



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

ASPECTS OF “ART” AND “MORALITY” IN IRIS MURDOCH’S *THE BLACK PRINCE* (1973).

¹Ranadip Dutta
Research Scholar

Department of English
Assam University, Silchar, Assam, India

Abstract: Iris Murdoch— a British novelist and philosopher of the 20th century is known for her novels where she often brings on her discussions of art and morality thematically. She introduces common human conditions to the unthinkable complexities of life where characters are trapped with sense of duty and choice of free choice. In these dilemmas she continues her quest for beauty and truth and *The Black Prince* is not an exception. This paper aims to explore the discussions of “art” and “morality” in the context of Murdochian ideologies. Moreover, it will try to discuss the search for “love” and “purity” in her particular novel.

Index Terms - Iris Murdoch, Art, Mortality, Purity, Platonic love

The novel *The Black Prince* ends with the murder of Arnold Baffin- a writer and Bradley Pearson – Arnold’s friend had been suspected of the crime and put behind the bar. The novel starts with Arnold Baffin calling Bradley that he killed his wife. Unlike other selected novels for the study, this particular novel comes up with five “postscripts” all other main characters describing the character of Pearson in their own ways. One of the postscripts is written by the titular character the “Black Prince” Bradley Pearson about himself. The postscripts reveal a lot about the author’s views on art and aspects of Bradley Pearson’s character who finally dies out of cancer after living a life caught in the web of morality and artistic vision. Apart from the “postscripts” this novel starts with a “foreword” by Bradley Pearson in the beginning of the novel suggesting that in this novel Murdoch experiments with a unique narrative technique to investigate the views on “art” and “morality”. It can be compared with the later “postscripts”. “The wisdom however, as I trust that I truly think it to be, will not be absent from the story” (11) is a significant line indicating why the themes of “art” and “morality” cannot be separated from Murdoch’s fiction. It can also imply that Murdoch’s views on philosophy have an inerasable impact on her fictions.

This chapter will also give a glimpse of Murdoch as an “author” of both philosophy and fiction. In the “foreword” Bradley says “ All art deals with the absurd and aims at the simple. Good art speaks truth, indeed is truth, perhaps the only truth” (11) is no doubt Murdoch speaking here as a narrative voice. Here Murdoch is the narrative persona of the chief character of the novel. She in Bradley voice speaks about the writer too, that is

I am fifty eight years old. I am a writer. ‘A writer’ indeed is the simplest and also the most accurate general description of me. In so far as I am also a psychologist, an amateur philosopher, a student of human affairs, I am so because these things are a part of being the kind of writer that I am. I have always been a seeker. And my seeking has taken the form of that attempt to tell the truth (12).

This foreword slips to the description of Bradley undoubtedly, but it can’t be denied that Murdoch was speaking about herself in the disguise.

The postscript of Bradley Pearson in the novel *The Black Prince* starts “How little in fact any human being understands about anything the practice of the arts soon teaches one.” (Murdoch 381) and concludes about art as “Art is a vain and hollow show, a toy of gross illusion, unless it points beyond itself and moves ever whither it points.”(Murdoch 392). Bradley had always been in the search of greater aesthetic achievements in his works to his fellow writer and friend Arnold Baffin, who had established himself as a reputed

writer in the society. Arnold Baffin in Bradley's words, "a one-book-a-year man" (Murdoch 23) with whom Bradley "have had differences of opinion with Arnold about his writing". (Murdoch 23). But for Bradley "Art is a kind of artificial memory and the pain which attends all serious art is a sense of that factitiousness. Most artists are the minor poets of their little world, who have only one voice and can sing only one song." (Murdoch 381). However, it is also interesting to notice that Murdoch herself publish a novel in a year. To this point in his "Nice but Not Good" by Murdoch, Bernard Bergonzi, writes in "The New York Review of Books" that he found it "readable, certainly" but an "unimportant book", and suggested that its favourable reception was due to Iris Murdoch's "annual novel" having attained the status of "venerable British institution". (11 April 1968).

The postscript by Rachel - Arnold Baffin's wife in the *The Black Prince* contradicts what one reader reads about her in the novel's story. Murdoch uses the tool of foil character to extend her belief of "Art" and "Morality" through the two main characters in the novel Bradley and Arnold. Rachel who was in high praise of Bradley as a writer seems to change her views in the postscript saying that "His tastes in literature were juvenile" (Murdoch 403). She does not stop there to describe Bradley's artistic sense and calls him as "bore" as the "pretence of being an artist was psychologically necessary to him." (Murdoch 404). However in the novel Rachel on occasions with Bradley states that he has got "dignity" (Murdoch 176) and she can listen to his intellectual words while doing her ordinary things of day to day life. As it is evident when she says, "You'll be talking your intellectual talk together and I'll be washing up and hearing your voices going on and on" (Murdoch 180).

It can be stated from her four postscripts statements that Bradley was a pretentious artist. Her views can also be analysed from her part as the widower and murderer who herself kills her husband Arnold and blames it to Bradley Pearson to the world to believe. Once on the pretext to take the news of Julian- Baffin's daughter with whom Bradley had a love affair, when Bradley reaches Arnold Baffin's house, Arnold "was lying in a red wet stain which has soaked the carpet round about it." (Murdoch 376). Mrs. Baffin could successfully make the jury believe that the death of her husband was due to "artistic rivalry" as she sums up her postscript saying "Artist are notoriously an envious race." (Murdoch 407).

In the paper titled "Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince*: A Valorization of Metafiction as a Virtuous Aesthetic Practice" by Sara Soleimani Karbalaee states that this novel is a quest to find the "art- truth relationship" which is the main paradigm of Murdoch's meta-fictional works towards morality where in exposes in "its quasi-referentiality, its indeterminacy and its existence as a linguistic world". It has a Derridean context of "archi- ecriture" to Murdoch's search for truth in fiction. Murdoch always considered her to be a "moralist".

Good art explains to us how the world is changing and it judges change, it's the highest wisest choice of morality, it is something spiritual—without good art a society dies. It's like religion really—it's our best speech and our best understanding—it's a proof of the greatness and goodness which is in us.

The above quote from Iris Murdoch's *Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues* (1987) puts forward Murdoch's views on "art" and "morality". Here the "art" will be discussed in the context of "art" of fiction writing and how it rediscovers truth/s amid the "ethics of the narratives".

The story of the novel is also a search for the "truth" of a murder mystery. Here Murdoch within the characters' actions tries to indicate "modern moral degeneration is due to man's inability to associate virtue, truth and love." (Karbalaee, 93). The idea of "beauty" is associated with truth as Murdoch brings the idea when she says "Beauty is present when truth has found an apt form." (81).

The sense of realisation is used as a tool by the writer which works as a door to morality in *The Black Prince*. Bradley's sympathy for Priscilla's ill fate tries to tell the moral aspect of Bradley. As he feels "defeated" and "humiliated" in her defeat and humiliation. (109). The moral crisis of Bradley can be seen when he encounters Francis Marloe. In the context of art and the characters narrator says,

: character in art can have unassailable dignity, whereas characters in life have none. Yet of course life, in this respect as in others, pathetically and continually aspires to the condition of art. A sheer concern for one's dignity, a sense of form, a sense of style, inspires more of our baser actions than any conventional analysis of possible sins is likely to bring to light. (124,).

This novel puts forward two writers of creative art. Arnold Baffin is presented as a "one-book-a-year man" is a "prolific popular novelist, is never long out of the public eye." (93,)m whereas Bradley Pearson is a writer who has drafted only a few works in comparison to Baffin and has differences of opinions with his writings. Baffin has been described as "my protégé" by Bradley in his description to the readers.

The narrative technique of the novel is complex. It could have been started in different points as expressed by the first person narrator in this case Bradley that it "might start with Rachel's tears, or Priscilla's" (21) but it started with at the "moment when Arnold Baffin" rang up Bradley to tell about a murder. Amid the search of "truth" Rachel— Arnold Baffin's wife says that "All men despise all women really. All Women fear all men really" (40,).

Taking about the artists Bradley Pearson says in his direct confession to the readers that "Any artist musty sometimes be filled with an intense pleasure in his work, a sense of radiant merit, a vision of it as excelling." (80). In the beginning of the novel in Pearson's voice Murdoch is clearly stating that "My book is about art. It is also, in its humble way, a work of art: an art 'object'...as I observed to young Julian) is the story of telling of truth, and is the only available method for the telling certain truths" (80). There are clear indications that

apart from the story of the novel, this novel is also about the discussion of art and its relationship with morality and truth. The three main characters, Bradley Pearson- an established writer, Arnold Baffin- a junior writer and Julian- daughter of Baffin are important character in the discussion of “art”, “morality”, and “truth”.

Julian Baffin in her postscript writes, “Art is secret, secret secret. But it has some speech or it would not be. Art is public public public. (But only when it is good.) Art is brief. (Not in a temporal sense.)” (Murdoch 408). This view on art summarises both Bradley and Arnold’s views on art, which were drastically different from each other. She too says that “Pearson was wrong to identify his Eros with the source of art.” (Murdoch 410). According to Julian – who once loved Bradley and wanted him to be her guide could only understand “vulgar side of Shakespeare.” (Murdoch 409).

Probably the most mentionable postscript about Bradley is penned by Francis Marlowe – a sacked doctor, brother of Bradley Pearson’s ex-wife’s brother. It can be considered as the most significant account of Bradley’s life. Francis writes that he was the “greatest homosexual of them all.” (Murdoch 398). He also calls him a “masochist”. In an interesting revelation, he says Bradley was in “love” with Arnold Baffin, and to make an attempt to understand the character of Bradley one has to “deal with the psychology of a complicated and refined person.” (Murdoch 399). About Bradley’s artistry Francis writes that “It is surely more natural for man to picture the force of love as women, and for a woman to picture it as a man. (It is true that both Eros and Aphrodite are the invention of man, but it is important that the former is the child of the latter.” (Murdoch 400). From here one can derive the understanding that in most of the cases Bradley wanted to pen his love for Arnold in his works but he failed to do so because of the existing social norms. As he says towards the ending of his monograph that Bradley’s “ill-concealed love for me as evidence of his perverted tendencies.” (Murdoch 401).

Like *The Sandcastle*, in *The Black Prince* too the letters exchanged among the characters are crucial in storytelling technique of Murdoch in her novels. It can be seen she has used this method to pierce and explore to the unconscious motifs of the characters which in turn they make conscious confessions in their letters. It is also common to notice that the main protagonist of each novel finds himself, Thomas Mor in *The Sand Castle* and Bradley Pearson in *The Black Prince* – two central male characters of the novel often find themselves cornered in dilemmas to draft the letters. The letters serve as an inseparable part of the plots of the novels. In *The Black Prince* the first letter is written by Bradley. Letter as a form of art in the novel describes certain things about it. “A letter is a barrier, a reprieve, a charm against the world, an almost fallible method of acting in a distance.” (63,) says Bradley as a narrator in disguise.

The first draft of letters were written by Bradley addressed to Arnold Baffin but it was basically addressed to Rachel after an unwanted situation faced by him in their household. He did not want to ruin the friendship between him and Baffin which he was worried about and probably the most important reason why Bradley had started to write the letter. “in spite of all the differences our friendship is precious to me.” (63,). The second letter was written to Julian— Baffin’s daughter a literature student who wanted to learn the art of writing from Bradley Pearson. He on the other hand says that it is impossible to tuition someone about creative writing or art. It is at the same time ironical that Julian asked help from Bradley but not from her own father who himself was an established novel writer, a “prolific” novelist. Julian and Bradley relationship invites lot of moral debacles as the story of the novel progresses as Baffin’s daughter falls in love with her father’s mentor and friend. But Bradley Pearson had faith on Arnold Baffin and initially suggested Julian ask help from her own father about his recommendations of 19th century English and Russian fiction by reading those as Bradley believes that Julian can develop a taste of remarkable literature. Another facet of art comes to the context in the novel when Bradley says in his letter to Julian that, “Art is a gratuitous and usually thankless activity and at your age it is more important to enjoy it than to practise it.” (64,).

The third letter was written to Mrs. Evandale, former acquaintance of Bradley asking her not to meet him in London as he heard that she was there for some of her works. He also stated that he will be travelling out of London in a day or two.

Bradley’s marriage was a failure. His sister Priscilla’s marriage also came to a halt after her husband Robert Saxe reportedly abused her and she took shelter in her brother’s home. To it Priscilla eventually generalises that all men “despise women-, Men are terrible, terrible” (134) while she was talking to Francis—Bradley’s brother –in- Law.

Bradley says “Marriage is a curious institution... People who boast of happy marriages are, I submit, usually self –deceivers, if not actually liars.” (91,). Finding one of the reasons for it, Bradley points out that, “Human soul is not framed for continued proximity, and the result of this enforced neighbourhood is often an appalling loneliness for which the rules of the game forbid assuagement.” (91,).

The fourth letter comes from Rachel— Baffin’s wife to Bradley revealing her feelings for him as a response to the letter written by Bradley earlier. It gives a different twist to the cases of adultery in the novel where Bradley finds himself in a complex moral dilemma. After the initial care shown by Bradley after the couple’s fight then the physical intimacy between Rachel and Bradley, Rachel expressed her love to him in a complicated way. The story follows the common pattern of how adultery starts. She writes, “I must live with my husband as best I can, with his infidelities and his tempers, which no outsider, not even you, really knows of or will believe in, and also my own indelible hate, which is part of my love.” (128,). Thus she expresses her association with her husband Arnold Baffin and simultaneously writes to Bradley in the same letter that “I wanted to kiss you like that for a long time. Bradley, I want and need your love. I don’t mean an affair. I mean your love.” (128,). Bradley was “upset, touched, annoyed, pleased and thoroughly frightened” (129) by the emotional missive.

Francis Marloe— a doctor by profession has been described as a “pseudo – scientist” by the narrator. In his case, Murdoch seems to discuss about “moral uprightness” when the speaker narrates about “sex” in general and its realted views more specifically in his affair with Rachel and Francis’ wit. Here, Bradley seemingly realises that he was “not such a shallow fool as to, imagine that a trivial sexual release would bring me the great freedom which I has sought, nor had I in any way confused animal instinct with godhead.” (144). Amid the dilemma about his relationship with Rachel and simultaneously his desire to see his wife Christian again his thoughts about sex with other women is quite relevant.

Bradley finally posts his review of Arnold Baffin’s book which his wife initially stopped Bardley not to do so talks in volume about moral salvation in art. In his resistance to publish the blurb of Baffin’s book he says that “*I was a bad artist because I was coward.*” (144). Here he talks about the freedom in art. He was often encountered with the question of what are love, sex and art. Finally he “felt a strong urge to do something, to act, which often afflicts people in unanalysable dilemmas” (145). He finally comments that Baffin’s book is “quite serious and quite funny” (146). He goes on answers about whether the particular book is a work of art or not, he fears that “in the case of the rest of Mr. Baffin’s aeuve, is alas no.” (146).

Baffin’s reaction to Bradley blurb about his upcoming book takes about Arnold’s view about writing. He says that “For me writing is a natural product of *joie de vivre*.” (172). Moreover, he questions to Bradley that why he cannot be happy if publications can give him certain amount of joy. On the contrary he ironically taunts Bradley that he “Finish nothing, publish nothing, nourish a continual grudge against the world, and live with an unrealised idea of perfection which makes you feel to feel superior to those who try and fail.” (172). It is one of the important quotes in the novel that holds different viewpoints about art and artists. Two aspects of art can be seen in Bradley’s self analysis after he discussed with Baffin about his new book. Bradley says that “I have always felt that art is an aspect of the good life, and so correspondingly difficult, whereas Arnold, I regret to say, regarded art as ‘fun’.” (187). Through the characters of Bradley and Baffin’s art works Murdoch is subtly able to hold up her view point of art the disguise of storytelling.

In her unique style of narration Murdoch brings the narrator of novel *The Black Price* directly taking to its readers. It says, “As I now approach the first climax of my book let me pause, dear friend, and refresh myself once again with some direct converse with you.” (183). This part is mostly about retrospection what had gone by in the novel. It talks about the themes of freedom and servitude in morality. It also analyses Bradley’s recent conduct “as it were” towards Rachel which he “acted out a mixture of rather graceless motives.” (183). It talks about the “dangerous” mechanism of the letters as they can be “endlessly reread and reinterpreted.” (183). For example, it says that the response letter of Rachel “communicated self importance, energy, the sense of role.” (183). He is on the opinion that vanity, anxiety and envy of Arnold brought Rachel close to him and he consequently succumbed to a “sort of love and certainly an intermittent play of physical desire.” (185). His relationship with Rachel can be said that it was devoid of love but with Julian he was in love. As the narrator of the novel says “When sexual desire is also love it connects us with the whole world and becomes a new mode of experience.” (211).

In the “part two” of the novel Bradley realises that he has fallen in love with Julian—Mr. Arnold Baffin’s daughter. He describes it as a condition of “insanity”. Bradley Pearson talks about what love can do to art as he describes the rigmarole of his life. “Love can soon dim the dream of art and make it seem secondary, even a delusion”. (208) as Bradley’s ambitions as a writer are connected with Julian. He perceives her as a better prospect than her father Arnold Baffin.

Taking forward Murdoch’s discussion of “morality” in life it is commented that “A man’s life should be simple and lived in the open. It is very much more rarely worth lying, even for hedonistic purposes, than in generally supposed in sophisticated circles”(161). This quote reflects Bradley desire to live his life openly when he discovers himself amid some “unwanted muddles” in his relationship with Rachel and Julian. It constantly made him worried about his friendship with Baffin to whom he was a “discoverer” and Baffin was his “protégée”.

Rachel always wanted a “special” relationship with Bradley. “I don’t want an affair, not because I do not want an affair, maybe I do, it’s not worth finding out, but because it would be a mess...you have not got the guts or temperament or whatever for an affair, but, Bradley, I want *you*.” (217). Rachel was clear about her intentions for Bradley but he was always in the dilemma of not able to make any decisions. Moreover, his interest was inclining towards Julian. Bradley and Rachel finally settle to be “friends” forever. Bradley’s love for Julian comes to a half when he knows about Septimus Leech— Julian’s new boy friend. He “stood dazed in the lamp light among the hurrying ghosts. And I felt as a man might feel who, with a whole skin on him and a square meal inside him, sits in a cell having just been captured by the secret police.” (243).

Bradley’s life takes a different twist when he is kissed by Julian and after that she confessed her love for him. Arnold also writes a letter to Bradley that he had developed certain sort of feelings for his wife Christian. In this mess, Bradley’s character can be seen dwindling between morality and freedom of choice. At one point he is in physical intimacy with his friend’s daughter and his friend cum protégé has expressed his love for Bradley’s wife. Julian was in fact ready to marry Bradley. When Julian’s parents visited Bradley’s experienced that their “sheer incredulity, feigned or otherwise, silenced me, put me to flight. I could explain nothing and felt that I was creating some entirely false impression. Also I know that I was not only seeming but also falling apparently guilty.” (280).

Bradley was in some sort of madness. When Julian’s father accused Bradley for being “randy” about his daughter, Bradley said it was serious and Baffin does not know about love as he “never in any of” his “books really described what is it to be in love”. Bradley believes it to be love but was guilty only in the presence of her parents. Though seemingly, he resisted only the physical encounter between him and Julian, eventually he succumbs to it. Bradley was considerate about so many things from the very beginning when

Julian came to take tuition from him but at the same time he had “imagined” kissing her. Making realise Bradley about his unethical explorations with Julian her father says, “Bradley, you are a decent rational man and a moral being. You can’t seriously propose to settle down and *explore* this emotional mess with Julian? I call it an emotional mess, but thank God it hasn’t had time to develop into one. Nor it will do so. I shall stop it.” (282) Bradley seemingly agreed to Baffin’s view about the whole mess and apologises both.

Bradley was “complacent with different reality”. Baffin was playing his part as a friend to Arnold and as a father as well. “Fathers have duties. Please try to understand. It’s kindest to Julian to play this quite cool. You will sheer off and keep quiet, please?” Hinting Bradley’s condition of marriage with Christian and his inability to become a father simultaneously keeping his friendship with him Baffin does a wonderful job. Murdoch here shows two families- two ways of life, conventional Mrs Baffin and unconventional Mrs Bradley.

Bradley was caught between the “chaste” and the “frenzy” in the pursuit of “sacredness”. He trusted Julian’s instinct for “frankness” that he did not had the sense to “advice” her and worry of her parents. “ I had been far too absorbed in the sacredness of my own feelings...There could have been chaste and then less chaste kisses...sick it up ...put her in frenzy? ” (290). Whereas Julian was successful running away to Bradley again and expresses that in a “triumphant aggressive way” (293) she had said everything to her parents. Both were getting closer ever than before but Arnold and this time Christian were once again looking for them. Amid this Murdoch does not fail to show that Bradley was failing his duties as an elder brother of Pricilla as he fails to carry forward his responsibilities towards her as she needed attention the most.

Part three of the novel starts far away from London city with Julian and Bradley were spending time together. In search of real human happiness Bradley realises that it is “rarely in the best of circumstances without shadows, and in almost pure happiness can be a terror to itself.” His happiness at that time though “intense, was far for pure, and in the midst of all this mad joy...I soon started rehearsing terrors and miseries” as he knows there was “vengeful Arnold, resentful Rachel, miserable Priscilla.” (306). In no moments they started fighting and Julian in an act of madness jumped out of the car Bradley was driving. She wanted it to stop. Bradley was surrounded by questions about how to take the relationship forward. He realises that “ She was a child of extremes” and he was a “Puritan and old”. (312).

Bradley and Julian’s relationship reveals lot more about love and life as in the case of other couples in the novel was missing. It has some major revelations of human’s complex nature and understanding. Already narrated as a complex relationship in the novel, Murdoch explores major mysteries through their relationship about human pure “instinct” and “dedication”.

The absolute yearning of one human body for another particular one and its indifference to substitutes is one of life’s major mysteries. There are, I am told, people who just want ‘a woman’ or ‘a man’. I cannot conceive of this state of affairs and it does not concern me. I had rarely wanted another human being ...at all. Holding hands and kissing, that can mean something in friendship, though it had not been my way. But that trembling dedication to the totality of another I had experienced – well, as I sat on the divan bed that evening and waited for Julian I felt, never before. (317).

This important quote from *The Black Prince* does not mean Bradley as an immoral character or it can be said that he has the realisation of the nice and good. Though he knew that he was in love with his wife Christian “intellectually” he was always in search of something pure and natural. Murdoch aptly describes this as “pure happiness can be a terror to itself” (306). Bradley waited for the love-making and given it over “to her instinct and the tempo of her being. The moment I longed for and dreaded would come at its natural time.” (316). It reflects Bradley’s character in the chaos.

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