

## Iris Murdoch, the London Novels, a Dickensian Approach

DR. JOAN FERNANDEZ

*Associate Professor, Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow.*

### ABSTRACT

*Reading the novels of Iris Murdoch, a British novelist, one is invariably reminded of writers like Charles Dickens, for whom London was a living presence. Like Dickens, Murdoch's novels, also display a penchant for London surroundings, prominent monuments, common streets and locations, all inserted in the novel with the primary aim of bringing London alive and giving it a living presence, until London becomes a character in the novels.*

**KEYWORDS:** *London, Iris Murdoch, Charles Dickens, Murdoch's London and Dickens London, comparison and contrast.*

### INTRODUCTION

#### DICKENS' LONDON

Thinking about London, streets roads activities and its people from one end of the city to another, one is inevitably reminded of Oliver Twist, when Nancy moves through the dark and murky streets leading to Fagin's house and also of that night that Nancy had a street meeting with Rosemary and Mr Browlow on the bridge. We find yet another description of Mr Barnacle's residence at number 24 Mews Street, Governors Square which was in a hideous little street of dead walls stables and dung hills.

This was London over a century ago. Iris Murdoch now seems to take Dickens' place in the descriptions and depiction of London.

Murdoch presents London both in its grandeur as well as in its decay.

#### Murdoch's London

'Feathery bushes and plump trees posed motionless against white walls yellowed by a powdery sun. Pink roses clambered upon stucco balustrades and multi coloured irises period through painted lattices. (A Fairly Honourable Defeat, p.30)

Against the sophisticated and elegant look of the Boltons, is placed the sordid and decaying atmosphere of Tallis' house in Notting Hill, a step down from Danby's moldy house on Stadium Street.

'Located between the Old Brompton Road and the Fulham Road lies the Brompton Cemetery.

Big houselike tombs, like dwellings of dead, lined the wide central walk which showed in a cold sunny glimpse the curve of distant pillars. In quieter side avenues, humbler graves were straggled about with grass, with here and there a cleared place, a chained space, a chipped mound, a body's length of granite chips, a few recent flowers wilting beside a name.'

(Bruno's Dream, p.133)

### **MURDOCH AND DICKENS, A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

Murdoch's description of various London locales comes very close to Dickens' description. Like Dickens, London roads, streets, houses, cemeteries, lie in the background. Their prominence is not felt but their presence is, when they appear at right places to intensify the emotions experienced by the characters. In fact all events in the novel, seem to emanate from that awful room in Stadium street.

Characters in Murdoch's novels are strongly linked with their surroundings. They enjoy a oneness with their environment whether their surroundings are shabby and decaying, or pleasant and sophisticated.

The vivid description of London streets makes the reader feel a part of London society. Iris Murdoch's description of London is naturalistic. She shows a penchant for minutiae in giving an objective description of the physical side of the city. Through her writings, she reveals her love and concern for London.

She talks about London, feels strongly about things happening in London and most of her novels have a London setting and a vivid portrayal of life in London. Here, Murdoch's semblance and affinity to Dickens, cannot be denied.

#### **Peter J. Conradi opines that**

"London is a real presence in the books, indeed seems to figure sometimes as an extra character, and even where people are having a hellish time there, which is often, the author's loving and patient apprehension of the city comes through. This is more noticeable in that Dickens and Woolf apart, London has lacked distinguished celebrants. There is no touch of neurotic agrarianism in Murdoch, and if London had its Samuel Palmer, it might well be her."

(Peter J. Conradi, p4)

Like Dickens, Murdoch is accustomed to visualising and describing London sites and streets and giving elaborate descriptions of its location and at the same time a careful account of what happened in each place. The need for these detailed descriptions of London houses and lanes arises from the fact that the scenes of London and the characters portrayed are so intermingled that one would seem incomplete without the other.

Louis Martz is of the opinion

"The London novels of Iris Murdoch have their Dickensian quality of detail because they grow from a deep instinctive affection for the London setting whether sordid shabby or genteel. And that affection for the outward traces of man's habitation derives from the theme of love that constitutes the redemptive element in the novels of both writers.

(Louis Martz, p69)

A minute description of London scenery is also present in 'The Nice and the Good' wherein Kate and Octavian Gray, a happily married couple are set against the calm and peaceful and salubrious household in Trescombe, Dorset. Contrary to the complacent and satisfied couple, we have John Duncane who lives in Chelsea but despises it probably because the atmosphere around it is so different from the perpetual calmness reigning in Dorset.

Another description from the same novel makes Murdoch's style very akin to Dickens'. A Dickensian strand in her writing is not only visible but outstandingly obvious.

"Across a moon swept open space we followed what used to be Fyefoot lane, where many a melancholy notice board in the ruins of the city churches and where a public house stood beside the solitary tower of Saint Nicholas we passed into Upper Thames Street. There was no sound, not a bell, not a footstep. We trod softly we turned out of the moonlight into a dark labyrinth of alleys and gutted warehouses where indistinguishable objects loomed in piles.... The rear street lamps revealed pitted brick walls and cast the shadow of an occasional cat."

(Under the Net, p.117)

Such descriptions in Murdoch's novels seem to have a reflection of the dark and dirty murky streets of London talked of so often by Dickens. It reminds one of the time Oliver is led by the Artful Dodger to Fagin's hideout and meets him for the first time.

Murdoch attempts to give her readers a topographical view of London and then shifts their attention to a more personal emotional level. London becomes a part of Murdoch and Murdoch a part of London. The same is true of her characters. Like Dickens, Murdoch attempts the big Canvas crammed with characters. Dickens' personality acted like a gravitational plane that attracted all towards him. His love for characters gave him a reason for producing infinite number of characters for the same plot.

It is said that a man may even be lonely in a crowd. Dickens' characters are like these men for even in the presence of company, they seem to be oppressed by a sense of solitude, brooding over wrongs done to them and drawn imaginatively to the criminal world.

This forms the main theme of David Copperfield and grows out of Dickens' own unpleasant reminiscences of his childhood.

Being an English woman Murdoch, like Dickens feels strongly about London. The reader's attention is first focused on a particular household for maybe a certain individual. Then this picture of the individual is widened and placed against the background of its immediate neighbourhood, be it a factory site as in 'Bruno's Dream' and 'The Flight from the Enchanter' or a sophisticated posh locality in 'The Nice and the Good' or in 'A Fairly Honourable Defeat', the final setting is of the particular household and the various happenings taking place in the city or the country concerned. Murdoch's view seems to be microscopic in the first phase referring to a minute inspection and observation of a group of people and telescopic in the second phase meaning a widening of vision in viewing the same people, but now placed in a wider and more spacious atmosphere.

While describing London, Dickens places before his readers an aerial view of London, London pictured from above. He talks about streets running into one another, churches, buildings and the

other significant landmarks and his similarity in his treatment of London is unmistakable and cannot be ignored.

### **Murdoch And Dickens: A Contrast**

Not only does Dickens describe London streets, but like a camera lens, focuses on a particular household, the subject of his story. The accuracy and intense care he takes to portray the details of the house cannot be overlooked. The furniture and the position of various articles is revealed and with it comes a circumspective examination of the character's nature and behaviour. Hence Dickens' descriptions are superficial and at the same time particular. The only difference between Iris Murdoch and Dickens lies in the fact that Murdoch proceeds from the particular to the general while the reverse is true of Dickens.

Dickens was devoid of any contact with the bureaucracy and upper aristocratic class which naturally showed in an absence of the representation in his works. His imagination was stimulated by what he himself experienced during the most susceptible period of his life, that is his youth. Dickens belonged to a poor middle-class family which lived in and around London. Dickens' intellectual genius was born of the union of his experience and his imagination. Certain aspects of life struck deep roots in him and set fire to his creative energy. For Scott it was the border country, for Hardy, rural Wessex and for Dickens, London, which featured in his works. Dickens' view of London was however the product of his fantastic imagination. It was a grotesque and realistic portrait of London. He skillfully moulded and modified London by accentuating its idiosyncrasies to a fantastic degree. Certain aspects of his life could not be modified and then Dickens would use exaggeration. His use of exaggeration has been criticised by some, but others like David Cecil, praise him and remark that exaggeration is a sign that Dickens' imagination was working.

Murdoch is formally educated and has an aristocratic background. Consequently her view of London and her society differs significantly from the slums of Oliver Twist former the law courts of Bleak House, the West End of Little Dorrit, the waterside of Our Mutual Friend or the suburbs of Nicholas Nickleby. 'All these form part of the same world, the world which is not London but which London has stimulated Dickens' fancy to create'. Iris Murdoch's London portrays more of the higher strata of society.

Dickens knew London in and out. He had traversed streets of London as a boy and as a youth. London for him had a personal touch. When he spoke about London, it was his heart which spoke out, his feelings went out to the masses who

were part of his own self, his involvement with London was highly personal. Iris Murdoch's picture of London is evidently coloured by her love and concern for London, which obviously lacks the intensity of Dickens. Murdoch has seen London but her's is a detached and objective view. She sees London as one would observe a valley landscape from the top of a hill. The view is clear to the minutest detail but lacks the sympathy and intimacy of Dickens. Nevertheless her descriptions of London and Londoners are accurate and tangible. Dickens saw life as a child does – magnified and full of sentiment. His aim was always to bring an extra tear by overstating a fact.

Murdoch's judicious mixture of the various elements in her novels keeps the reader content, for be it suspense or romance, Murdoch's seems to stop exactly at a point where the reader is made aware of the mood of the novelist and the characters. He waits for more but a denial of giving him an excess, keeps the novel well-balanced. Even the endings of a novels are not well defined and much is implied and left to the reader's imagination.

Talking about endings, one would notice that Dickens' novels usually end with the marriage of the hero and the heroine, fortunes changing, conflicts getting resolved, differences getting sorted out, and the villain of the piece, getting punished for his wickedness. Murdoch 's novels strike along a different, path. The hero and heroine , in many cases, remain separate and even in the last chapter, events may change drastically and quite unexpectedly.

## CONCLUSION

It is therefore amply evident that Murdoch in very many ways comes very close to Dickens in her description of London. It would therefore not be wrong to give her the reputation of being the most important heir to the Dickensian tradition.

## WORKS CITED

- i. Murdoch, Iris, Bruno's Dream (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969) p133
- ii. Murdoch Iris, Under the Net (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954) p117
- iii. Peter J Conradi, Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist (England: Macmillan)
- iv. Louis L Martz, 'Iris Murdoch: The London Novels, Twentieth Century Literature in Retrospect, 1971.