

Psychological Trauma and Mythical Images in 'A Severed Head'

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Abstract- It is arduous and somewhat complex thing to speak about the works of writers who express their multifarious views in an extraordinary way in this empirical world where our great writers are free lances. Very few writers achieve the success path as fiction playwrights and philosophical instigators. By virtue of the extent and variety of her work, the vigour and originality, her influence on art, letters, philosophy and life, and the range and beauty of her style, Iris Murdoch entered the literary scene with her book *Sartre: The Romantic Rationalist*. This paper deals with the theme and analytical observation of *A Severed Head* in which Murdoch presents incest, marital absurdity and extramarital relationships within the structure of extremely intricate psychological, existential and Freudian views. The atrocities and incest are taken as common things in the western society and no one dares to reveal those uncommon things to the world. No one thinks about the future of those sufferers. But Murdoch has presented her positive views in her book *A Severed Head* and showed her courage to the literary world by taking a weird subject. This paper elucidates her views about repressive social rules, her philosophical knowledge, sentiments, humor and sudden twists in the story.

Key Words: Freudian psychology, incest, adultery, severed head, social sentiments, morality

I. INTRODUCTION

Freedom, love biography, diary, art and morality as the main concepts of *A Severed Head*, Murdoch has presented a fast-paced work with wit and humor. The imagery is much more vivid and internal part of the plot and theme. She has chosen symbol and characterization as the methods to depict her story. For each novel she wants to present a new description and a novel concept. An anthropologist, a mysterious half-sister Honor Klein is the 'severed head' of the title. She offers the power and energy which are essential to free the other character mainly the protagonist and the narrator of the story, Martin Linch Gibbon. According to A.S. Byatt, Linda Kuehl and R. Rabinovitz, "Moral behavior is perceived differently by each proselyte in the novel. Murdoch shows that the responsibility for moral action lies with an individual's acceptance of love which frees him from power as victim or victor." (347)

Murdoch touches the question of Sigmund Freud's ideas. Freud was interested in psychoanalysis, which is a scientific method of psychology to analyze the human's psyche, wits and especially to find out the reasons of psychic or physical problems. The method consists in or draws on the analysis of human dreams, their interpretation and using hypnosis. Murdoch points out the result of such therapy, the 'patients' are manipulated by higher power represented by a psychologist.

Manuscript received October, 2013.

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A Severed Head is partly a parody on this psychological field of knowledge, which was new at the beginning of the twentieth century. It seems that Murdoch does not believe in effects of the psychoanalysis and she impeaches them in her novels. The issue of psychoanalysis is not the only allusion to Freud. The other important question Murdoch deals with is Oedipus complex.

Allowing Martin's experiences and voice to stand by them, Murdoch gives life to that unique individual whose necessary obscurity and unpredictability have both enthralled and threatened her imagination. Martin says, 'The story which follows will reveal whether I will or no, what sort of person I am' (12). The creation is the man. According to Byatt (1965), *A Severed Head* is seen as a comedy with moral themes (6). This impressive novel is full of surprises, manipulation and irony. The author touches various issues such as multiple falseness and incest, which is illegal or social taboo. An anomalous human relation between the psychoanalyst and his stepsister has scandalous effect for many readers, but Murdoch demonstrates that even this could happen in the society. The story sows that nothing is clear and lined. Things can happen unpredictably and are not as they seem to be. Love, hate, machination, dependence, sexual desires, hysteria and egoism are signs, which are recognized in this excellent piece. *A Severed Head* 'was a harbinger of the Sexual Revolution that was to hit Britain in the 196s and 70s.' This novel 'is regarded by many readers as the most entertaining of Murdoch's novels.' It was successful and "together with J.B. Priestley, Murdoch adapted the book for the stage."

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Severed_Head

II. RETROSPECTION

The novel starts with the conversation between the protagonist Martin and his girl friend Georgie about Martin's wife Antonia. Martin maintains Georgie as his mistress without the notice of his wife Antonia. He compares Georgie with his wife in every aspect, like their behavior, age, their concern and love about him, their tidiness etc. He always presents odd gifts to Georgie which she keeps in an untidy order all the time against the nature of Antonia. "I loved to give Georgie outrageous things, absurd garments and gewgaws which I could not possibly have given Antonia, barbarous necklaces and velvet pants and purple underwear and black openwork tights which drove me mad" (4). He also admires Georgie's uninteresting character in worldly possessions, her significant indifference and her candid and naive nature. When he is about to leave Georgie's room, she has given a straight glance which he likes very much. In his words "Antonia would not have sustained such a steady gaze for so long: warm, possessive, and coquettish, she would not so have exposed herself" (5). Murdoch's opinion quoted by Peter J Conradi in his *Iris Murdoch: the Saint and the Artist* that "people are secretly much odder, less rational, more often powered by obsession

than they outwardly pretend or know," (5) gives the insight of the novelist about human behavior and tastes.

Murdoch introduces another three characters Palmer Anderson, Antonia's psychoanalyst and their family friend, Palmer's half-sister Honor Klein, an anthropologist and a kind of research guide to Georgie and Alexander Gibbon, a well-known sculptor, brother of Martin Lynch Gibbon to the readers. Martin inherits the family's wine firm and is a pedantic connoisseur of wines, but has no interest in the business as such. He is interested in military history but manages to practice it at a double remove from reality. He has taken history as the first subject at Cambridge. The historian's temperament is reflected as well in Martin's penchant for collecting and arranging objects. His beautiful home he delights in as a protective shell or carapace. He feels secure in "the rich and highly integrated mosaic of his surroundings" (4). Martin is quite satisfied with his older wife and younger mistress. When he asks about Honor Klein, Georgie shows keen interest in Alexander Gibbon and asks him to introduce his brother. But he does not want to introduce her to his brother because he feels his brother may seduce her as he has seduced all his girl friends. He somehow considers Georgie his own and he is never ready to leave her. At the same time he never wants to lose or leave his wife Antonia. Though he tells about Antonia in a negative way to Georgie as it is very common to men who maintain mistresses, his marriage with Antonia is a happy and successful one.

III. FREUD'S FEATURES

A Severed Head is treated as a special novel written by Murdoch. The novel has Freud's impact and influence in many incidents and on many people. Murdoch has changed her journey from fictionally mediated philosophy which she has written in *'Under the Net'* and *'The Bell'* to an introspective moral psychology. This is not to say that the novel does not deal with philosophical ideas, it replaces Murdoch's early concern with Plato, Nietzsche and Sartre. The novel's area of discussion is Freudian psychoanalysis in regard to moral decline and progression; indeed, it goes beyond this by reversing the Kantian notion of freedom residing in attention towards moral. She also has her own impediments in expressing her philosophy to the readers. In this novel Martin has his own philosophy, Palmer and Honor have their own and Antonia has her own method.

Antonia is taking psycho-analysis treatment from Palmer Anderson. Martin is wondered if any people who are undergoing psychoanalysis treatment feel that it is a hard and caustic experience but Antonia always feels ecstasy and great satisfaction after the treatment. So he always feels proud to have such a wonderful wife and pleasant mistress. But his happiness is disappeared when Antonia announces her deep love and affair with Anderson. She asks Martin divorce and requests him to set her free from the struggle she has been enduring for a long time. When he is in a state of shock, asks her why she wants to break her happy marriage, she tells her opinion about their marriage. She said, "A marriage is an adventure in development. And ours is simply at a standstill. I was conscious of that even before I fell in love with Anderson. It's partly my being so much older and being a sort of mother to you. I've kept you from growing up. All this has got to be faced sooner or later" (24). Anderson also requests Martin to give divorce to her and says that they both will treat him like a child and invites him

for Christmas celebration. But Martin feels like a deceived husband, rejects their invitation for Christmas. He wants to visit his mother's place Rembers where his brother Alexander lives and celebrates Christmas with his brother and sister Rosemary.

IV. MYTHICAL PERCEPTIONS

In Rembers Alexander shows Martin a bronze head of Antonia in his studio where he makes his sculpture. "It was in a light golden bronze and showed a youthful forward-darting Antonia that was not quite familiar to me: a champagne-toasted dancing-on-the-table Antonia that seemed to belong to another age. The shape of the head was excellent, however, and the great flowing pile of hair at the back, wildly tressed and some what Grecian: and the big rapacious slightly parted lips, these I knew. But it was a younger, gayer; more keenly directed Antonia than my own" (42). Here Murdoch describes the beauty of Antonia and Alexander's adoration for her beauty, the beauty which gives him stimulation to make many sculptures.

Alexander has not given body to the head of Antonia. So Martin feels that he cannot imagine her without the body. But as an artist, Alexander holds a key for understanding the relationships of people and seeing reality that Martin envies and somewhat fears. Martin always lives in fictional world. He sees in Alexander's sculpted heads "a technique for discovering more about what is real." Alexander replies, "So have you. It is called morality" (41). Martin again sees at Antonia's head and expresses his fear. Their conversation follows:

'I don't think I like a sculpted head alone,' I said. 'It seems to represent an unfair advantage, an illicit and incomplete relationship.'

'An illicit and incomplete relationship,' said Alexander. 'Yes. Perhaps an obsession. Freud on Medusa. The head can represent the female genitals, feared not desired' (42).

The reader clearly sees the influence of Freud on Murdoch in this novel. She has expressed great admiration for Freud's thought; nevertheless she is at variance with his theories in two essential aspects. The first aspect deals with the 'ego' and the will and in this novel her point is similar to that against Sartre's existentialism, the second aspect on the other hand parallels her arguments against Plato in his attitude to art and artists. Murdoch's generally skeptical stance regarding psychoanalysis results from the former. The point here, as Murdoch knows, is that neither of the interpretations is conclusively 'correct.' Freud and Sartre have used the ancient myth to express a facet of experience; they have assigned a meaning to the story, and the different meanings testify to the diversity of human life. Freudian perception is obviously seen in many incidents. For example in Martin's life Antonia plays a vital role and she is the mother figure he lost in his adolescence. As she is five years older than him, he sometimes perceives her as his mother. According to Martin's description of her she has ancestral connections to an artistic clan and dominates his life as did his artistic mother. He accepts that during the first years of their marriage, "I was absorbed completely into the delightful task of being Antonia's husband. When I as it were came round, emerged, that is, from the warm golden haze of those honey years, I found that certain roads were closed to me" (13).

Although he thinks his role of her husband is different from others as he is under the control of Antonia, he invites

that type of behavior and his romantic attitude toward Antonia is reinforced by his strong attachment to his late mother. Judith Ann Carson in her thesis "Iris Murdoch: Her Philosophy in Two Novels" writes, "In both his brother and his wife Martin finds his lost mother and because of these two figures avoids reality and mature love. He is able to assess clearly his relationship with his mother, but fails to recognize that this same relationship has been extended to his brother and wife" (50). Whenever he visits 'Rembers,' his native place, he thinks about his mother, her vague personality and her gentle behavior. "I recalled her clearly, with a sad shudder of memory, and with that particular painful guilty thrilling sense of being both stifled and protected with which a return to my old home always afflicted me; and now it was as if my pain for Antonia had become the same pain" (38).

Byatt states that "Murdoch uses the contrasting Freudian and Sartrian concept of the images While Freud saw the severed Medusa's head as a symbol of fear of being observed." (Byatt, 1976: 27) Sartre, like Freud, sees life as an egocentric drama; "the world is my world" in that it is shaped by my values, projects and possibilities. Sartre wishes however, while attempting to lay bare by a pure reflexion . . . the nature of consciousness, to preserve the sovereignty of the individual psyche as a source of meaning. For him the psyche is coextensive with consciousness. Whereas for Freud the deepest human impulse is sexual, for Sartre it is the urge towards 'self-coincidence' which is the key to our being (Ibid. 117).

The irony of the story is the liaison of these two mother figures. Their relationship exists from the beginning of Martin's and Antonia's marriage. When it is finally revealed to Martin, he is then able to see them as separate individuals, free from the role he has given them. Antonia is inside society because of the value she places on modern arbiters such as psychoanalysis and sexual power. The power she holds over Martin comes from his worship of her as a woman, especially in her role as his substitute mother. She blames her affair with Palmer on the failure of her marriage to Martin because of this role. This explanation provides an excuse for Antonia's adulterous behavior as well as indicating the power she holds over Martin. Frankova says of human relationships: "central to all human relationships, and to love relationships in particular, is communication." (Frankova 1995 p.77) In this sense Murdoch chooses literature as a way of successful communication.

Palmer Anderson has found a flat in Lowndes Square to Martin. Rosemary and Antonia are dividing the things in a neat way. Then Antonia asks Martin to receive Honor Klein, half-sister of Palmer at the railway station as Palmer is suffering from a severe cold and it is not good to go out in that foggy climate. Martin accepts and goes to railway station to receive Honor. Waiting for her in the dense fog he is unable to recall her face although he has met her before. The reason for this may be her "animal like and repellent face" (54). Her first remarks cause him to reflect on his reactions and inaction over his wife's infidelity. Driving through the fog he recognizes her femininity in the headless body as she leans out of the window. He feels a bond with her because of her help to him in getting through the treacherous fog. This is an indication of the role she will play in the remainder of the story. She is transformed in his eyes by the power he sees radiating from her when she confronts the lovers "... Like some insolent and powerful captain, returning booted and spurred from a field of

triumph, the dust of battle yet upon him, confronting the sovereign powers whom he was now ready if need be to bend to his will" (56).

V. CONCEPT OF LOVE

The readers find some change in Martin's concept of love in the later chapters. As a part of Murdoch's views, love is a redeeming quality. Martin's love for Georgie, however, does not free him despite his evaluation of the situation. He has taken Georgie as his mistress out of the influence of Antonia. The contingent factors which impose upon their relationship bring him towards accepting responsibility for himself and his actions. He asks Georgie not to tell about their relation to anyone and when Georgie becomes pregnant she has an abortion. She suffers silently and accepts him as a being separate from herself and loves him as an equal unique being and lives in the constant hope that he will eventually, publicly acknowledge her in the same way. She hates his fictitious life with Antonia and his acceptance of influence of Antonia on him. When he tells Georgie about the psychoanalysis treatment of Palmer Anderson on his wife and praises Palmer that he is good at setting people free, she says, "Anyone who is good at setting people free is also good at enslaving them, if we are to believe Plato. The trouble with you, Martin, is that you are always looking for a master" (3). From these words the reader appreciates Georgie's knowledge to estimate the real nature of people, her individuality, her independence and her power the qualities which Martin lacks. Martin is unable to recognize this side of his nature. He would rather see himself as a kind and good person. His lack of personally-derived moral convictions permits him to be victimized and to use Georgie as his mistress. It is only when his reliance on his masters causes continuing harm to his psychological and emotional well fallible. Murdoch uses Martin's dilemma to point out the failure of certain moral values or the lack of them. According to Milada Fankova, "Love thus defined as seeing the other is also necessary for freedom, which Murdoch understands as the experience of accurate vision free from fantasy rather than exercise of will. Attention for Murdoch means unselfing, while attention to self in order to gain self-knowledge amounts to indulging in a delusion." (68)

Even though Antonia leaves him and lives with Anderson, Martin does not dare to tell his relationship with Georgie to her. It makes Georgie feel hurt and she is vexed with the lies she has told to others about her secret life with Martin. Then the secret is revealed to Antonia and Anderson through Honor Klein one day. He gets angry with Honor Klein and comes back to scold her. He finds Honor holding a Japanese Samurai Sword in the hall. She does not allow him to touch her sword as it is spiritually symbolic to her. She explains about the value of those swords and realizes he is unable to understand her point. He learns from Honor that the use of Samurai sword is "not merely an art but a spiritual exercise" (96). She is a Jew who believes in people not dark gods. We observe the qualities of authority, control and power in Honor. Through Honor's character Murdoch presents a link between modern society's Christian view of the world and ancient, more primitive ones.

Martin asks Honor to show her skill by using that Samurai Sword. She takes two crumpled table napkins and throws them in the air and when they are coming down, with a high speed she cuts the napkin. He observes neatly cut napkin

pieces and is moved by the power and reverence with which she displays her skill with the sword. This splitting also symbolizes the split in relation between Antonia and Anderson, Martin and Antonia, and Martin and Georgie. Instead of chiding Honor, Martin falls in love with her.

Even in his dream he has got the image of Honor. When he visits George, on the stairs again he sees the image of Honor. He is surprised to see his brother Alexander in Georgies' room and inquires how Georgie has got acquaintance with Alexander. He immediately gets angry on Honor when Georgie told that Honor had introduced Alexander to her. Martin asks his brother to leave the flat at once. After Alexander's departure he slaps Georgie hard and later asks her to marry him. But she says, "You don't mean it, Martin. You're just a little crazy at the moment and jealous. Ask me again later if you still want to" (103). This indicates the matured mind of Georgie. Later she clears her doubt that it is not Martin that passes her girl friends to Alexander and it is Alexander who takes away his girl-friends with his magnetism.

VI. INCEST INJURY

Martin completely falls in love with Honor Klein and wants to see her. He reaches Honor's house at Cambridge and expects she is alone in her house. He rings the bell of her house so many times but there is no sound. He strongly wants to give his appearance at once to Honor to surprise her. He throws the front door but it is locked in side. He finds a small gate in the garden which leads to French windows of a lower room. With great difficulty he enters the room and goes upstairs. He taps Honor's bedroom and opens it as there is no answer from the room. There he observes Honor Klein half naked on the bed with her brother Palmer Anderson fully naked. Martin is shocked and trembled. Without any word he comes back to the hall. He is seeking a myth, but what he finds is stark reality in the incestuous love scene between Palmer and his half-sister. Martin does not simply learn of the incest, he sees it; it is a reality existing outside of him which he cannot swallow up in thought. Martin is forced to approach this knowledge through his imagination, his dreams, and specifically mythology, a work of creation itself: "The psychological literature was scanty and unsatisfactory, and I soon turned my attention to mythology where, with a curious gratification which was almost consoling, I noted the frequency of brother and sister marriages, particularly among royalty and gods." (155)

The incest shock has an amazing effect on Martin. He sees Honor as a woman, an individual separate from his fantasy of her. The contingency of Martin's impetuous journey has destroyed the fantasy of a virgin goddess who has been waiting for him to awaken her sensuality. It wakes him up to reality. In her essay, "Against Dryness", Murdoch states that "reality is not a given whole and reality is incomplete" (20). This is borne out in the novel Martin must confront each relationship and fantasy before he faces reality as a whole. The experience exposes him and the reader to the many way modern man interprets and comes to grips with reality by drawing on psychoanalytic Freudian concepts, Sartre's theories, and mythology, as well as creating new ways of coping with the world.

Palmer appears to be the Totalitarian man until the incest scene. He is rational, acts on his beliefs and uses his will to control the world about him. He is a Freudian analyst and

offers Martin professional sympathy: "The psyche is a strange thing and it has its own mysterious methods of restoring a balance. It automatically seeks its advantage, its consolation. It is almost entirely a matter of mechanics, and mechanical models are the best to understand it with" (29). In Byatt's view, "He seems to be unaware of what lies outside this mechanism, what can save the man from being captured by an absolute form or purpose." (Byatt, 1976: 25)

Though Martin has not told anything about Palmer and Honor, Palmer has a great fear and guilt which makes him rude to Antonia. One day Antonia comes to Martin and complains about Anderson's behavior. She observes a drastic change in Palmer and repents about her divorce with Martin. Antonia decides to leave Anderson and wants to live with Martin again. When Anderson comes to Martin's house to get back Antonia, Martin expresses the decision of Antonia and sends him away with a small quarrel.

Then one day Martin's brother Alexander calls him on telephone and announces that he is going to marry Georgie. Martin is surprised and feels desolation about the decision of Georgie yet invites them to his house. Antonia undergoes more pain than Martin when she hears this news. Martin cannot understand why she feels such agony but leaves her alone. He must feel agony because he loses Gerogie permanently with this marriage.

VII. RECOGNIZING THE REAL PARTNERS

Palmer informs Martin that he and his sister are going on tour to some places and invites him to come along with them. Martin sees Honor everywhere and remembers her a lot in his mind and heart. Martin comes back to his house and is waiting for Antonia who has not arrived yet. As she has not come that night, he is worried about her and rings to her mother, Rosemary, Rembers, and at last to her hair-dresser. After some time he is engrossing thinking about Honor and he does not believe that Honor and her brother are going other countries. At that time Antonia enters with a delighted face. She discloses her love for his brother Alexander and Alexander's deep love for her to Martin. Martin is deeply shocked knowing about their affair. But Antonia has thought that Martin must have known about their matter yet he has endured their relation as he loves her extremely. Again Martin is shocked with her words and says, "What a fool you must both think me. No, I didn't know. Of course I realized you were very fond of each other. But I didn't know this. Do you imagine I would have tolerated it? How little you know me." (190)

Antonia unveils everything to Martin that Alexander has been her lover before their marriage and she never loses his touch with her even after she married Martin. But when she loves Palmer, Alexander gets hurt and is depressed. As revenge he wants to marry Georgie but very soon he realizes that he can love only Antonia and none another. Antonia also recognizes the same thing that she never likes anyone, only Alexander. When Georgie knows about Alexander's love for Antonia she has tried to kill herself. From her explanation Martin comprehends that both his women Antonia and Georgie really love his brother, not him. He contemplates, "I was becoming dazed and stupid. I felt like an empty vessel that is struck again and again. Even Georgie's love was being taken away from me. It would take little now to make me believe that Georgie had loved Alexander all along. At any rate she had been waiting for Alexander all along. Yet she sent me her dear hair." (193)

Martin's unreal understanding of his perfect marriage is shattered by the truth. Antonia admits that she also was living in a dream, until Palmer woke her up and she tells Martin that he dreams along without facing things. Since she managed to hold Martin's love in spite of her infidelity with Palmer, she assumes that she can do the same where her love with Alexander is concerned. Her experience with Palmer has given her courage to be honest with little cost to her. She tries to continue her manipulation of Martin, explaining that since he was unconsciously living in an unreal world and loving her, he should be able to continue loving her, because now the truth is out it will be better. Her liberal view of morality is a net of terms and theories with which she is trying to hold Martin's love: "I must keep you in my loving net." (193)

Martin goes to airport when Honor and Palmer Anderson are leaving London and observes Georgie with them. He comes back to his house and sits silently contemplating. Until this point Martin has not been able to experience real emotional pain because he was not living in the real world. Now he "surrendered to grief and to the physical pain which is the mark of a true emotion." (205)

All of a sudden he hears the door-bell, observes Honor Klein standing at the door. She has stayed because Palmer was 'frantic' (207) to get away from her. Whether as an explanation for Palmer's frantic leave taking or for the possibility of a relationship between her and Martin, Honor asks him if he recalls the legend of Gyges and Candaules. Although he can recall the tale he no longer sees myth as significant and asks Honor if it is possible to "have relations with a severed head." (208)

In analyzing their position he states that the dream they have been living in to stay together in confronting reality. He is ready to face reality. Freedom and love are the possibilities of such an awakening. They both realize that chance, or contingency, is involved and they are willing to take the risk.

VIII.CONCLUSION

In Murdoch's early novels the theme is hinted at where twins fall in love or have sexual relations with one and the same person. *A Severed Head* is the first novel where incest is handled openly. In full agreement with Freud, the incest fright is conspicuous both outside the novel, as critical reactions have proved, and inside it, as shown by the author. But whether Murdoch writes about incest or milder forms of oedipal variations she lays them before us as part of life and although she does not eschew the puzzlement or horror of witness, she does not analyze or judge. Peter Conradi describes Murdoch as an 'anti-puritan puritan', but he adds that her Puritanism is by no means sexual' (188). In her novels Murdoch discusses sex but she never hesitates to show the dark side to sex, including incest and promiscuity. The slightly appalled critical comment on Murdoch's characters exchanging partners as if they were playing musical chairs or even having incestuous relations does not seem to take into account that eroticism is played down and what Murdoch gives prominence to are psychological and moral issues, though without moralizing.

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