
A Journey Towards Self-realization: An Indian Reading of Iris Murdoch's 'Henry and Cato'

Ponapalli Prasanti Prabha^{a*} and Dibba Bhargavi^b

^aResearch Scholar, English Department, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning

^bAssistant Professor, English Department, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning

*corresponding author: ponapalliprasantiprabha@sssihl.edu.in

Address:

Ponapalli Prasanti Prabha (Corresponding Author), Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Anantapur Campus, Opp. Sharada Nagar, Near RDT Office, Po. Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh, 515001

Dibba Bhargavi, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Anantapur Campus, Opp. Sharada Nagar, Near RDT Office, Po. Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh, 515001

Paper Received on 25-03-2023, Accepted on 05-05-2023,
Published on 16-05-23; DOI: 10.36993/ RJOE.2023.8.66

Abstract

Spiritual crisis seems to be the problem of the post-modern psyche, in general, and Murdoch's characters, in particular. This paper intends to highlight the influence of the Indian theological text, *The Bhagavad Gita*, on Iris Murdoch's novel, *Henry and Cato*. The authors have attempted to analyse the character of Cato Forbes. The central concept analyzed in this paper is Cato's state of illusion. Though Cato is considered as one of the most flawed characters, this paper attempts to portray the goodness latent in him. Critics highlight Murdoch and novels as pessimistic and her characters representing hopelessness. On the contrary, this paper, using certain concepts from the *Bhagavad Gita*, will prove how Murdoch's voice resonates with the profound truths irrespective of her seemingly existential plots. This paper aims to make a novel contribution to Murdoch's studies, drawing on some fascinating

sources (including the original commentary from the Iris Murdoch Archives, London).

Keywords: Illusion, Reality, Knowledge, Cato Forbes, and *Bhagavad Gita*

Introduction

Iris Murdoch was deeply fascinated by matters of religion, spirituality, and morality. Also, as Priscilla Martin and Anne Rowe point out that "In the novels of the late 1970s, a deepening mysticism accompanies the formal experimentation and the ubiquitous debates about the possibility of Good in a Godless world" (Rowe & Martin 139). This fascination for goodness in a Godless world is one of the primary reasons why most of her novels contain a spiritual or sometimes religious character. The characters that she invents in

her novel are neither of the highest good nor are they the epitome of perfection. They are ordinary mortals, sometimes flawed, but attempting to tread the path of self-realization. Starting from the early novels, the readers can notice that many characters discuss God's divinity in novels like *The Time of the Angels*. In *The Nice and the Good*, Theo is a Buddhist character. The 1976 novel *Henry and Cato* also has a character Cato, who seems to be a failed saint. Also, in her Booker prize novel, *The Sea the Sea*, we find the characters like Charles Arrowby and James Arrowby, who are intensely influenced by the religion of Buddhism. We can also trace other characters like Anne Cavidge in *Nuns and Soldiers*, Father Bernard Jacoby in *The Philosopher's Pupil*, and Marcus Vallar in *The Message to the Planet*, who are all deeply interested in matters of religion and spirituality.

Many of her characters strive to be good, and this difficulty that an individual confronts is the central issue of most of her novels. They face a lot of hardships and disappointments while journeying on the path of goodness. While a few give in, most of her characters hold on to the good they want to achieve. As an excellent experimental novelist, Murdoch chalks her characters in a way that gives them the room to falter, stumble, and make mistakes. She watches over them patiently until they learn to overcome their mistakes and progress to become better human beings. Despite several weaknesses in her characters, Murdoch helps them strive for the good, even if it sometimes seems to last only momentarily.

Cato is one such character, sometimes called a 'failed priest' by critics. His journey toward goodness and the mistakes he commits is a matter of learning for the other characters in the novel and the readers. As the novel opens, Cato is seen trying to throw a revolver into the River Thames. He is trying to help his criminal friend, Beautiful Joe. Cato is wholly lost and is trying to find a way toward spirituality. Also, as Anne Rowe and Priscilla Martin rightly point out that "Cato is Murdoch's most searching study of a priest who has lost his faith" (Rowe & Martin 139).

Man is carried away by the mistakenly false notions of religion, spirituality, and matters of religion which he mistakenly takes for real. These blurred notions are sometimes clarified through people, institutions, and mainly through our intuitions, experiences, and consciousness. In the case of Cato, he learns through people (Brendan) and primarily through his experiences, intuitions, and consciousness about the true nature of reality. Murdoch says, "The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy, and despair" (Murdoch, *MGM* 123). Even though Cato is aware of the various facets of illusion, his difficulty lies in his inability to refrain from returning to the fantasies of the self. This facet of reality can be compared to what Lord Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita* "In order that our mind and heart may dwell close to God, sensual pleasures are to be abjured" (Bhave

64). Controlling the senses is essential if one intends to achieve stability of mind and keep attention fixed upon reality. Cato tries to look at reality while he is completely engrossed in sensual pleasures. He does not realise that he is under a heavy spell of illusion, and the only way to come out of it is to perceive reality. This leads us to what Murdoch talks about Plato's cave analogy. Ramanathan, in her book, *Figures of Good*, says that if Cato is forced to look at the sun (seeks conversion though he does not understand its true meaning), will he not strain his eyes which will compel him to take refuge in the objects that he can perceive and those that he can vouchsafe to be safe than the ones he is being shown. This experience of Cato proves to the readers that what appears as dazzling truth, if not properly attended to, may turn out to be yet another shadow cast on the wall. Like Bellamy, Cato seemed to have leaped into spirituality without realising the path he had taken.

Cato has two significant flaws. Firstly, it is his obsession or misplaced love for Beautiful Joe, and secondly, his mistaken notion about spirituality and religion. He wishes to become a saviour for Beautiful Joe and redeem him. He secretly wishes to lead an authoritative life. He says, "He knew how much he loved a certain kind of power, the power of the authoritative" (Murdoch *HC* 33). He wanted to have authority over Joe and release him from the burden of sin. Cato almost felt it like a temptation when he thought about redeeming Joe. He says, "To be able to release a man from the burden of sin in the

confessional filled him with an almost too exultant pleasure; and the precious jewel of the priesthood, the mass itself, was to him sometimes almost a temptation" (Murdoch *HC* 33). Though being a priest, Cato could never follow the principles of religion and morality. Although he knew the difference between right and wrong, he never made any sincere attempt to attain the right kind of knowledge. As Ramanathan points out, "The role of emotion in the religious life is explored through the character of Cato to demonstrate both its indispensability and its dangerousness" (Ramanathan 44). Cato's obsession with Joe proves that he cannot keep his emotions under control. Sometimes, he is swayed away by Joe's words. He feels elated when Joe tells him, "I must see you, I must talk to you. You're the only one I can talk to, you don't know what a star you are in my life, you're the only thing that's not bloody rotten and awful around here, you're the only *person* I know—" (Murdoch *HC* 47). Cato's attachment and love for Joe prevent him from seeing the reality, and thus he considers what he is doing as right Murdoch says, "The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really *looking*" (Murdoch *MGM* 87). This philosophy of Murdoch resonates with Krishna's teachings in the Bhagavad Gita. When He says, "Not hoping, not lusting, Bridling body and mind, He calls nothing his own: He acts, and earns no evil" (Bhave 52). One must not expect anything in return for the love that one showers.

On the other hand, Cato's love for Joe blinds him from reality. Cato's

spirituality as a priest had utterly failed him. "His head was now only filled with the pictures of the boy, and he could not use the method of prayer to render them harmless" (Murdoch *HC* 65). Cato could not make his love for Joe seem ordinary. "The ambiguous chaste romance he seeks with Joe is as much above his moral level as Henry's more obviously pretentious renunciations" (Conradi 283). Murdoch also talks about the nature of love in her philosophical work *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. She says, "Love is the general name of the quality of attachment, and it is capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors" (Murdoch *MGM* 86). Love is one such quality that can degrade and uplift an individual. In Cato's context, his initial deranged love for Joe throws him into a bottomless pit, in which he enjoys the pleasures of the world. Later, this same love brings him on the path of self-realisation, wherein he acknowledges his folly of loving someone like Beautiful Joe.

Cato only makes half-hearted attempts to give up Beautiful Joe. However, one day he suddenly gets a sought realisation:

He put out the cigarette, thinking clearly for the first time, I cannot help this boy. Our relationship is a dangerous muddle and nonsense. I must leave him absolutely and for good. I can do nothing for him, nothing. I must say goodbye to him tonight. This is the

logical, the easiest moment to do it. It is, oh God, now. No need to make a drama. I must save myself. I must go away somewhere and think. I must go back to some more innocent place where I can see. (HC 44)

This realisation does not last long for Cato. His obsession for Joe continues to the extent that he is ready to give up Christ for the sake of Joe. These brief glimpses of realisation lead him nowhere. He is confused about love, spirituality, religion, and morality. As a result, Cato cannot exercise his will and freedom in the right direction. Freedom, Murdoch says, is "Not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action. "The freedom which is a proper human goal is the freedom from fantasy. His experience with Joe sometimes makes him think about the righteousness of his actions. Sometimes He wonders, "If he could only break through to some kind of real directness, to some kind of truth with the boy" (Murdoch *HC* 122). He also realises how he is distancing himself from God. Murdoch says, "He was now thinking more about Beautiful Joe than God" (Murdoch *HC* 122). This leads him to think about the truth, which all this while he deliberately decided to close his eyes to reality. Cato's love for Beautiful Joe was not pure or good love. It was completely selfish and sensual love, and he did not

understand the true import of the word 'love'. After Joe backstabs Cato, he realises his mistake and decides to repent for it.

Cato seeks repentance for his mistakes from Brendan. He tells him, "He invaded my life. Everything dissolved everything fell. Oh God, Brendan, I'm so bloody unhappy" (Murdoch *HC* 122). He seeks refuge in Father Brendan. Father Brendan, explaining to him the chief cause of misery, consoles him thus:

Ordinary human consciousness is a tissue of illusion. Our chief illusion is our conception of ourselves, our importance which must not be violated, our dignity which must not be mocked. All our resentment flows from this illusion, all our desire to do violence, to avenge insults, to assert ourselves. We are all mocked, Christ was mocked, nothing can be more important than that. We are absurdities, comic characters in the dream of life, and this is true even if we die in a concentration camp, even if we die upon the cross. But in reality there are no insults because there is nobody

to be insulted. And when you say "there is no one there" perhaps you are upon the brink of an important truth.'

Brendan's assertion on the temporality of the self has an eastern colouring. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna advises Arjuna about the dangers of falling prey to the self. He says, "Those ignorant of the True self, thinking instead that they are the body and the doer, may attempt to renounce worldly actions, but at the inner level they still have the turmoil resulting from their attachment and desires" (Hawley 45). Cato's conversation with Father Brendan makes him realise that he has been trapped in the mire of illusion all this while. Murdoch says, "He felt that he was in a labyrinth in which he must very carefully and meticulously find his way" (Murdoch *HC* 122). It gets arduous for Cato to come to terms with the reality even though he knows what is right and wrong. He says, "I cannot quite feel that it was an illusion, even though I know now that it is not for me" (Murdoch *HC* 122). His love for Joe has created confusion but helped him perceive reality more clearly. Murdoch says, "Love which is only physical treasures mere 'mortal trash' (Symposium 211E), but even bad egoistic love may lead on to teach us virtuous selfless love, and perception of beauty as unselfish attachment can bring about spiritual change" (Murdoch *MGM* 26). Cato's infatuation with Joe leads him toward the path of self-realisation. How does this take place in the novel? Joe kidnaps Cato and demands a heavy ransom from Henry (Cato's friend). He also tries to

rape Cato's sister, Colette. In a fit of anger, Cato kills Joe. It is in this retrospect that Cato starts thinking about his life. This is the moment of unselfing for Cato.

He explains to his brother how he has lost his 'selfish complacent illusions and vanities'. Only when one is stripped of everything that one realises the absolute. In the *Gita*, Krishna says, "When you reach enlightenment, ignorance will delude you no longer. In the light of that knowledge, you will see the entire creation in your own Atman and in me" (Bhave 55).

"How can a man be happy at all, since he cannot ward off the misery of this world? Through a life of knowledge" (Murdoch *MGM* 44). Cato can finally move towards reality and seek happiness as his illusions are forcibly smashed. He realizes his false attraction for Joe which only took him farther from spirituality. By redeeming Joe, Cato traps himself in the web of illusion. It is through father Brendan, that he is able to achieve the right kind to knowledge which will help him move away from self-deception and tread the moral path. Anne Rowe, in her book, *Iris Murdoch: Writers and their Works* argues about the good and religious characters who act as a catalyst for the other characters around them. She says "Even her most morally culpable characters can be spiritually enriched by closeness to those who believe in God, or by the ambience of religious spaces, and may be morally improved and reach a greater psychological freedom by means of them" (Rowe 67). In the case of Cato, He is hand-held by Father Brendan, who helps him achieve the path of self-knowledge.

Murdoch talks about the nature of goodness in her philosophical work, *The Sovereignty of Good*. According to her goodness is an art and this art is perceived and practiced in distinctive ways. These characters also, in a similar manner, embark on a journey towards goodness but often misguide and misperceive themselves (mainly due to egoism). These characters searching for good, traversing different routes, encounter many impediments but that does not hinder them for striving to achieve morality in life. These characters are also the ultimate examples of how "the 'fat relentless ego' can overwhelm the person and destroy the possibilities of moral life" (Browning 95). All the characters, Bruno, Bellamy, and Cato, progress on the path of knowledge and finally make an attempt to move towards self-realization. These characters, though, morally frail, are magnetically pulled towards the idea of perfection.

References

- Bhave, Vinobha. *Talks on the Gita*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960. Print.
- Hawley, Jack. *The Bhagavad Gita: A Walkthrough for Westerners*. California: Novato, 2001. Print.
- Meyers, Jeffrey. *Remembering Iris Murdoch: Letters and Interviews*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Print.
- Murdoch, Iris. *Metaphysics as a Guide to*

Morals. London: Penguin Books, 1992. Print.

_____. *The Sovereignty of Good*, 3rd ed.

Oxon: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960. Print

_____. *Henry and Cato*. London:

Penguin Group, 2010. Print.

Martin, Priscilla and Rowe, Anne. *Iris*

Murdoch: A Literary Life. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.

Nikhilananda, Swami. *The Bhagavad Gita*.

India: Advaita Ashrama, 2010. Print

Rowe, Anne. *Iris Murdoch: Writers and their Works*. London: Northcote House, 2019. Print.

The Narrative Technique in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. She also presented a paper on Iris Murdoch at the University of Oxford. Her research interests include Postmodern Theory and Fiction, Narratology, Literature and Eastern Philosophy.

Dr. Dibba Bhargavi (M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.) is Assistant Professor in the Department of English, at the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Anantapur. As a part of her research work, she has worked on some modern and post-modern British novelists. Her doctoral thesis is on Iris Murdoch studied from Indian perspective. She has guided a number of P.G dissertations and is currently supervising a doctoral thesis in the area of postmodern British Literature. She also presented a paper, in this area, at the University of Oxford. Her teaching, research interests and publications cover Modern & Post-modern British Literature, Novel, Short-story Studies, American Literature, Narratology.

Biographical Information:

Miss Ponapalli Prasanti Prabha is a Doctoral Research Scholar in the Department of English, at the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Anantapur. She worked on a Graduate thesis entitled:

How to cite this article?

Ponapalli Prasanti Prabha* and Dibba Bhargavi“ A Journey Towards Self-realization: An Indian Reading of Iris Murdoch's 'Henry and Cato'” *Research Journal Of English(RJOE)*8(2),PP:60-66-2023, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.2.66