

Exploring Post human Subjectivity in the Select Novels of Iris Murdoch

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Abstract

This paper approaches to study Iris Murdoch's select novels on Posthumanism. Posthumanism is a philosophical and cultural perspective that explores what it means to be human in the context of evolving technology, biology, and society. It challenges traditional human-centric views by considering how advancements in fields like artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and cybernetics might reshape our understanding of humanity. Iris Murdoch is remembered as one of the most influential British novelists of the 20th century. Her work continues to be studied for its unique blend of philosophical depth and literary craftsmanship. Murdoch's novels, such as *The Sea*, *The Sea*, *The Bell*, *The Black Prince* and *Under the Net*, showcase these themes, creating rich tapestries of character and narrative that explore the depths of human experience. Her novels are known for their rich, multi-layered narratives and psychological depth, often incorporating elements of philosophy and existential thought. Iris Murdoch indirectly addresses the concept of posthumanism in her works, as the term and its theoretical frameworks were developed more prominently after her time. However, her philosophical and literary work provides valuable insights that can be related to discussions of posthumanism. This paper surveys how Murdoch's exploration of love, particularly in its capacity to expand one's perspective beyond selfish concerns, can be seen as relevant to posthumanism's ethical considerations. Posthumanism often involves rethinking ethics in the context of new technologies and entities, and Murdoch's emphasis on selflessness and moral attention might contribute to these discussions.

Key Words: Cultural Prospective, human-Centric, biotechnology, cybernetics, ethical

Post humanistic Panorama in Iris Murdoch's Select Novels

Posthumanism in literature explores themes beyond traditional humanism, challenging the boundaries of what it means to be human. This genre delves into concepts like the integration of technology with human life, the implications of artificial intelligence, and the reimagining of identity, consciousness, and society. Stories often explore the merging of humans with technology, such as cybernetic enhancements, AI, and virtual realities. This can challenge notions of identity and selfhood. Posthumanism often questions the centrality of humans in the world, exploring the agency of non-human entities like animals, machines, and ecosystems. The genre frequently reimagines what constitutes identity, consciousness, and the self, particularly in contexts where humans and machines intersect. Many works explore the ethical implications of technological advancements, such as cloning, genetic engineering, and AI, questioning what it means to act ethically in a world where the boundaries between human and non-human are indistinct. Posthumanism often addresses the relationship between humans and the environment, emphasizing interconnectedness and challenging human-centred worldviews. These themes reflect



a growing interest in understanding humanity's place in a rapidly changing world, where technology and other non-human elements increasingly influence our lives and identities.

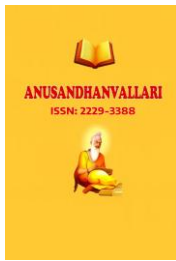
Posthumanism is a philosophical and cultural perspective that explores what it means to be human in the context of evolving technology, biology, and society. It challenges traditional human-centric views by considering how advancements in fields like artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and cybernetics might reshape our understanding of humanity. Here are some key aspects of posthumanism, the first and the foremost one is human enhancement in which Posthumanism often involves discussions about enhancing human capabilities through technology. This includes physical augmentation, cognitive enhancements, and even the possibility of merging with machines. The next point is Artificial Intelligence as AI becomes more sophisticated, Posthumanism examines how our interactions with machines might redefine our concepts of consciousness, identity, and agency.

The third fact is philosophical shifts in which it questions traditional philosophical boundaries between human and non-human entities, suggesting that our ethical and existential considerations might need to expand to include artificial beings or non-human life forms. The important and central idea of Posthumanism is ethical considerations which inspect ethical questions regarding the implications of human enhancement and AI. Issues such as inequality, privacy, and the potential loss of human values are central to these discussions. All the facts lead to posthuman futures which mean to speculate about future scenarios where humans might transcend their current biological and cognitive limitations, leading to new forms of existence and interaction. Overall, posthumanism encourages a re-evaluation of what it means to be human in an increasingly technological and interconnected world.

Iris Murdoch is remembered as one of the most influential British novelists of the 20th century. Her work continues to be studied for its unique blend of philosophical depth and literary craftsmanship. Her contributions to both philosophy and literature have left a lasting impact, and her novels are still widely read and appreciated today. Murdoch is best known for her novels, which blend philosophical insights with intricate plots and complex characters. Her writing often addresses themes of good and evil, moral dilemmas, and the nature of human relationships. Some of her most celebrated novels include *Under the Net* (1954), *The Bell* (1958), *A Severed Head* (1961), *The Nice and the Good* (1968), *The Black Prince* (1973), and *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), which won the Booker Prize. Her novels are known for their rich, multi-layered narratives and psychological depth, often incorporating elements of philosophy and existential thought.

Iris Murdoch is known for her complex narratives and deep exploration of philosophical and psychological themes. Here are some recurring themes in her novels is morality and ethics. Murdoch often delves into questions of good and evil, morality, and the ethical dilemmas faced by her characters. She explores how people navigate their moral choices and the impact of those choices on themselves and others. In the subject of love and relationships, the nature of love, in all its forms—romantic, platonic, and spiritual—is a central theme in Murdoch's work. She examines the complexities and ambiguities of love, including unrequited love, the idea of love as a form of power, and the self-deceptions that often accompany it. Murdoch's characters often struggle with the tension between free will and determinism. She explores how much control individuals have over their own lives and the extent to which their actions are shaped by external forces, such as fate or societal expectations. The quest for self-understanding and identity is a recurring theme in Murdoch's novels. Her characters frequently undergo personal transformations or face crises that force them to confront who they really are.

Murdoch, also a philosopher of aesthetics, often includes discussions about the role of art, literature, and beauty in her novels. She considers how art can provide insight into the human condition and offer a form of redemption or transcendence. Many of her novels explore dynamics of power and control within personal relationships, highlighting how people manipulate or dominate others, often unconsciously. Murdoch's characters are often unpredictable, with complex motivations and actions that defy simple categorization. She challenges the reader to understand and empathize with their inner conflicts and contradictions. Influenced by existentialism and



Christian theology, Murdoch frequently incorporates philosophical and religious discussions into her novels, questioning the nature of existence, the meaning of life, and the possibility of spiritual redemption. Murdoch's novels, such as *The Sea*, *The Bell*, and *Under the Net*, showcase these themes, creating rich tapestries of character and narrative that explore the depths of human experience.

Iris Murdoch theories often intersect her philosophical work and her literary writing, providing a comprehensive view of her intellectual landscape. Murdoch believed in the existence of objective moral values, which she referred to as "the Good." She argued that moral understanding is akin to vision, where one must strive to see reality clearly and truthfully. This vision is often clouded by self-centeredness and illusions. She emphasized that morality involves a constant effort to overcome these distortions and see things as they truly are.

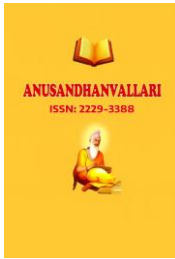
A central idea in Murdoch's philosophy is the concept of "unselfing," which involves moving beyond self-centeredness to perceive the world more accurately and compassionately. She believed that self-centeredness distorts our perception of reality and impedes our moral growth. Through attention and love, one can transcend the ego and approach a more objective understanding of others and the world. Murdoch saw art and literature as essential tools for moral and spiritual development. She believed that great art helps people see the world more clearly by presenting reality in a way that is free from personal bias. Art, in her view, could serve as a training ground for moral perception, encouraging individuals to look beyond themselves and understand different perspectives.

Murdoch was critical of existentialism and behaviourism, particularly the views of Jean-Paul Sartre and B.F. Skinner. She argued that existentialism, with its emphasis on radical freedom and the absence of inherent meaning, overlooked the importance of moral truths and the role of love in ethical life. Similarly, she criticized behaviourism for reducing human actions to mere responses to stimuli, ignoring the complex inner life and moral considerations that influence behaviour. Murdoch contributed to the revival of virtue ethics, focusing on the development of moral character rather than the strict application of moral rules. She emphasized the importance of virtues like humility, love, and compassion. Her work in moral psychology explored how people's inner lives—thoughts, emotions, and motivations—shape their moral actions.

In her book *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch argued that goodness is a fundamental and transcendent aspect of reality. She claimed that the concept of the Good has a central place in moral philosophy, and that moral philosophy should focus on the individual's quest for goodness. This work criticizes the prevailing trends in analytic philosophy, which she felt neglected the importance of moral vision and the complexity of human experience. Murdoch's philosophical work is characterized by its deep engagement with literature, psychology, and metaphysics, making her contributions unique and interdisciplinary. She sought to integrate the moral and aesthetic dimensions of life, arguing that the pursuit of truth, beauty, and goodness are interconnected. Murdoch's life and work reflect a deep engagement with questions about morality, identity, and the human condition, making her a significant figure in both philosophical and literary circles.

Iris Murdoch indirectly address the concept of posthumanism in her works, as the term and its theoretical frameworks were developed more prominently after her time. However, her philosophical and literary work provides valuable insights that can be related to discussions of posthumanism. Murdoch's philosophical writings emphasize the importance of the self and its moral development. In *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), she argues for a vision of moral goodness that transcends self-interest and personal gain. This view of the self as something that can be refined and transcended can be related to posthumanist ideas about evolving or enhancing human capacities. Murdoch believed in the possibility of moral and existential self-transcendence, which resonates with posthumanist themes of surpassing current human limitations and achieving new forms of existence or identity.

Murdoch's exploration of love, particularly in its capacity to expand one's perspective beyond selfish concerns, can be seen as relevant to posthumanism's ethical considerations. Posthumanism often involves



rethinking ethics in the context of new technologies and entities, and Murdoch's emphasis on selflessness and moral attention might contribute to these discussions. Her ideas on moral responsibility and the nature of good could provide a framework for considering ethical issues in a posthuman context, where traditional notions of responsibility might need to be reevaluated.

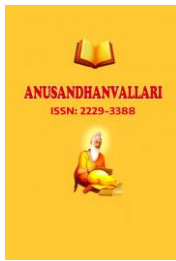
Iris Murdoch's novels do not clearly tackle posthumanism as it is understood today, but they do explore themes that intersect with or foreshadow some posthumanist concerns. Her work delves into the complexities of human nature, identity, and morality, all of which are relevant to posthumanist discussions. Murdoch's novels often feature characters grappling with their own identities, moral dilemmas, and existential crises. For instance, in *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), the protagonist Charles Arrowby experiences a profound identity crisis and self-reflection. This focus on the self and its transformation resonates with posthumanist themes of evolving or transcending human identity.

In novels like *The Black Prince* (1973), characters strive for self-understanding and personal growth. Murdoch's interest in self-transcendence and moral development parallels posthumanist ideas about surpassing current human limitations. This novel explores complex ideas related to identity, reality, and the nature of art and love, which can be connected to posthumanist thought. The novel's protagonist, Bradley Pearson, experiences a fragmented sense of self, torn between his public persona and his private desires. This exploration of identity aligns with posthumanist ideas that challenge the notion of a stable, unified self. Posthumanism often examines how identities are constructed, fluid, and influenced by external factors, mirroring Bradley's struggles with his own sense of self.

The Black Prince delves into the role of the artist and the nature of artistic creation, questioning the boundaries between reality and fiction. This focus on art can be linked to posthumanist themes by exploring how artistic expression transcends traditional human experiences, potentially connecting with broader questions about consciousness and the limits of human understanding. Murdoch's novel examines the complexities of moral decision-making and the ambiguity of good and evil, challenging traditional ethical frameworks. Posthumanism similarly questions established moral and ethical systems, especially in the context of technological and scientific advancements that complicate our understanding of right and wrong. The novel explores intense and often troubling relationships, including themes of power, manipulation, and the complexity of human emotions. These dynamics can be viewed through a posthumanist perspective that considers the interconnectedness of individuals and the influence of external forces on personal relationships and identity formation. Bradley's introspective journey and his philosophical musings on truth, reality, and self-knowledge reflect a posthumanist curiosity about the nature of existence. Posthumanism often involves questioning accepted truths and exploring new ways of understanding the world beyond human-centric perspectives.

The structure of *The Black Prince* also lends itself to a posthumanist reading. The novel is presented as a text written by Bradley Pearson, followed by various appendices and commentaries by other characters, challenging the reader's perception of reality and truth. This multi-layered narrative can be seen as reflecting posthumanist ideas about the multiplicity of perspectives and the constructed nature of narratives and realities. The novel *The Black Prince* is a posthumanist novel, its exploration of identity, art, morality, and the complexity of human relationships can be interpreted through a posthumanist lens. The novel's philosophical depth and questioning of traditional concepts align with the posthumanist ethos of challenging established norms and expanding the boundaries of human thought and experience.

Murdoch's exploration of morality and the nature of good often involve characters who confront ethical dilemmas and personal shortcomings. In *The Bell* (1958), the story revolves around a religious community and its struggles with personal and collective morality. This examination of ethical behaviour and selflessness relates to posthumanist concerns about how new forms of existence and technology might affect our moral frameworks. *The Bell* can be interpreted through a posthumanist lens due to its exploration of themes like the de-centering of



the human subject, the questioning of fixed identities, and the influence of external systems on individual lives. The characters in *The Bell* often struggle with their identities, which are shaped by personal desires, societal expectations, and spiritual beliefs. Posthumanism questions the concept of a fixed, stable identity, suggesting that identities are fluid and constructed through various influences. In the novel, characters such as Dora Greenfield and Michael Meade undergo significant transformations, challenging the notion of a consistent self. The novel is set in an isolated religious community, Imber Court, where individuals are interconnected and their lives are deeply intertwined. This setting reflects posthumanist ideas about the interconnectedness of all beings and the impact of community and environment on individuals.

The novel explores how communal life and shared beliefs shape personal identities and moral choices, echoing posthumanist concerns with the interconnectedness of life. Murdoch's exploration of moral and spiritual dilemmas in "The Bell" aligns with posthumanist critiques of traditional moral frameworks. The characters grapple with issues of faith, sin, and redemption, often finding that conventional moral guidelines do not fully address the complexities of their experiences. Posthumanism often challenges established moral systems, particularly in light of technological and social changes. The religious setting of Imber Court acts as a system that influences and, at times, constrains the characters' choices and identities. Posthumanism often examines how external systems—be they technological, social, or cultural—shape and sometimes limit human experiences and identities. In *The Bell*, the religious and social norms of the community serve as a microcosm for examining these influences. The religious setting of Imber Court acts as a system that influences and, at times, constrains the characters' choices and identities. Posthumanism often examines how external systems—be they technological, social, or cultural—shape and sometimes limit human experiences and identities.

Murdoch's emphasis on understanding and empathizing with others is crucial in her work. For example, in *A Severed Head* (1961), interpersonal relationships and moral choices are central to the narrative. This focus on empathy and moral responsibility can be linked to posthumanist questions about interactions between enhanced or artificial beings and humans. In *Under the Net* (1954), Murdoch critiques the limitations of rationalism and intellectualism through the character of Jake Donaghue. This critique is relevant to posthumanism, which often questions the adequacy of rationality in addressing the complexities of human existence and the implications of advanced technologies. While not openly focused on technology, Murdoch's novels sometimes explore how characters' lives are mediated by various social and personal forces.

In *The Nice and the Good* (1968), the influence of external events and personal relationships plays a significant role in shaping characters' experiences. This theme can be extended to consider how emerging technologies might mediate human experience in a posthuman context. Murdoch's novels often delve into existential questions about meaning, identity, and the nature of reality. For example, *The Time of the Angels* (1966) explores themes of time, existence, and the supernatural. These existential concerns align with posthumanist inquiries into how future developments might reshape our understanding of existence and human experience.

Iris Murdoch, a posthumanism critic, engages with themes and ideas that intersect with posthumanist thought. Her philosophical and literary works offer a nuanced exploration of human nature, ethics, and identity that can be related to discussions within posthumanism. Murdoch's philosophy places a strong emphasis on transcending self-centeredness and developing moral integrity. In works like *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), she argues that true moral goodness involves moving beyond selfish desires and focusing on the well-being of others. This focus on overcoming egoism could critique posthumanism's potential emphasis on self-enhancement and individualistic aspirations. Murdoch might question whether technological or biotechnological advancements risk reinforcing rather than overcoming self-centered behaviours.

Murdoch's work is deeply rooted in humanistic values, emphasizing the importance of empathy, ethical responsibility, and the capacity for personal growth. Posthumanism often involves questioning or redefining traditional humanistic values in light of technological advancements and the potential rise of non-human entities.



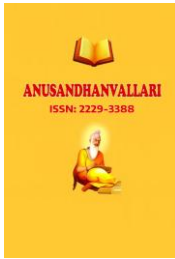
Murdoch's emphasis on the inherent value of human relationships and ethical behaviour could serve as a critique of posthumanist tendencies to prioritize technological progress over these fundamental humanistic principles. Murdoch critiques the limits of rationalism and intellectualism in understanding human experience and morality. In *Under the Net* (1954), she addresses the inadequacies of purely rational approaches to human problems. Posthumanism often challenges the primacy of rationality by incorporating new forms of intelligence and consciousness, such as artificial intelligence. Murdoch's critique might question whether posthumanist visions adequately address the moral and existential dimensions of human life beyond rational calculations.

Murdoch's novels often explore the complexities of interpersonal relationships and the importance of authentic connections with others. In *The Bell* (1958) and *The Black Prince* (1973), the intricacies of human relationships are central themes. Posthumanism's exploration of relationships between humans and non-human entities could be critiqued by Murdoch's emphasis on the depth and authenticity of human-to-human connections, raising questions about whether technological entities can truly replicate or understand these dynamics. Murdoch's ethical philosophy emphasizes responsibility, compassion, and the moral imperative to understand and care for others. In a posthumanist context, where new technologies and entities challenge traditional moral frameworks, Murdoch might critique whether these advancements adequately consider the moral implications of their impact on human and non-human life. Murdoch's engagement with existential questions about identity and the nature of reality, as seen in novels like *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), provides a foundation for critiquing posthumanist ideas about the future of human existence. She might challenge whether posthumanist visions of transcendence or transformation address the existential needs and concerns that she sees as central to the human condition.

Iris Murdoch's novels and philosophical works offer a wealth of insights and lessons that can be applied to both personal and philosophical reflections. Here are some key lessons to be learned from her body of work: Murdoch's characters often undergo journeys of self-discovery, revealing the importance of understanding oneself. She teaches that self-awareness is crucial for personal growth and moral development. By examining our motives, desires, and biases, we can better understand our actions and make more ethical choices. Murdoch emphasizes the importance of love and compassion as central virtues. She explores different forms of love—romantic, platonic, and spiritual—and suggests that genuine love involves seeing others clearly and treating them with kindness and respect. She argues that love helps to overcome selfishness and fosters a deeper connection with others.

Murdoch believed that art and literature are not merely forms of entertainment but are crucial for moral and spiritual growth. Great art can help us see the world more clearly, expand our understanding of different perspectives, and cultivate empathy. She suggests that engaging with art is a way to practice the "unselfing" process, allowing us to see beyond our own experiences. Murdoch's works often highlight the complexity and ambiguity inherent in moral decision-making. She challenges the idea of simple right or wrong answers, instead portraying characters faced with difficult, nuanced ethical dilemmas. This underscores the importance of careful consideration, humility, and the willingness to accept the complexity of human life.

A recurring theme in Murdoch's work is the need to see things as they truly are, without illusions or self-deception. She argues that much of our suffering and moral failure comes from our refusal to face reality. By striving for honesty and clarity in our perceptions, we can make more authentic and responsible choices. Murdoch often explored the relationship between moral goodness, truth, and beauty. She suggested that the pursuit of these ideals is interconnected and essential to a meaningful life. Recognizing and valuing beauty, seeking truth, and striving for goodness can lead to a more fulfilling and ethically engaged life. Many of Murdoch's characters struggle with pride and the desire for control. She highlights the importance of humility as a virtue, suggesting that acknowledging our limitations and weaknesses is essential for personal growth. Pride, on the other hand, can lead to self-deception and moral blindness.



Murdoch's concept of "unselfing" teaches the importance of moving beyond self-centeredness to genuinely consider others' perspectives and needs. This process can lead to greater empathy, moral clarity, and ethical behavior. Murdoch emphasizes the importance of our inner lives—thoughts, emotions, and imagination—in shaping our actions and moral decisions. She encourages paying attention to our inner world, as it profoundly influences how we relate to others and the world. Murdoch believed that moral development is a lifelong process. She encourages continual self-reflection, learning, and striving toward moral improvement, recognizing that perfection is unattainable but progress is always possible. Through these lessons, Iris Murdoch's work invites readers to engage deeply with their own ethical and philosophical beliefs, encouraging a thoughtful and compassionate approach to life.

Iris Murdoch's novels engage with themes of identity, morality, and existential inquiry that are relevant to posthumanist thought, even if she did not directly address posthumanism. Her focus on the complexities of human nature and ethical behavior offers a valuable perspective for considering how future developments in technology and philosophy might impact our understanding of what it means to be human. While Iris Murdoch did not openly engage with posthumanism, her philosophical and literary work provides a rich basis for critiquing and engaging with posthumanist ideas. Her focus on overcoming self-centeredness, the value of humanistic ethics, the limitations of rationalism, and the significance of genuine interpersonal relationships offers a perspective that can critique or complement posthumanist approaches. Her work encourages a thoughtful consideration of how technological and philosophical advancements impact our understanding of morality, identity, and human nature. Posthumanism cannot be replaced by traditional ethics and morality because it offers a broader, more inclusive framework that encompasses both human and non-human considerations. It challenges established norms and provides tools for navigating the ethical and philosophical questions that arise from technological and scientific advancements. While traditional ethics and morality remain essential for guiding human behaviour, posthumanism extends these discussions into new, often uncharted territories, making it a crucial complement to traditional ethical frameworks in contemporary society.

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