

IRIS MURDOCH'S SEVERED HEAD: A REFLECTION OF INCESTUOUS LOVE

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Love is one of the central themes in the literary fiction of Iris Murdoch considered to be a realist, and “best known for her stories regarding ethical and sexual themes”ⁱ Love is reflected in her novels in various forms and extents. To be precise, three of her novels *Under the Net* (1954), *Severed Head* (1961) and *The Black Prince* (1973) are replete *inter alia* with human relationship laced by love. In her novels Murdoch has primarily focused human relationships for the reason that her philosophy has marked proximity with this aspect of life that she has attempted to portray in manifold dimensions. We find in her novels themes related to -- love and art; love and Eros; love of friends; filial love; incestuous, conjugal and power relationships; and the primordial heterosexual love between man and woman -- ranked in her novels from the weakest in intensity to the strongest one.

Milada Frankova, in her study on Murdoch, observes that Murdoch devotes attention to an extreme kind of love which is a part of the “relationships through family ties” seeking to “acquire incestuous overtones”ⁱⁱ. The critic also finds that Oedipal motives are manifest “where the people are tied up in various relationships which are half dark to them”ⁱⁱⁱ. The Encyclopaedia 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 the 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 "blood relatives"; other societies further include those related by adoption or marriage.”^{iv}

In her early novels the theme is insinuated where twins fall in love or have sexual relations with one and the same person. *A Severed Head*^v is the first novel where incest has been openly handled. The incest dread, in full agreement with Sigmund Freud is palpable both outside the novel, as critical reactions have proved, and inside it, as shown by the author. But whether Murdoch writes about incest, or about the milder forms of oedipal variations, she places them before us as part of life. She does neither eschew the puzzle or horror of the witnesses, nor analyse or judge.

It seems that in her novels Murdoch was inspired by her own experience, and thinking about Freudian knowledge. In view of metaphoric *Oedipus complex*, she could play a role of a mother to her husband, and her husband Bayley was nonetheless younger than she was. On the top of that, they had no children, as is the case with some of her characters casting in the novels.

Beside Plato, Sigmund Freud is another great thinker who had by means of his, often speculative, *psychoanalytic criticism* – originating out of his own tenet of psychoanalysis, the term coined in 1896 – significantly modified the 20th century quest for and discovery of connections between the artist and what s/he actually creates. In accordance with Freudian system of analysis a literary character is treated as if it is a living human being. Later, Jacques Lacan adopted the technique of seeing literature as a “symptom” of the concerned author.

Murdoch admired, studied, and explored Freud’s thoughts and ideas both in her philosophical and literary work. Freud, over and above other conceptions of *the unconscious* referred to *Oedipus complex*, the term derived from the classical Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. *Oedipus complex* displays the desire for incest and the accompanying strain to subdue it. Freud considers that incest, always a socio-moral taboo in society, sprouts from the very first natural sexual impulse of young boys and girls. He also considers homosexuality to be corollary for the failure of successful resolution of *Oedipus complex*.

For human relationships, Murdoch followed Freudian themes emphasizing the relationships. Freud found out that:

“The experiences of psychoanalysis make the assumption of an innate aversion to incestuous relations altogether impossible.”^{vi}

In other words, man has the innate and subconscious sexual relationship to a member of his family. This is called incest, and it is a natural reaction to a close person. Freud’s psychoanalysis confirms that:

“The first sexual impulses of the young are regularly of an incestuous nature.”^{vii}

Murdoch, in connection with such relationships, deals with the

“Labyrinthine nature of the human subconscious with regard to sex.”^{viii}

While experimenting in diverse love affairs, Murdoch brazenly demonstrates incestuous relationships.

Incestuous relationships are a complex group of unusual relations. In her fictional work Murdoch inquires into the darker side of human nature. Although *A Severed Head* may be seen as a sheer comedy, it deals with a deeper moral inquiry. Murdoch, in *A Severed Head*, brings in ***Oedipus Complex***. *A Severed Head* is the novel where Murdoch mentions incest between siblings along with other forms of relationships.

It is natural to ask why Murdoch attends to incestuous relationships in her novels. In *A Severed Head* incestuous relationships occur in various relations. It is represented by Palmer, a psychologist, and his half-sister Honor, a German Jewish anthropologist. Their relationship is

real and sexual. The other example of the sexual relationship between relatives is seen in case of Antonia and her brother-in-law Alexander. The love affairs that Murdoch puts up in her novel are rather scandalous. The edition of *The Black Prince* (1973) is labelled “perverse.”

One more example of oedipal complex is seen in the case of Antonia and Martin, -- the most notable incestuous relationship in *A Severed Head*. Martin is younger by five years than Antonia. The novel also represents the first type of incestuous relationship -- “*metaphoric*”. It is so because two involved people are not blood relatives. They live without children, and both enjoy their seemingly quiet marriage. Antonia, a beautiful lustful fair-haired woman, foppish enough, has an amazing influence on Martin who calls her “a goddess”. She often looks after Martin like as one takes care of a child. Antonia actually substitutes his mother for Martin who loves her above all else. Murdoch demonstrates Martin’s need to have a surrogate mother and Antonia meets his expectations.

Revealing various sexual relationships, Murdoch breaks the taboo of incest. In fact, in *A Severed Head* the author shows the incestuous relations within a group of civilized and educated people. Honor Klein is a teacher figure. She changes the consciousness not only of other characters but even of her own brother Palmer, who is a psycho-analyst. Martin, no less than the readers, is shocked when he finds Honor in bed with Palmer, her half-brother.

We identify with his response:

“From *this* there shivered through me a violence of amazement not distinguishable from horror; and I felt as a physical pain the shock of what I had done to *them*” (p. 89)

Whereas in the beginning Palmer fully controls Martin and Antonia, Honor on the other hand, controls Palmer who is supposed to solve psychological problems of others, yet he cannot free himself from the clutches of Honor. Psychiatrists deal with neurosis which is supposed to be

caused due to incestuous feelings or acts. Here the psycho-analyst himself indulges in incest. Instead of making incest look as a heinous act it is shown as a union of the like with the like, at the conscious level. In describing herself, as a “Severed Head”, Honor makes reference to alchemists. The aim of alchemy is to convert base metal into gold, and ultimately to philosopher's stone. Martin's consciousness is ridden by conflicts. It can be changed by a ritual sexual relationship with Honor Klein. Honor becomes a taboo for Martin, representing a specific challenging power of taboo objects. 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.”^{ix}

In her incestuous relationship Honor becomes a goddess for Martin and challenges him to abandon moral conventions of society. In contrast to his primary reaction, where he was shocked and puts the words :

“Caught in the coils of such stupidity I could not yet even begin with my imagination the notion that she should have had her brother as a lover.” (p. 129).

Martin later responds to Palmer in compliance with Murdoch’s openness to human relationships supported by Freud’s findings:

“I don’t disapprove of incest. I don’t think that you’re committing any sin by embracing your sister; that is, not any sin that arises from the fact that she’s your sister.” (p.131).

Honor objects to Martin’s confession of love claiming that it does not dwell in the real world. She compares herself to a severed head -- the Freudian image of the Medusa’s head, for feared female genitals. The head that represents the conscious part of human body has been severed from:

“The sexual impulses of which we are not fully conscious”.^x

A.S. Byatt sees *A Severed Head* as a comedy with moral themes, being an impressive novel full of surprise, manipulation and irony. The author touches various issues such as multiple falseness and incest which is illegal or social [taboo](#). An anomalous human relation between the psychoanalyst and his stepsister has scandalous effect for many readers, but Murdoch demonstrates that even this could happen as well. The story shows that nothing is clear or lined. Things can happen unpredictably, and are far from what they seem to be. Love, hate, machination, dependence, sexual desires, hysteria and egoism are signs, which are recognized in the excellent novel. *A Severed Head*:

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

The novel is regarded by many readers as the most entertaining of Murdoch's novels. Together with J. B. Priestley, she “adapted the book for the stage.”^{xi}

Palmer–Honor sexual relationship is not like Martin's other sexual pursuits. Martin had no commitment with Georgie, and commitment of marriage to Antonia. Honor-Martin relationship gives birth to a philosopher's stone. This relationship will be in terms of sex biology, ill terms of the body. Martin's relationships with Antonia and Georgie have not worked because it was profane sex. Martin does not know to unite with the right mate. He brings certain projections. He wants to do everything for Antonia's happiness. In Martin-Georgie relationship, Martin has never bothered about Georgie's happiness. In Martin-Antonia relationship, he does not care for his own happiness and goes on accepting things according to the wishes of Antonia.

In Martin-Antonia relationship Antonia is older than Martin by five years. He is often referred to as a "child." Antonia has more than once been taken for Martin's mother. Obviously she functions as such to this child. Their marriage is "simply at a standstill" and Antonia explains this to Martin:

"It's partly my being so much older and being a sort of mother to you." (p. 26).

If someone's wife behaves like mother he would be preoccupied with day-dreams of seductive nature. When Martin goes to Palmer to talk about his relation with Antonia Palmer says—

You have been a child to Antonia and she a mother to you, and that has kept you both spiritually speaking at a standstill. But you will grow up, you will change, more than may now seem to you possible. Haven't you sometimes realised the extent to which you now regard yourself both as a child and as an old man. (p. 29)

Martin develops sexual relations with Georgie to come out of this mother-child bond. This keeps him from "growing up." The relationship of Martin with Antonia has been described by Isaiah Smithson as that of "uroboric ego" to "great mother".^{xii}

Martin sees the mother image in his wife Antonia, and so she never feels emotionally and spiritually satisfied with him. Martin tells what he feels but he has not tried to see "what Antonia herself was thinking and feeling" (p.120). The failure of normal husband-wife relationship drives Martin and Antonia to have extramarital sexual pursuits, and the marriage vows lose their meaning for them.

In Murdoch's novels men and women are forced to envisage the consequences of their own actions. When the higher authority is absent they fail to recognize the moral problems they create, as is presented in *A Severed Head*. The characters seem not to understand the aftermath of love. Elizabeth Dipple says:

"Under the amusements 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." ^{xiii}

Intimate relationships are presented by Murdoch in their complexity as part of human relationship. She writes about incest and homosexuality, but does neither judge nor offer an explanation or solution. Her characters deal with the problem and live on because moral issues involved are given priority.

Murdoch's novels are full of cross-textured human relationships where love plays an important role. People love, hate and envy one another, and are also selfish. Different kinds of love are remarkable. It is possible to notice love of friends, incestuous relationships, power relationships and the most widespread type of love - love between men and women. All the relationships can complicate lives of the characters. Relationships are heterogeneous, scandalous and understandable, at the same time they are nevertheless realistic. The reader forms an opinion that the author does not criticize the relationships and emotions but portrays all the possible angular situations man can face.

Murdoch shows the complexity of sexual relationships, which no scientific theories of psychoanalysis can reduce to manageable patterns or pairs of rational egos. Therefore, an explanation or solution has never been adduced by her, never a simple thread of causes and effects. Iris Murdoch makes it imperative for the reader to stoop to the inevitability of an impenetrable tangle of accidental events, experiences and emotions that are in constant flux.

References

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¹ A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom*, (London: Vintage 1994), p. 116.

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ⁱ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iris_Murdoch#Bibliography>

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^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 169.

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