

Realism and True liberalism in Iris Murdoch's "A Severed Head."

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Abstract

Dame Jean Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) was one of the twentieth century's best and most remarkable British novelists, philosophers, and playwrights. She won The Booker Prize in 1978 for her novel *The Sea, The Sea*. She was the author of twenty-six books. *A Severed Head* (1961) was one of Iris Murdoch's most commercially successful novels, made into a major motion picture of morality, truth, adultery, reality, liberty, and incest within a group of criticized and educated people. It deals with the western bourgeois society. In the highly materialistic west family, ties have broken. Every human being is seeking happiness and freedom and is ready to pay for everything in return except his loss.

Keywords: true, realism, liberalism, society.

Introduction

The plot, subplots, and all the characters are in illusionary relationships of the desire for love, life, and liberty. This becomes the cause of changes in human relations, which affects the life of the protagonist Martin Lynch-Gibbon and his journey from imprisonment to freedom. Bran Nicol explains it as a story of disempowerment". (1) *A Severed Head* was a harbinger of the sexual revolution to hit Britain in the 1960s and '70s. Iris Murdoch analyses 'Freud's theories about male sexuality, desire, and particularly the fear of castration. Set in and around London depicts a power struggle between grown-up

middle-class people destined to be free in the journey of love and life.

A Severed Head moves around the protagonist Martin Lynch Gibbon, a forty-one years old Anglo Irish wine buff and amateur historian who believes that he can possess both a beautiful and more aged wife, Antonia and a delightful mistress Georgie. It never occurs to him that his ongoing affair with a young academic, Georgie, could be immoral because his childless marriage with Antonia has been one of convenience rather than love. Does Martin accept Georgie as "a mistress, not a master."? He feels free from all social bondage. Pressures, rules, and regulations and desires to continue his illegal relationship with her without any commitment and responsibility. When he learns that Georgie is pregnant, it looks to him that the freedom and innocence of their relationship have gone. Martin's love for Georgie is entirely physical, and he discloses his feelings devoted to sexual passion or desire: "I promptly fell in love with her. It may sound ludicrous, but I think I fell in love with her as soon as I saw her bed." (p. 28)

Murdoch points out that human relationships are lesser important for the modern man. Relationships are a business based on profit and loss and a 'give and take' commitment. Through Georgie, Murdoch clears her views: "No one is essential to anyone." None is essential for Martin, Antonia, Georgie, and her unborn child; he is childless but has no love or affection as a father and no sympathy as a

human being for his illegitimate child. Georgie's abortion can not produce mercy in his heart for his unborn child. How harsh and heartless relations are in the modern world. It is hard to believe that a man can love two women at one time as Martin declares, "I do love you so much, I just loved Georgia too." (p. 77) It means he is truthful to none. Martin misleads Georgie about the success of his marriage. Although he married Antonia for social reasons, apart from being childless, their married life is perfectly successful. He admits it himself: In almost every marriage, there is a selfish and unselfish partner. A partner is set up and soon becomes inflexible, with one person making the demands and one person always giving way. In any marriage, I early established myself as the one who took rather than shown. Like Dr. Johnson, I started promptly upon how 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." (p. 11)

Martin lives in an illusionary world about his marriage. Martin- Antonia's relationship is essential because it proves that unions without emotional understanding and complete devotion will fail. Their marriage is "simply at a standstill" because no one wants to sacrifice themselves and give time, love, and trust. In place of the husband-wife relationship, it is more like a mother-child relationship because Antonia is older than Martin by five years. That's why he attracts Georgie, which keeps him growing up. Isaiah Smithson has described the relationship of Martin with Antonia as that of "no boric ego of a great mother." It becomes a significant cause of emotional dissatisfaction for Antonia. This provokes her to make a physical relationship with Palmar Anderson, her psychoanalyst, in search of satisfaction, freedom & love.

Their marriage proves unsuccessful. As P. P. Punja remarks: Marriage has evolved as an institution. It has become a social convention, and it is social, legal, and moral permission to have sexual relations to produce children. However, men and women marry for different reasons. Someone marries because he has been attracted to the skin-deep beauty of the other person. Another person marries for the sake of money and social status. All those marriages performed without emotional compatibility and intellectual understanding is likely to quit. They are likely to result in divorce, constant apathy, quarrels, or extramarital relationships."

Antonia demands divorce because, in her sense, "marriage is an adventure in development." (p. 24) that dynamic progress is absent in her marriage; now, divorce is the only license to liberty. She admits, "Now one just want to tell you the main truth, to tell you that you've got to set me free. This thing has overwhelmed me, Martin. I've simply had to give into it, Honesty, it's all or nothing." (p. 23) And the other side Martin does not disclose his secret about Georgie to Antonia due to feeling free from the burden of cheat and a sense of guilt. Everyone is after blessedness, the most refined enjoyment arising from the purest social, benevolent affections and liberty, the ultimate power to act, speak, or think without externally imposed restraints.

Martin brings Georgie to his home only for a glimpse of freedom. As he says to Georgie, "I need to recover a sense of freedom. Seeing you there will open up a new world." (p. 67) His attempt to show himself free proves a false acknowledgment when he pulls Georgie down out of the window in doubt of his wife's pending arrival. His action demonstrates that he is still thinking of getting back his wife in life. When Palmer and Antonia ask about

Georgie, he does not agree to take responsibility for his actions. He protects himself by saying: 'I won't be guilty or worried, I'll be raring 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? (p. 78) Martin's comments prove that he lives in his dreamy world, which is nothing but fictitious and hallow far away from reality, truth and rationality. He is driven by an intense desire to control his world and the people around him. A Severed Head tells of how this power is systematically stripped away from him and others so that they can face the truth and enjoy absolute human freedom.

Georgie attracts Alexander, Martin's brother. Martin hurts a lot, so he misleads her by giving mendacious hope of marriage because he is not ready for another betrayal. He plans, "It was, with a vengeance, the intimate talk which I had promised Georgie, I would never have, and as I thus betrayed her, I felt on an invigorating increase of my freedom."(p. 98) Georgie hazes that Martin's inclinations are fatal. She craves her freedom from his outstanding filtration. She petitions: Martin, I'm miles nearer the edge that you've got any notion of. I can't tell you how much I've suffered from the lies and feeling so paralyzed. I had to do something of my own. I think twice as natural now. I was stopping being free. And for me, what's stopping existing? I was getting to be no good to either myself or you. You've got to see me, Martin. I'm to blame. I've never been relatively and entirely myself with you; the situation didn't tell me to be. The untruthfulness

infected everything. I must break out a little. Do you see it at all? (p. 103)

Martin knows that he has been exposed to his duplicity by Honor Klein, Palmer's half-sister and a Cambridge anthropologist. He meets Honor in the cellar to take revenge. Martin's terrible fascination for Honor brings horrific revelations and disastrous consequences. This fascination makes nonsense of all previously held notions about his social and sexual being. He resorts to violence and hits Honor. He strikes her thrice, and she takes the violent act heroically, and the scene reverses the situation. Douglas Jefferson rightly remarks: Probability has been disturbed to produce a schematic sardonically conceived reversal of Martin's whole existence and Honor is the part of the design.

During the physical assault, he comes closer to Honor and feels a great desire to love her. From that moment, he starts loving her desperately. He feels completely changed, and now he can distinguish between shadow love and genuine love. He adds Extreme love once it is recognized as the stamp of the indubitable... With two women on my hands already, I had no business falling in love with a third, which troubles me comparatively...

On the other hand, none of this made me doubt that I now loved her. Yet it was, in truth, a monstrous love such as I had never experienced, love out of such depths of self as monsters live in. Love devoid of tenderness and humor, a love practically devoid of personality. (pp. 125–126)

P. P. Punja explains this love relationship in terms of "sex biology. (6) Later, Martin catches Honor in bed with Palmer. The degree of narrative contrivance

reaches its climax, "...the whole Murdochian swindle becomes evident."? The scene jolts Martin into a shocking realization that Honor does not exist only about his dreams, "As free and alone, as waiting in her still slumbering consciousness for me, reserved, separated, sacred." (p. 170). Now, he perceives the real interpretation of Honor's word, "everything in this life has to be paid for." (p. 63) He decides to be silent due to Antonia's happiness. From that day, Palmer behaves violently with Antonia. She violates her relationship with Palmer and reunites with Martin. They are together again, not because they love each other but because they feel secure, free, and real with each other. Martin feels, "All's well that ends well." (p. 149). P. P. Punja is right to say: That the 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 lame smith 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.

Honor helps Palmer to accept reality by facing the truth of his broken relationship with Antonia. Palmer lets her free from his psychological effects. He decides to move with Honor. Alexander informs them about his plan to marry Georgie. An accident occurs and changes the paths of all the characters. Georgie tries to commit suicide; nobody knows the cause except Georgie.

Meanwhile, with her doctor's treatment, they all get time to come closer to one another, especially Antonia with Alexander,

Georgie with Palmer, and Martin with Honor. Martin, who was not ready to take responsibility for what he had done now ready to commit everything in front of Honor after realization of true love, "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 and convention about where it is to be found." (p. 185) But Honor is not regard this love as a reality of their life. 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 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 return.' Yet still, she did not dismiss me (pp. 184–185). She says: Your love for me does not inhabit the real world. Yes, it is love; I do not deny it. But not every pet has a course to run smoothly or otherwise, and this love has no method. Because of what I am and what you saw, I am a terrible object of fascination for you. I am a severed head as primitive tribes....And who knows, but that long acquaintance with a severed head might not lead to strange knowledge. For such knowledge, one would have paid enough. But that is remote from love and remote from ordinary life. As real people, we do not exist for each other. (p. 185)

Antonia confesses to Martin that she has been sleeping with his older brother Alexander since he introduced them. After knowing the truth, Martin's whole world starts disintegrating. Martin's ego is bruised further when Antonia admits to him that she feels held back by their marriage. Her views of marriage as progress conflict with Martin's static opinions on marriage, but

she has nevertheless racked the existence of their marriage. He feels shocked and says, "you mean our marriage never really existed at all." (p. 191) No reason has disclosed that Georgie has committed suicide when she finds out that both brothers loved Antonia, not her. Now he can easily perceive the same pain in his heart which has passed out with Georgie. Suddenly it looks to him that everything has near finished.

Every character in *A Severed Head* is in search of reality, truth, and freedom. In his article, Leonard Kriegel makes much of the idea that Murdoch fails to establish true credibility for her character. He intends to convey what he sees as the unreality of Murdoch's world, rather than of the world we live in. he has not, however, recognized the deliberate staging of the action of the novel, the dual plot, the mythological story which runs parallel with the story of the real world and which is necessary for understanding the real world. Hilda D. Spear observes. Martin considers his present in the light of the event of the past weeks.... He looks upon his role as a husband from a position outside himself. His role as a betrayer of his marriage, his role as a cuckold, and recognizes that they were the only parts he was playing. Now the play is over, and he is no more and no less than his authentic self.'

A natural person who has the ability to face and accept reality is a free human being in a true sense. After receiving their secret love in front of society, Antonia and Alexander moved to Rome to start a new life. Palmer is also ready to leave. Georgia and Honor are with him at the airport. Martin comes to London Airport to confirm Honor's departure. He defines his last moments of waiting as his toughest inquisition; he says "it was like a waiting

room for *The Last Judgment*." (p.200) 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." (p. 206)

Martin returns home and finds Honor there, waiting for him. In the shape of Honor, he finds his true soul mate. Martin accepts this has nothing to do with it. happiness, nothing whatever." (p. 212)

Conclusion

The novel is essentially a comedy, however, and is to end happily through the two remaining lovers coming together. It is a sign of genuine human freedom. In the Murdochian world, what is space, in the beginning, can be imprisonment after, so the realization of inner truth is the absolute freedom for humanity. According to a realistic vision of Murdoch, his protagonist has passed his whole life in a fake marriage bond and in a shadowy extramarital affair to understand the real meaning of true love and search for everlasting and faithful relations. For Murdoch, the journey of every character in the novel from illusion to reality, from lie to the truth, and from bondage to liberty is absolute human freedom according to humanism in the true sense that upholds human freedom, human reason, truth, and reality, individualism, ethical values, social justice, and individuality.

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