EXPRESSION OF LOVE IN MURDOCH’S THE BLACK PRINCE

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Abstract:
Iris Murdoch’s novel The Black Prince, published in 1973 has been considered by many critics to be the best of Murdoch’s novel which won the most prestigious James Tail Black Memorial Prize. The paper illustrates Murdoch’s conviction that although human beings think that their active participation in vibrant social life, involvement in creating and solving problems and tendencies to be judgmental, are the only implication of their supposed human existence. On the contrary, these illusions and myths create more confusion in understanding the complexities of human survivals. The research paper explores veiled sense present behind these myths, false assumptions and idealism and discloses the true parameters of being real humane while facing extreme pressure, criticism, betrayal, treachery and opposition with the help of truth on the ground of reality. The study also investigates one’s treatment towards true love and its impulsive collision with eroticism and sexual desires in which the existence of platonic love is very crucial. Consequently, abstract nourishment of innocent true love does not stay alive against concrete realm of sensual urges and physical pleasures.

Keywords: flayed victim, pure echoing emptiness, shattered and empty, enlivened vision etc.

The Black Prince is the novel in which Murdoch offers her most comprehensive exploration of Eros, love as path to the good. The novel has challenged critics due to its use of experimental features such as frame-breaking and its apparent refusal to achieve closure. In her search for truth to reality, Murdoch repeatedly destroys the illusion of the reality of the text. The protagonist, Bradley Pearson, is engaged on a search for truth and clear vision. Bradley Pearson is a fifty-eight year old perfectionist, bound by theories of art, which longs to create a masterpiece but has so far failed to do so. He self-consciously sees himself as waiting for an ordeal which will release his creativity. He is threatened by the worldly success of his former apprentice, Arnold Baffin. Bradley finally achieves a previously inconceivable intensity of vision when he is overwhelmed by love for Arnold’s twenty year old daughter Julian. This experience of love opens a gateway into a new world. Although the nature of Bradley’s love is highly ambiguous, its power
fires him with inspiration which enables him to pursue his art. Whilst in prison, and soon to face death, Bradley is able to transform love into art and at last write his masterpiece, a work of art which attempts to tell the truth without consolation.

The novel is subtitled ‘A Celebration of Love’ and, as Loxias points out, erotic love can open our eyes to truth, just as art can (414). Bradley seems to believe that his love for Julian will be the saving ordeal for which he has been waiting. However, Murdoch shows her readers that erotic love can be dangerously ambiguous, because although it has the potential to illuminate reality, focus attention on the loved one and blot out the self - ‘Human love is the gateway to all knowledge, as Plato understood’ (390) - it also has the contradictory power to create delusion and cloud vision with egoism. Bradley’s love for Julian transforms his perception of the world, to the extent that he is oblivious even to his sister’s suffering: ‘I had totally and absolutely forgotten Priscilla’s existence’ (249). Julian becomes the centre of his world, rendering all others invisible, and Priscilla is the casualty of his obsession. His lack of grip on reality becomes most shockingly clear when he decides to ‘obliterate from history’ the news of his sister’s death in order to prolong his secret holiday with Julian (326).

Bradley seems to want to align himself with Shakespeare by creating his own Hamlet, and has subconsciously elected Julian to take this role. Like Shakespeare, Bradley becomes a version of Marsyas, Apollo’s ‘flayed victim’ (199). He is punished, not just for aspiring to create a masterpiece, but for having the audacity to attempt to create life. Both acts are attempts to put himself on the same level as a god. He has created the myth of Hamlet as pure language, and becomes dominated by it, leading him to attempt to possess Julian, to express his identity through her, and finally to tear apart this identity when he rapes her. This is indicated in the way that he describes his aggression: ‘[t]he fury, the anger, was directed to myself through Julian or directed against fate through Julian and through myself. Yet of course, this fury was love too, the power of the god, mad and alarming’ (329). This attempted self-purging causes Julian to feel ‘impersonal’, ‘shattered and empty’. Bradley observes that he has reduced her to ‘pure echoing emptiness’ and follows this by the declaration that ‘now, empowered, I would be able to create’ (331). Bradley thinks that he has now been through the test for which he was waiting: ‘Though still in the dark, I had come through my ordeal’ (331). He does not realise that the true ordeal of the trial still lies ahead.

Although erotic love prevents Bradley from perceiving Julian for herself, he is able to see through her in order to create his masterpiece. In Martha Nussbaum’s view it is as a recollecting artist, rather than as a lover, that Bradley is finally able to see her most clearly and accept her elusive reality. (Nussbaum, 704) He follows Proust by learning to detach himself from his love and to reflect on it in order to achieve greater clarity of vision and possess his love in his art. It is not until he is close to death that the secondary, wiser Bradley is finally able to accept Julian’s otherness: worked upon your being, really imagine that I invented you. Eternally you escape my embrace. Art cannot assimilate you nor thought digest you.’ (392)

Purged of egotistical fantasy, Bradley has glimpsed the possibility of progressing through Eros and art in order to reach the perfection of silence. Although her character comes to realise the impossibility of equaling Shakespeare’s achievement himself, in *The Black Prince* Murdoch has succeeded in extending
the boundaries of her art through her attempts to perceive and articulate what she believes to be true, real and good.

Moments after Julian has left him, Bradley is overwhelmed by the ‘astounding phenomenon’ of love (205). He believes that the object of his love is Julian, and he struggles with language in order to try to express the feelings with which he has been flooded: ‘I had fallen in love with Julian.’ The words are easily written down. But, how to describe the thing itself? (205) the shock of love has torn him out of himself, dislocating his sense of self so that he feels ‘totally alienated and changed and practically discarnate’ (206). He believes himself to be experiencing ‘an overwhelming sense of reality, of being at last real and seeing the real’ (209). His vision seems briefly to have been enlarged by the experience of paying close attention to Hamlet. However, all too soon his ego recovers itself and begins to generate illusions once more.

Despite his professed uncertainty about whether it is possible to describe the experience of love Bradley remains obsessed with the power of words which pour out of him as he wonders at his own capacity to feel emotion. Bradley claims that his love allows him to see Julian with an ‘enlivened vision’ far from the ‘casual blinded consciousness of the person that I was’ (207), but his perception of her in fact seems to be flawed by egoistic illusion. His love is highly self-conscious. He congratulates himself for his ‘marvellous achievement of absolute love’ and enjoys imagining himself as Julian’s god-like creator: ‘I felt that I was, at every instant, creating Julian and supporting her being with my own’ (208). Byatt sees Julian as Bradley’s ‘master-mistress’, and Gordon develops this line of thought when he places Julian within a series of androgynous characters in Murdoch’s fiction, and claims that ‘the love felt for these figures is not the recognition of another separate identity [. . .] It is, rather, the love of some idea or ideal in the lover’s mind.’ Bradley’s love of Shakespeare’s achievement seems to have become diverted into an erotic love for Julian; he loves her as Hamlet rather than as herself, and his love therefore remains solipsistic because he loves her as a character who is an extension of himself, rather than as a separate being.

Iris Murdoch makes her fiction the site of a ceaseless struggle against the self, as she ruthlessly scrutinises what she perceives as her own shortcomings and strips away the illusion-generating ego in a continuous process which never permits the elusive concept of reality to stabilise. Her awareness of the unreality of realist conventions has led her to seek new ways to articulate what is real, resulting in daring experimentation with form and language, exploration of the relationship between author and character, and foregrounding of the artificiality of the text. She exposes the limitations of language itself, which filters reality, preventing the artist from presenting things and people as they really are. Through her interrogation of the relationship between life and art, Murdoch radically re-conceptualises the possibilities of realism. Although Murdoch may not have consciously sought affiliation with the postmodern aesthetic, in retrospect she certainly seems to involve herself with issues which are dominant in, although not exclusive to, an early phase in the development of postmodernist fiction.

Thus, it would be appropriate to contend that love in the fiction of Murdoch has a distinct role and function not only to shape the character and plot of the story but it has a universal value of significance to
be elaborated as a distinct feature of Murdoch’s writing. The paper will definitely enlighten the vision of literary readers in a novel way to understand the expression and concept of love as appeared in his fiction.

References: