

Iris Murdoch's *Bruno's Dream*: A Phantasmagoric World**Dr. Charu Mehrotra,**

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DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2020.4.6.19**Abstract**

The celebrated philosopher-novelist, Iris Murdoch, has made an extensive use of classical mythology to elaborate her central themes of Love and Goodness in almost all her novels beginning from *Under the Net* (1954). However, her 12th novel, *Bruno's Dream* (1969) is a unique work in as much as in it she has projected her views on life and death through the Indian myths of Maya and Shiva/Parvati. Bruno, the central character of the novel, is an ugly and repulsive old man, yet he stands as the focal point of love and forgiveness in the fabric of the story. Through his example the other characters undertake a moral pilgrimage, and rediscover love and meaning in their lives.

Keywords- Myth, Sympathy, Anxiety, Realization, Sufferings

The myth of Shiva and Parvati pervades every love relationship in the novel, *Bruno's Dream* for it illustrates that only through suffering can one achieve love. Bruno suffers in his last days. Danby's duel with Will Boase and his close shave with death, both serve to reform Danby and Bruno. Danby has yet to suffer the pain of being parted from Lisa before he can gain her love. The sub-plot of the novel is a statement on ordinary love. Will Boase and Adelaide Decrecy, both manipulate each other for their selfish motives. They are finally united after the duel with Danby. Murdoch shows their future together as in melodramatic Victorian fiction, complete with sons and success, but there is an absence of a deep understanding.

Maya is a comprehensive concept in Indian philosophy signifying illusions and falsehood. It is an embodiment of the human ego, the root of selfishness, and the fountain-head of all carnal desires. Maya is the goddess of mundane existence and "the eternal weaver of the webs of illusion" (Cirlot 290). Indian philosophy aims at preventing people from becoming victims of their own Maya and entering "into a reality outside and beneath the intellectual and emotional convolutions that enwrap our conscious being" (Zimmer 26). Murdoch's moral philosophy is influenced by Indian philosophy. She believes that "the self, the place where we live is a place of illusion" (Sovereignty 93). Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially

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conceals the world” (Sovereignty 84). Putting forward Murdoch's own view, Nigel, Bruno's male nurse says:

A human being hardly ever thinks about other people. He contemplates fantasms which resemble them and which he has decked out for his own purposes (239).

It is only when man attempts “to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is.” (Sovereignty 93) that Goodness and Enlightenment come. While talking to Lisa, Bruno says, “I'd like to know what I'm like... I want to get it into focus” (Dream 175). Lisa answers: “Leave yourself. It's just an agitating puppet. Think about other things, think about anything that's good. Brooding about the past is so often fantasy” (Dream 176).

The major characters in Bruno's Dream initially move in a phantasmagorical world where Maya weaves illusions. Later they leave this world to enter into the world of reality where they find selfless love. Attainment of love through negation of self is beautifully symbolized in the Indian myth of God Shiva and his consort Parvati. Let us take Bruno's case. The fear of death and its close footfalls change the bedridden man, wallowing in self pity and living in the past, to come to terms with life. On the threshold of death, Bruno feels that life has cheated him and wonders “what had happened to him and what was it all about and did it matter now that it was practically over” (9), and whether there was “any point in starting to think about it all now, in setting up the idea of being Good now, of repenting or something” (9). The moment Bruno accepts his own nothingness he pierces through the dream, that is this life, and understands what love is. This knowledge brings him close to real life.

The understanding of love makes Bruno begin moving on the path of forgiveness. He wants to meet his son and repent for his past misdeeds which include prejudice - for not accepting his son Miles's Indian wife, Parvati, deception-his affair with Maureen; hatred which he feels against his wife, Janie, when she discovers his affair and withholding forgiveness by refusing to meet her when she asks for him at her death-bed. He sends his son-in-law, Danby Odell, with the message of reconciliation and the latter's visit to Miles sparks off a number of love affairs between the two households.

Danby, a widower, plunges into one affair after another. Leaving his house-keeper-mistress, Adelaide, he begins a short flirtation with Diana, Miles's second wife, and subsequently, when he meets her sister Lisa, Danby transfers his affection to her. But Lisa loves Miles, and the latter discovers his reciprocal feelings only when Danby makes advances towards her. Diana, who had dedicated her life to her husband, is almost shattered with the knowledge. Adelaide discovers she loves her cousin Will Boase only when Danby rejects her.

Bruno, Miles and Danby had wrapped their first wives in an aura of romanticism. This has to be dispelled before they can embark on a new relationship. Guilt and humiliation mar Bruno's love for his wife, Janie. He, however, blames her for this. He is afraid that he too will die a lonely and unforgiven death. Miles is unable to accept the reality of Parvati's death and attempts to immortalise her in the poem ‘Shiva and Parvati’. He settles for a placid marriage

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with Diana because he feels that emotional involvement with another woman will be a sacrilege to Parvati. Danby, on the other hand, is involved with a number of women after his wife Gwen's death. Simultaneously, he believes that the "intense high and spiritual" love he knew with Gwen cannot be equaled with anybody else. For him:

Gwen had been reality and his subsequent life had been a dream. . . he decided that, like other people he was not made for reality he could not now, without Gwen even conceive of any possibility other than the dream life of the hommemyensensual which to the tips of his fingers he so absolutely was. (142)

None of the three widowers are capable of true love, the love that accepts death, the love that lives with death. They are rudely awakened from their romantic dreams by the advent of Nigel, a devotee of Indian mysticism. He brushes off others' romantic cobwebs and awakens them to the reality of death. This awakening is, for Murdoch, the beginning of love. The supreme Hindu Trinity consists of 'Brahma'-the Creator, 'Vishnu' -the Preserver, and 'Shiva' -the Destroyer. However, 'Shiva' is considered supreme by some sects. He is the Lord of Destruction, and "destruction is considered a necessary Prelude to Creation" (Thomas 27). His nature "at once transcends all the polarities of the living world" (Zimmer 126). "The Divine Yogi, the model and arch-ascetic of Gods" (Zimmer 115), "the personification of the Absolute", and "the embodiment of Super-Death" (Zimmer 167).

The cosmic dancer releases "the soul of men from illusions" (Coomarswamy 313). Parvati, the consort of Shiva, won him through severe penance. The myth becomes an effective parable of perfect love which denies the self and accepts death. Parvati, daughter of the Himalayas, lured Shiva out of an intense period of meditation and asceticism and became his wife. Failing to win Shiva her beauty or devotion, she then gave up the world, became contemptuous of physical beauty and began to practice severe penances and starve her body. Once she lost her beauty, Shiva, disguised as a Brahmin youth, appeared and asked her why anyone so beautiful would torture herself for the God of Destruction. Parvati checked his criticism and defended Shiva, reaffirming her love for him. The youth took off his disguise, and Shiva and Parvati were united.

Like Parvati, Diana and Lisa learn to replace "cool self-love" with selfless love from their acceptance of death. Lisa is introduced as the "bird with a broken wing", a woman racked by tuberculosis, "nervy and reticent and silent and solitary." Yet she is capable of comforting Bruno. On the other hand, Diana thrives on "her dream picture of herself. She is a "cheerful unanxious person, endowed with good looks and an aura of self-satisfaction." Bruno's ugliness repulses her. But she is humbled "to the point of annihilation" by the revelation of Miles's love for Lisa. So far she had led a shallow life confident of her superior charm.

Lisa and Diana are alike in their acceptance of the illusion of romantic love. Lisa breaks off her romantic involvement with Miles by telling him: "We must keep this love

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uncontaminated even if we kill it. This is real death. We shall forget each other" (226). She is shaken out of her complacency by her feelings for Miles. Her character undergoes a humanization when she realises that she is "only a woman" who wants "warmth and love, affection, laughter, happiness" (296). "I don't want to live upon the rack" (296), she says. The novel culminates with Lisa as "a picture of life at its most explosively robust and hopeful" (306). She is now ready to love Danby.

Diana forgives Miles and Lisa, and begins to love Bruno. She, however, "felt herself growing older and one day when she looked in the glass she saw that she resembled... Lisa as Lisa used to be" (309). Like the goddess Parvati, Diana finds love in the acceptance of death, for loving Bruno is "like loving death itself" (309). She lived the reality of death and felt herself made nothing by it and denuded of desire. Yet love still existed and it was the only thing that existed" (311).

Acting as an intermediary between the world of illusion (self-love) and reality (love of others) is Nigel, Bruno's nurse. Nigel plays the role of 'Bodhisattva', a helper of the Buddha, who indicates the path that Lisa, Diana, and even Danby in his casual way, are to follow as the action develops. But Nigel's role is neither clearly nor palpably defined.

Nigel first appears in the novel dancing and meditating: "In the beginning was Om, Omphalos, Om Phallos, black undivided round devoid of consciousness or self" (928). Zimmer notes that Aum or OM (A and U combine) is a mystical utterance, "an expression and affirmation of the totality of creation... A is the state of waking consciousness, together with its world of gross experience. U-is the state of dreaming consciousness... M- is the state of dreamless sleep undifferentiated consciousness" (Zimmer 154). And "Om" is the word uttered by Shiva when he establishes his supremacy over Brahma' and 'Vishnu' (Coomaraswamy 286). Shiva is revered as both the God of creation and the God of Love. This dual but complementary role is symbolised by the Lingam or phallus which is worshipped ritualistically by the devotees of Shiva. Later as Nigel glides through the city at night, looking into windows "dusky white-clad worshippers are silently carrying white fragrant garlands to lay upon the greasy lingam of great Shiva" (86). Further, association between Nigel and Shiva is indicated by Nigel's enlightenment after he dances. Nigel says "Love is death, All is one" (28). Shiva is also both the Lord of Death and the Cosmic Dancer.

Nigel is described as "the all-seer, the priest, the slave of God" (28), and "a god, a slave, a sufferer in his body for the sins of the sick city" (86), Nigel tells Diana; "I am God. May be this is how God appears now in the world, a little unregarded crazy person whom every one pushes aside and knocks down and steps upon. Or, it can be that I am the false God, or one of the million false gods there are. It matters very little. The false God is the true God. Up any religion a Murdoch gives shape to her idea of God as an emanation of love. man may climb" (237). Through the contradictory character of Nigel, Whatever name it may be called by-God, Good or Love-the foremost prerequisite to gain enlightenment is Faith in a transcended reality.

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Bruno talks about the metamorphosis that his interpretation of God has undergone. First God was "a great blank of the sky He was the spider who wove the web of life": later "God was love and the world was full of the power of love". Still later, God was something rather lost and pathetic, a little crazed perhaps, and small and then God was "simply gone" (99-100). Still not satisfied he questions Nigel "What is God made of?", and receives the answer that it is not important "what He's made of nor whether we are saved. It is loving God despite the suffering involved that makes all the difference. Nigel is "annihilated by God" (101) through prayer and it is this that makes him see death as "something beautiful, something one could be in love with... a jet black orgasm" (101).

On his death-bed Bruno "could see so clearly what love ought to be like" (305), and he realises the significance of his earlier statement that God is death. Once he understands that Death is the ultimate reality that "contradicts ownership and self" (138), Bruno is able to seek forgiveness of Janie.

Miles Greens leave is the artist whose creativity is bound by his romantic indulgences in reminiscing about his dead wife Parvati. His case offers Murdoch an opportunity to express her views on art and morality. Art for her should not kill and comfort, but should be an expression of truth. Parvati was young Miles's inspiration. He told her "You represent the God... Shiva Eros... All poets have Angels You are mine" (59). His refusal to come to terms with her death makes him realise "how hard it was to see things."

He tries to give form to his experience through his art. His poem 'Shiva and Parvati' was such an attempt - "to change into art and into significance and into beauty the horror of that death It had prevented him from seeing what he ought to have seen and what he had never allowed himself afterwards to see the real face of death" (57). Secure in a calm life "he did not want emotions and memories and scenes and unmanageable, unforeseeable situations. He did not want to go through the rigmarole of forgiving and being forgiven it might delay, it might offend, it might preclude forever the precious, imminent visitation of the God." This is why Miles avoids meeting Bruno in the first place and then the reason for his refusal to discuss Parvati with him. He feels "the past was terrible, sacred, his" and he will not "enter into a live relationship with his father which involved the reopening of the past" (154).

Miles, however, is thrust back into the reality that he had been avoiding by the awareness that Lisa "was loseable. She was free." He sees that "Lisa lived in a real world which seemed very unlike the reality which in his poetry he was attempting to join." The experience of falling in love is itself, however painful, also a preoccupying joy. It increases vitality and sense of self. His world of illusions is shattered when Lisa decides to leave, for Miles had believed that he could hold the situation and keep both Lisa and Diana. He is able to discern between "true love, the love that accepts death, the love that lives with death" (190) and romantic love. He analyses the forms of love:

Plato thought that any love was capable of leading us into the life of the spirit, perhaps because falling in love induces so intensely of the reality and power of love

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itself, which dulled life knows nothing of. But falling in love involves also an enlivening and magnifying of the greedy passionate self. Such love will envisage suffering, absence, separation, pain, it will even exult in these but what it cannot envisage is death, utter loss" (189)

Miles's self-centredness is the moral barrier that restricts his creativity because "good art comes out of courage, humility, virtue" (190).

Miles is able to accept Parvati's death in the face of Lisa's impending departure for Calcutta. In Lisa's absence, he realises that Parvati "was utterly gone out of the world for ever. She did not exist anymore at all." "A tall, cold angel, chilly and strong as a steel shaft.... The angel of death, perhaps of Parvati's death" replaces Lisa's image. It is a moment of his spiritual re-birth. His inspiration seems to be spasmodic and "when the frenzy left him... he would be left with all the tools of de." What had availed him now, what had bundled him through the barrier into the real world, this Miles knew too, but now "that his life's work had begun he averted his gaze." He had been indifferent to his father's plight. But Lisa's departure makes him alive to the sufferings of others. With rising sympathies comes a reawakening of his literary powers.

The myths of Maya and of Shiva and Parvati come together at the close of the novel in the letter sent to Danby by Nigel. Calling himself a "spirit", Nigel sends a final message before he departs for India:

Love is a strange thing. It is our only significant activity... yet what a trouble maker it is to be sure. What a dreamer upper of the impossible, what an embracer of the feet of the unattainable. It is a weird thought that any one is permitted to love any one and in any way he pleases a cat may look at a King, the worthless can love the Good. The good, the worthless, the worthless the worthless, and the good the good. Hey presto: and the great light flashes on revealing perhaps reality or perhaps illusion. And alas how very often... does one love alone, in solipsism, in vain, in capsulation... Love knows no conventions" (286)

This is the final message of Nigel who leaves once he has played the destroyer-in keeping with the myth of Shiva- the destroyer of romantic illusions. Both Danby and Diana are influenced by his message and are able to forgive and love again.

The myths of Maya, Shiva and Parvati provide an appropriate medium for Murdoch's expression of her moral philosophy. She shows how Maya- illusion- disguises reality in a cloud of make-believe to create false love. Then the story of Shiva and Parvati exemplifies true love that draws sustenance from denial, penance and sacrifice. Faced with the reality of death, her characters discover true love that leads them on towards Good. Maya, Shiva and Parvati reinforce the central theme of the novel and provide its case of moral philosophy.

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