murdoch says, "An attention which is not just the planning of particular good actions but an attempt to look right away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection, a source of uncontaminated energy, a source of *new* and quite undreamt-of virtue" (Murdoch, *MGM* 23). After a couple of meetings with Father Damien, Bellamy came to realize his folly. What he had thought of as a recourse to spirituality was only leading him into a state of delusion. However, he had already begun to lead a contemplative life ' by giving up life at home, and his job and moving to a small, congested room. Slowly he began to realize the fakeness he seemed to be living in till now. How did he achieve that realization? He gained it through self-reflection. This kind of introspection created the right awareness needed for looking at reality. Murdoch calls this 'attention'. According to Murdoch, attention is the 'attempt to look right away from the self '. The success lies in turning the gaze away from the self in the most arduous circumstances when the guilt keeps enticing the gaze back to the self.

Bellamy was able to acknowledge his fake suicide through 'attention'. Murdoch argues that "Attention is rewarded by the knowledge of the reality" (Murdoch, *SG* 44). Bellamy realizes the fabricated nature of his illusioned state of spirituality. He says, "The idea of giving up the world, which had given him for a time so much life-energy, appeared now as a sort of fake

suicide, a ghastly play-image of his death” (Murdoch, *TGK* 116). This 'falseness-of-heart,' for which he was joyous until now, makes him realize that true spirituality lies in serving society rather than shunning away from it. According to the *Gita*, it is not possible to seek renunciation and worldly desires simultaneously, but one can achieve liberation by performing worldly actions. How is it possible? Lord Krishna says, “One cannot seek at the same time liberation and fulfillment of worldly desires” (128, Nikhilananda). Bellamy is one such character in the novel who half-heartedly seeks liberation. He seems to exile himself from warmth, friendship, and love to prove his craving for renouncing the world, while on the other hand, he seeks gratification by revealing his restlessness when he says that he does not know where to keep his hand at night.

Most of us act or perform actions because we desire something. This desire binds us in a vicious cycle, and we are carving to gratify other desires. This results in a never-ending cycle of desires. Bellamy craves holiness because he wants something in return. He says, “I wanted to escape to solitude and darkness in a holy place” (Murdoch, *TGK* 153). He realized that all that he dreamt of achieving was only a fantasy. Coming to understand reality and being good for the sake of goodness is what true spirituality is. Murdoch, in her philosophy, says that “The only genuine way to be good is to be good 'for nothing'” (Murdoch, *SG* 54). This concept can be compared to what Lord Krishna talks about *nishkama karma* in the *Gita*. He says, “Do your duty, always; but without attachment” (Isherwood 46). At the same time, giving up action is not the path to spirituality. The *Gita* says, “Not by merely abstaining from action does a man reach the state of actionlessness, nor by mere renunciation does he arrive at perfection” (Nikhilananda 104). Bellamy restrains his organs of actions by saying that he wants to be a hermit, but he continues dwelling, in his mind, on the objects of the senses. He says, “I cannot even manage my body; when I go to bed, I do not know where to put my arms” (Murdoch, *TGK* 170). Because he is obsessed with himself, he cannot overcome the illusion of body-mind temporality. Murdoch insists, both in her philosophy and her novels, on overcoming illusion. She says that the self is the place of illusion. Furthermore, therefore, goodness, according to Murdoch, lies in “The attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness” (Murdoch, *SG* 68).

Bellamy is struggling to see the real world. Initially, he tries to find solace in Father Damien, and then later, he feels that Peter Mir is like an angel and a heavenly sign. He is utterly confused about what he wants to seek. He is free to choose his reasons and ways of surveying as these are options open to every man. This act of choosing is what Murdoch calls freedom. Therefore, freedom is the exercise of this lonely will. In the case of Bellamy, he decides to renounce action to attain religious order. Murdoch says, “Freedom which is a proper human goal is the freedom from fantasy” (Murdoch, *SG* 62). Bellamy is unable to keep his senses under check. Father Damien pleads with him to introspect and understand himself by explaining his miserably failed situation to him. Father says, “I beg you to reflect humbly upon your situation, making a serious endeavor to distance yourself from the self-gratification you mistake for God's adoration God” (Murdoch, *TGK* 221). By distancing himself from society, people and work, he has mistakenly deceived himself about the true meaning of spirituality. The self has various ways of deceiving us. It leads us to think that the self is real. We always have to remind ourselves that the truth lies way beyond the self. Only when we focus our attention away from the self and look towards something other than the self can we see the world in the reality of its true consciousness. A true seeker of knowledge learns to engage in actions by detaching himself from the results. Father Damien advises

Bellamy that the only way to happiness is by helping others. He also tells him that “You need society and ordinary friendships. I begin to think you ought not to live alone” (Murdoch, *TGK* 221). Father asks Bellamy to live in the world but not of the world. A ship lives in the water, that is its nature, but when the water enters the ship, it sinks completely. Similarly, we are meant to live in the world, we cannot evade it, but the moment we get so absorbed in the world, we forget our true nature, which leads to our destruction.

Through experience, introspection, and interaction, Bellamy is now able to realize the true nature of reality. He is in a position to transform Peter Mir by explaining to him qualities such as mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. This kind of affirmative transformation in Bellamy instills a kind of hope in the minds of Murdochian readers. Most of her characters start by inhabiting a world of contingency and then slowly move on to the world of form. There is order and balance at the end in contrast to the only chaos in the beginning. Bellamy is one such character. His confusion at the beginning is reformed into realization at the end. Now, he knows what he wants. He thinks, “God is not in my soul, I am in God's soul, or rather I am in the womb of God” (Murdoch, *TGK* 292). Finally, he learns to seek God in his soul.

Most of the time, we are looking and are frantically searching for a personal savior or God to achieve liberation. According to Murdoch, the savior or the one who can uplift us is within us. We have to look within to achieve realization or self-knowledge. Considering Murdoch's moral values and also reflecting on what she said about a 'personal savior' in one of her interviews with Jeffery Meyers, it can be said that she was not for a personal God. Tammy Grimshaw says that's the reason “Murdoch was interested in eastern philosophy and religion in general” (Grimshaw 171). She believed that ‘imageless austerity’ was quite alluring and fascinating. Though we look out for a savior, guide, or *guru* to guide us on the right path, it's always the inner voice that leads us toward self-realization. Bellamy, sometimes, looks for a savior to uplift him, in Father Damien, Peter Mir, and Emil. Peter Mir In the novel, the readers notice that the Father, Emil, and Peter Mir advise him about the dangers of leading a life of a stoic ascetic.

Though Bellamy is not a realized character, he attempts the path of realization. When Peter Mir asks him if he intends to renounce the world to attain spirituality, he replies negatively. Their conversation goes thus:

Are you going into a monastery?’ ‘No. I have decided definitely not to.’ ‘Is that true? Are you sure? You are not entering into any engagement, going away to serve some novitiate or – ?’ ‘No, no. I'm just here. I'll have to find some ordinary job” (Murdoch, *TGK* 333).

He realizes that the true path to goodness lies in coming out from his false, stoic ascetic world and joining the world by participating and working for the upliftment of the good. Bellamy also realizes that all this while he was only caught up in the mire of illusion. He says, “Wanting to be in that monastery was a false way – then suddenly, at last, I found my way – wanting to have goodness is not enough, it is work, finding the way is part of the work, I felt I had come home” (Murdoch, *TGK* 333). A spark of realization strikes Bellamy that all those people whom he had assumed could be saviors were not. He says, “They had been reality, or rather they had seemed to be his reality” (Murdoch, *TGK* 333). He recollects all that Father Damien had written to him in the letters. He admits that he didn't have a strong will that could guide him in the right direction. He also tells Emil that it was merely because of sheer

anguish that he wanted to give up life to go and live in the monastery. Also, he acknowledges that his monastic life was instead a mere pretension. By the end of the novel, Bellamy accepts to live in the world rather than a mere pretentious way of leading a holy life. He begins a new life with Emil. He brings his dog, Aanx, back from Moira. He slowly learns to accept the world the way it is and concludes that one cannot escape actions to attain a contemplative and holy life.

Sometimes, the veil of illusions that surrounds us becomes so strong that they prevent us from seeing reality. “Bellamy suffers from illusions that distance him from reality” (Grimshaw 173). These illusions create a pernicious influence on his life. But, as it is always said, there is light at the end of the tunnel. Similarly, by the end of the novel, there is a complete transformation in this character. Bellamy begins to ruminate over the letters that Father Damien had sent him. He realizes that all that Father Damien warned him was correct. He had sought the invisible through the visible and made idols of the visible, for which he is regretting now. He realizes that giving up his home and life and going away to the mountains is not true renunciation. Living in the world but not living in the world is what spirituality is all about. This knowledge of what is real vs. what is not real that dawns on him help him become a better person living in this world. He is a completely transformed person by the end of the novel. After a few exchanges, in the form of letters, with Father Damien, he understands that all the while, what he was thinking as the true meaning of spirituality was only a hoax. So, he decides to live a comfortable life and attain spirituality thereof. He finally moves away from the ignorance (of seeking God outside) and towards the reality of seeking God within.

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