

Justice, Mercy, and Moral Consciousness: Exploring Ethical Complexity in *The Green Knight* by Iris Murdoch

¹D. Mohamed Raffic, ²Dr. A. Ajmal Khaan

¹Research Scholar, PG and Research Department of English, Jamal Mohamed College (A) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India

²Associate Professor of English, PG and Research Department of English, Jamal Mohamed College (A), (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University), Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India.

1. Abstract

This study studies the tremendous moral arc of the last novel of Iris Murdoch, *The Green Knight*. The narrowing of the concept of justice yields to the open, transformational kindness. The present paper is interested in the moral opposition represented by Lucas Graffe and Peter Mir, and argues that contrary to all expectation, Murdoch conceives mercy not as a simple absolution, but as a painful task, a task that has to do with attending to reality, suffering, and the crushing of the selfish ego. The study tries to analyse the ethical profundity in the novel by close reading of some of the most important episodes including the assault, the re-enactment, and the murders, and through philosophical articles by Murdoch. The work suggests that justice is necessary to recognise evil, and mercy is the only way to survive and love one another. Finally, Murdoch also turns the painful process of destructive demand of justice into redemptive practice into the foreground, stressing that the only way to morally evolve is to destroy the ego through love and attention in the chaos which is present in life.

Keywords: justice, mercy, ethics, Lucas Graffe, Peter Mir, attention, ego, and redemption.

2. Introduction

Iris Murdoch is a unique character in the history of twentieth century literature who combined analytic philosophy and fiction to describe the essence of the Good. Her literature has always been concerned with the difficulty of seeing reality correctly through the distortion of own fantasy and that love is basically a very hard process of realising that somebody not oneself exists (Murdoch, *Sovereignty* 21). Her narrative method is founded on this philosophical perspective, the requirement of characters to fight with their own selfish ideas of the world in order to reach the moral clarity with the help of attention. Her latest novel, *The Green Knight*, released in 1993, provides a very profound conclusion to all these ethical concerns which had been pursued throughout her life (Conradi 512). The title is a reference to the Middle English Arthurian mythology. The story looks to be a moral test, in which the characters are subjected to tests as Gawain was when confronted by the evil spirit. Here Murdoch investigates the limits of human forgiveness and the possibility of redemption in a secular age.

The narrative conjures two opposing forces of morality: justice, symbolised by the cold historical rigidity of Lucas Graffe, and mercy, symbolised by the lived experience of Peter Mir, which is fluid. Lucas is a kind of retributive legalism founded on egoistic protection, but Mir, in its development, is more spiritually difficult and does not simply absolve (Antonaccio 145). This battle is the plot's driving force, and the conclusion does not celebrate any easy legalistic solutions, but the myriad nuanced human interactions. This struggle among these forces exposes the ethical intricacies of human relationships, in which adherence to the law frequently conflicts with the immediacy of compassion. This study claims that Murdoch exorcises the agonising transmutation of a disastrous quest for justice into a rescuing practice of kindness. True moral goodness, Murdoch argues, "is the deconstruction of the selfish ego with the help of suffering, attentive love and acceptance of the disorder of the nature of things" (Murdoch, *Green Knight* 380). The first section of the analysis will focus on the architecture of justice developed by Lucas and then the revival and transformation of Mir. Things to come will be about the burden of truth, the occurrence of Eros as a spiritual link, other spiritual excursions and lastly, sober hope as envisioned by Murdoch (Rowe 185). Finally, the story suggests that justice may recognise injustice, but mercy is the only way to go on living (Byatt 45). In this route Murdoch argues that moral maturity is not set judgement, but the painful

accommodation of others, and the bending to them. The sovereignty of the self has been supplanted by the sovereignty of the Good.

3. The Architecture of Justice – Lucas Graffe and the Law of Retribution (Approx. 700 words)

In the narrative, the sterile architecture of retributive justice, embodied through Lucas Graffe in Iris Murdoch's *The Green Knight*, is seen as the height of kindness. In the end, the novel takes place. Lucas is a historian, a man of facts, of frigid detachment, of a world without charm. He is the incarnation of a system of ethics, in which justice is not a reconstruction. It is retributive and founded on the egoic demand on order above the insistence of the Good on love. Later Murdoch books, critics say, tend to focus on a confrontation between highly moralistic standards and the disorganised reality of human affairs, where uncompromising justice often cannot explain the complexity of the soul (Antonaccio 112). The figure of Lucas is the main vehicle of this inquiry, as it reveals how the cold rationale of life in the government may be transformed into a vehicle of violence. Lucas' moral decline is seen in the game of the Dogs and his attempted murder of his brother, Clement. This is a childhood game with a baseball bat hollowed out and packed with lead. This is a representation of the repressed aggression in Lucas' drive to control. But the core flashback in the narrative is where Lucas confesses to having placed the club on Clement in a black park because of a lifelong jealousy because he was adopted. To him, Clement's existence is a hardship and an intrusion to the pure undivided affection he experienced initially when he was the sole child (Murdoch 245). This desire shows that Lucas understands morality as a bargain; he is owed a specific place in the universe, and Clement's existence is an unpaid bill. As P. J. Conradi observes, the Murdochian characters struggle with the burden of self, the ego that controls other's reality (Conradi, *Life* 450). Lucas cannot think of Clement as a reality that he can love, he can only think of him as a barrier that needs to be removed. Lucas's sense of justice is also shown in his reaction to the return of Peter Mir. Mir, the man Lucas thought he killed when he tried to kill Clement, comes back from the dead and Lucas doesn't see it as a miracle or a chance to redeem himself. Instead, he regards Mir's survival as a nuisance, a disturbance to the legal and social order he has meticulously protected. He uses the law and quiet as a shield. He makes up a story about defending himself from a mugger to protect his image. This manipulation is a demonstration of justice as power, for Lucas the truth is secondary to the preservation of his structure. As Steven Halliday notes, Murdoch is inclined to criticise the official stories that individuals tell themselves in order to disguise their own moral inadequacies from themselves (Halliday 89). Lucas has not broken the silence but has exploited it as a strategy to maintain his dominance.

In the final analysis, justice overdone in Murdoch's Lucas spells sterility. He slays love, maintains order. He can't forgive Clement for being there; he can't accept his own guilt and the breakdown of his own identity. Chillingly, Lucas confesses to Peter Mir, "I have always wanted to kill you, ever since the moment when I learnt of your existence" (Murdoch 246). This remark characterises the vindictive souls of his; justice, for Lucas, is the destruction of the party that offends. No quarter, no quarter, just the uprising of scores. A. N. Wilson further argues that the characters in Murdoch's later fiction are generally caught up in their pasts and are therefore unable to go on because they are unwilling to let go of the past (Wilson 134). Lucas is stuck in his past of adoption and the hate that he can't get over and move on from.

Such is the condition on which Mir's admission is predicated in full adherence to the notion of retributive justice. Justice is a dead end for Lucas. Mir arrives at the area, looking for a similar law of revenge, an eye for an eye. But it is Mir who has grown, not Lucas. The stark beauty of the moral architecture produced by Lucas highlights the need for the transformation that Mir must undertake. Lucas is determined to avoid this at all costs, but, as Anne Rowe notes, Murdoch puts out that the only way to be fully matured is through the process of unselfing the protagonist (Rowe 78). Lucas is still, an idol of unbearable injustice and a forerunner to Mir. He shows that justice passes only via evil, but only kindness may be allowed for the preservation of life.

4. The Resurrection of Peter Mir – From Avenger to Enlightened Being

Peter Mir in Iris Murdoch *Lucas Graffe* embodies an angry, dead-end justice, and the ethical agent that upsets this is the Green Knight. Mir's story is a powerful narrative of a need for revenge that becomes a transformative act of mercy, and it exposes Murdoch's philosophical fear about the death of a selfish spirit. Initially, Mir is not a victim who has returned from the dead seeking comfort but a vindictive being who has returned seeking justice.

His first encounters are marked by a tight commitment to the law of revenge, which undermines the legalistic certainty Lucas had acquired. Mir is very explicit about what he means when he questions Lucas: "Restitution... Sometimes called justice" (Murdoch, Ch. 2). The titular Green Knight, Mir, threatens the so-called court of Lucas' life with violence, forcing the historian to address the moral aspect of the matter that had been repressed until then. Mir, the Green Knight by title, threatens the so-called court of Lucas's life with violence, which compels the historian to the moral side of the subject that has so far been repressed.

This risk is physically realised in the novel when Mir produces a revolver hidden in his umbrella, the symbol of the repressed violence of revenge. In an intense encounter, "Out of the inside of the shaft... there came a long gleaming steel knife" (Murdoch, Ch. 3). This is when the danger of Mir comes into play, he can ruin Lucas, physically or socially. Murdoch, however, uses this struggle to prepare Mir for a spiritual transition. But instead Mir had a great change in himself as he reconnected to his religion in the past. But I am also a Buddhist,' he tells Lucas (Murdoch, Ch. 3), suggesting a move from worldly revenge to spiritual enlightenment. Mir's philosophical turning point comes in a letter to Lucas when he officially backs down from earlier threats. He states, "My desire for revenge... I now understand as an impulse of unenlightened egoism... which I hereby repudiate" (Murdoch, 3). In this case the concept of mercy is seen not as a weakness, but as a controlled denial of the greedy ego. Murdoch understood the word attention to reality instead of fiction.

This arc ends with the "second event," a re-enactment of the initial attack. Mir does not murder Lucas, but inflicts a non-fatal wound on him in an attempt to achieve justice without furthering the cycle of violence. Later, Lucas tells Clement that it was just a pinprick (Murdoch, Ch. 3). This symbolic wound affords Lucas the opportunity to confess his sins without destroying his life. It is the beginning of retribution, not salvation. This is no death which perfects the moral labour of Mir, but this forgiveness which waits to finish the chain of hate which begun with the baseball bat. Dr. Fonsett says, "What really cemented the legacy of Mir was his death in the clinic." The doctor noticed that Mir 'was sustained by his heroic determination to accomplish specific aims... he relaxed into a tranquil acquiescence to an eventual death' (Murdoch, Ch. 5). This submissiveness in a gentle way indicates that Mir died having achieved his spiritual aims. He died not a victim but a kind of awakened soul, who had paid his karmic responsibilities. Mir via Murdoch's argument is that justice is not to be found in lawistic punishment but in the arduous work of unselfing. Mir's mercy is a bigger power than Lucas' hate. Mir's refusal to kill and his choice of the pinprick demonstrate that mercy takes more courage than vengeance. This moral rebirth is a metaphor for his reborn life. Evil is deserving of attention, but it is only mercy that makes life and love continue. He has a love potion because of his existence, which helps people to love and characters like Bellamy consider him as an avatar and are aware of this (Murdoch, Ch. 5). Ultimately, the novel validates its thesis through the journey of Mir, which implies the acceptance of suffering and the death of the self and a legacy of peace rather than agony.

5. The Burden of Truth and the Necessity of Lies

In *The Green Knight*, Iris Murdoch complicates the morality of revealing the truth by claiming that factual truth is not always the same as moral good. In the narrative the protagonists are lost in a labyrinth of lies employed sometimes for protectionism and not for destruction. This expresses Murdoch's philosophical view that truth is not absolute but relational, depending on context and love. Antonaccio says, "Murdoch's ethics are about the vision of the other, not about following the rules, and so there are times when brutal truth may obscure love rather than reveal love" (Antonaccio 112). Clement Graffe stands for the burden of complicity in his silence and his lies concerning the attack on his brother Lucas. One moment Lucas is trying to kill him, interrupted by Peter Mir Clement who decides to go and get him the murder weapon - a baseball bat. The deed is a metaphor for his sharing of the common blame, rather than his seeking justice in a court of law. Then, at the same meeting in which Peter reveals a knife hidden in his umbrella, Clement faints. The guy actually falls under the strain of the secret he holds. This answer makes quite evident the mental cost of his falsehood. These characters of Murdoch, says P. J. Conradi, are generally wrestling with the burden of self, when the demands of the ego are so heavy that the truth about other people is lost in the fog of death (Conradi 450). The dilemma is the ethical difficulties of whether this defence is an integrity failure or whether it is a peace defence. Similarly Peter Mir gives himself a false identity as a psychoanalyst but is in fact a rich butcher. This is shown at the wild and chaotic dinner party where Peter gets

picked up by Dr. Fonsett to be taken to the clinic. Peter admits: "I never was a psychoanalyst or a doctor of any kind. I told this first to Lucas and Clement. 'Perhaps I thought it more dignified' (Murdoch 450). We should, according to Murdoch, strive to see reality as it is; but, human beings utilise fiction to keep their identity. Murdoch says that we should make efforts to see the reality in its purest form yet there are times that human beings require fiction to sustain their identity. Anne Rowe argues that the late fiction of Murdoch tends to suggest that the only way to attain meaningful moral development is to unself the character undergoing it. This is not something that Peter experiences until he throws off his professional pretences (Rowe 78). His deceit allows him to into the family circle, but he must later admit to be actually related.

Another instance of the annihilatory quality of plain truth is Aleph's elopement with Lucas. She does not know of her family and later says that she is pleased but it pains them. She writes, "I write this with grief, but also, as I will explain, with joy" (Murdoch 520). She spares her mother, Louise, the shock of the elopement and gives her time to adjust to it, by delaying the truth. This is in line with Murdoch's idea of mercy, which is to do truth lightly. Wilson A. N. Wilson's later Murdoch fiction tends to depict individuals who are imprisoned by their past and cannot move forward because they cannot forget the past. The break that Aleph makes is a type of essential violence to define her future (Wilson 134). Finally, Murdoch claims that the truth is the possibility of seeing another person as they are, without the fiction of self-interest. In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch says that love is "the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real" (Sovereignty 21). Sometimes this perception is blinded by lies but painful truths can distort love. Clement's deception saves the family unit. Peter's lie saves his ego until he is ready to be humble. Aleph's silence saves her mother from immediate disaster. This struggle between truth and protection leads inevitably to love (Eros) as the mortar that ultimately resolves these ethical inconsistencies.

6. Eros and Agape – Love as the Vehicle for Mercy

In *The Green Knight*, Iris Murdoch argues that love is not just an emotion but a practice of mercy, and that morality can evolve via the death of the egoistic self. Love, as Murdoch explains, is "the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real" (Sovereignty 21). The narrative framework of the novel also introduces such realisation through the various sorts of unions that let characters escape the harsh criteria of justice and enter the regions of mercy. Love relationships, whether romantic or familial, are channels of redemption, through which characters are able to escape from their solitude and live decent lives. A case study of Sefton and Harvey's love is a story about a relationship that was born out of chaos and was a healing process. The union of the crippled Harvey, self-pitying and confined by intellectual austerity in Sefton, are saved. At the height of their lovemaking Sefton realises, 'We are like nothing on earth. "We are made divine" (Murdoch, ch. 4). It is more than a physical attraction, a Murdochian 'attention' saving Harvey from his obsession with his limb, Sefton from her isolated stiffness. Murdoch's ethics, Maria Antonaccio claims, involve a view of the other that substitutes selfish fantasy (Antonaccio 112). The love enables them to transcend their own pain to a communal life, which is the mercy of interpersonal care. Like wise, the marriage of Clement and Louise, which happens late in their lives, heals the natural sore left by the absence of Teddy and Lucas. Their marriage is enriched by the scene at the abandoned theatre when Louise finds Clement avoiding the world. Clement's realisation "It means you need me, it means you love me" (Murdoch, ch. 4) represents a turning point in his earlier noncommittal behaviour. This marriage is a blessing to the survivors, which reconstitutes the family, broken by the past. P. J. Conradi states that in Murdoch's novels human touch often appears as an attempt at reconciliation rather than abstract justice (Conradi 450). Choosing each other personally, Clement and Louise reject the loneliness of grieving, opting instead to follow the challenging route of common life. The marriage between Aleph and Lucas is possibly the most controversial act of kindness. Aleph's letter reveals her point of view: "He is the only person I could dream of marrying. I simply love him" (Murdoch, ch. 4). This relationship suggests that mercy is not denied even to the villain. Lucas, who was earlier shown as icy and retributive, is humanised by Aleph's devotion. According to Anne Rowe, Murdoch's protagonists are frequently redeemed by odd attachments that disrupt moral absolutes (Rowe 185). Aleph's choice validates Lucas' humanity, and that would offer him a chance to be happy, and justice would not allow that.

Finally the link between Joan and Humphrey Hook restores rationality to a situation of disaster. Joan's threats to commit suicide, Hook is a fictional character, but becomes a real-life saviour. His presentation as 'my fiancé,

Humphrey H. Hook from Texas' (Murdoch, ch. 4) finishes the tale of Joan between destruction and building. As A. S. As Byatt puts it, Murdoch's books overcome ethical dilemmas by ordinary human goodness rather than by dramatising it (Byatt 45). Hook is this common good that takes Joan to the reality.

Love in *The Green Knight* is ultimately mercy in action. It enables characters to move from egocentric complaints based on justice to a shared living based on mercy. The sovereign good, writes Murdoch, is "loving attention to others" (Sovereignty 91). Murdoch shows through the unions that justice acknowledges injustice, but that love is the only way to continue existing.

7. Alternative Moral Paths – Bellamy, Moy, and the Natural World

In contrast to Bellamy James and Moy Anderson, Iris Murdoch complicates the moral failings of the older characters in *The Green Knight*. Bellamy starts off as a religious seeker who wants to become monk because he wants to be holy. We see in his letter to Father Damien that he is fighting against his indulgence in self-fantasy rather than spiritual discipline (Murdoch, *Green Knight* 542). But in his last letter to Damien he is advised to leave the cloister: "Be happy yourself and make others happy" (Murdoch, *Green Knight* 543). This paradigm change illuminates Murdoch's philosophical argument that virtue is not in one place of withdrawal, but in active love and taking care of other people (Antonaccio 112). The episode of Bellamy marrying Emil is only a demonstration that holiness is gained by human attachment instead of abstract asceticism, which is also mirrored by the overall shift of the story in the direction of rigorous justice to mercy amongst humans. In Murdoch's books the protagonists are often saved by odd links which violate the moral absolutes, says Conradi. (Conradi 450).

Like that, Moy Anderson is a premoral or transmoral person, for her great attachment to nature. Moy's obsession with rocks, and in particular the lichen-runed obelisk, is her way of trying to restore order to a universe that has fallen out of balance. Her return to the hillside and replacement of the stone where it belongs indicates an awareness of the independent existence of things, a major Murdochian idea (Rowe 78). Furthermore, Moy's struggle with the swan to save a duck and the subsequent restoration of the seals reflect natural mercy beyond human legislation. Byatt argues that the normal resolution of moral tension in Murdoch's novels is through ordinary human virtue rather than spectacular intervention (Byatt 45). The hair Moy cuts is a metaphor of her transition from childlike imagination to mature realisation of loss, yet her spiritual sensitivity is not lost. Wilson (134) argues that in her later work Murdoch has a tendency to create characters that are imprisoned by their past, whereas Moy is able to avoid this through her engagement with nature. The subplots complement the main subject that ethical truth consists in caring for the realities of other human beings and nature. Bellamy learns to serve neighbours, not to seek solitary perfection; Moy learns to respect the fate of stones and creatures. Both characters demonstrate that the rigid rules and self-serving demands of justice must give way to a fluid, loving affection. In *Sovereignty of Good*, love is characterised by Murdoch as a hard realisation, the realisation of the actuality of the self in the other (Murdoch, *Sovereignty* 21). Moy and Bellamy, Murdoch emphasises, show that redemption is not to be obtained via legalistic judgement but by the humble acceptance of the sacredness of the external world.

8. Conclusion

The Green Knight culminates in a tremendous meditation on the intricacy of morality, the fallibility of people and the ineffability of redemption. Iris Murdoch provides her own perspective on how individuals navigate the tension between truth and fantasy to attain virtue through interconnected lives marked by tragedy, shame and desire. The mysterious Peter Mir, the so-called Green Knight, is a figure of an accuser and a grace-giver, who confronts the characters with certain secrets about themselves and their interactions. But there is no simple ending to Murdoch: Lucas and Aleph recede into an uncertain future; Clement and Louise grow up in the face of sadness; Sefton and Harvey start a youthful romantic relationship, still aware of its precariousness; Moy undergoes a quiet transformation in her relation to the natural world; and Bellamy continues his spiritual quest, now chastened by loss. The story suggests that moral evolution is not a matter of dramatic discovery but of patient and careful attention to people, toleration of ambiguity and the courage to love without full knowledge. Murdoch's perspective acknowledges suffering and evil but does not present kindness as a final answer, rather as a tough practice. *The Green Knight* asks us in the end to embrace the messy, flawed state of human life, where justice, eros, and

compassion are always in conversation with each other, and the pursuit for truth, though never ended, is the goal of a decent life.

References:

- [1] Antonaccio, Maria. *Picturing the human: The moral thought of Iris Murdoch*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- [2] Byatt, A. S. *Degrees of Freedom: The Early Novels of Iris Murdoch*. Chatto & Windus, 1965.
- [3] Conradi, P. J. *Iris Murdoch: A Life*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- [4] ---. *Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist*. Macmillan, 1986.
- [5] Halliday, Steven. *Iris Murdoch: A Writer at War*. Sutton Publishing, 2009.
- [6] Murdoch, Iris. *The Green Knight*. Penguin Books, 1995.
- [7] ---. *The Sovereignty of Good*. Routledge, 1970.
- [8] Rowe, Anne, editor. *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- [9] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Edited by J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 1967.
- [10] Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Translated by Charles Forster Smith, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1986.
- [11] Wilson, A. N. *Iris Murdoch as I Knew Her*. Hutchinson, 2003.