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The Problem of 'Self' in Iris Murdoch*

Iris Murdoch'ta 'Ben' Sorunu

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Abstract

Iris Murdoch started her academic career as a philosopher and continued as a literary scholar. The concepts she works on in the field of philosophy are mainly the subjects under the title of moral philosophy. She turned to the field of literature after she was convinced that it would be through literature to convey the philosophical subjects she was working on to a wider audience. Although she claims that her philosophy is not related to the literary works she produces, it is possible to see the reflections of her philosophy in her novels. One of the important concepts that Murdoch emphasizes in her moral philosophy is the 'self'. The 'self' problem has been one of the topics that many different

Öz

Iris Murdoch felsefeci olarak başladığı akademik kariyerine edebiyatçı olarak devam etmiştir. Felsefe alanında üstünde çalıştığı kavramlar ağırlıklı olarak ahlak felsefesi başlığı altındaki konulardır. Çalıştığı felsefe konularını daha geniş bir kitleye ulaştırmanın edebiyat aracılığıyla olacağına kanaat getirdikten sonra edebiyat alanına yönelmiştir. Felsefesinin ürettiği edebi yapıtlarla ilgili olmadığını ileri sürse de felsefesinin yansımalarını romanlarında görmek mümkündür. Murdoch'ın ahlak felsefesinde üstünde durduğu önemli kavramlardan biri 'benlik'tir. Ben sorunu birçok farklı disiplinin ele aldığı konulardan biri olagelmıştır. Bu konu Murdoch'ın hem felsefesinde hem de edebi çalışmalarında üstünde

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"1. Uluslararası Edebiyat, Kültür ve Dil Sempozyumunda bildiri olarak sunulan bu makale Iris Murdoch Romanlarında Yanılsama ve Gerçeklik başlıklı tezden üretilmiştir"

disciplines dealt with. This issue emerges as a common concept that Murdoch emphasizes both in her philosophy and in her literary works. She has based her philosophy on Plato's allegory of the cave while working on this concept. According to this allegory, while a few of the people approach the truth, only a few of them can see the truth as it is. According to Murdoch, one of the barriers between man and reality is the 'self'. The self does not see events, people and objects in their own reality. The self paints beings and events outside itself with the paint of its own consciousness. The motive behind doing this is that he cannot bear the pain of seeing the truth directly. In order to cover up the disturbing nature of reality, the self makes it more bearable by looking at events and beings from the window of its own consciousness. In this respect, the self is protected from the truth. Murdoch considers it a virtuous act for the individual to get rid of his ego and see the facts as they are. She argues that very few people are able to achieve this. There are various situations – like a true work of art – that will enable the individual to get rid of the self. Some examples of self and unselfing are discussed in this study.

Keywords: Self, Illusion, Iris Murdoch, Philosophy

durduğu ortak bir kavram olarak ortaya çıkar. Bu kavramı çalışırken Plato'nun mağara alegorisini temel alır. Bu alegoriye göre insanların az bir kısmı gerçeğe yaklaşırken, bu azınlık içinde çok az bir kısmı gerçeği olduğu gibi görebilmektedir. Murdoch'a göre insan ile gerçek arasındaki engellerden biri 'ben'dir. Benlik olayları, insanları ve nesnelere kendi gerçeklikleriyle görmez. Benlik kendi dışındaki varlıkları ve olayları kendi bilincinin boyasıyla boyar. Bunu yapmasının altında yatan güdü ise gerçeği doğrudan görmeyi vereceği acıya katlanamamasıdır. Gerçeğin rahatsızlık veren doğasını örtmek adına benlik olaylara ve varlıklara kendi bilincinin penceresinden bakarak daha katlanılır bir hale getirir. Bu yönüyle benlik gerçeklerden korunmuş olur. Murdoch bireyin benliğinden kurtularak gerçekleri oldukları gibi görmesini erdemli bir davranış olarak değerlendirir. İnsanlardan çok az bir kesimin bunu başarabildiğini ileri sürer. Bireyin benliğinden kurtulmasını sağlayacak çeşitli durumlar – gerçek bir sanat eseri gibi – vardır. Benlik ve benlikten kurtulma ile ilgili bazı örnekler bu çalışmada ele alınmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Benlik, Yanılsama, Iris Murdoch, Felsefe

I. Introduction

Iris Murdoch is a versatile writer who has produced many works in the field of literature. Despite her prominence in literature, she is also a scholar who has contributed to the field of philosophy. In her novels, it is likely to discover the reflections of her philosophy. In this sense, having a basic understanding of her philosophy can allow to better comprehend the themes she conveys in her works. Murdoch's area of interest covers predominantly the moral philosophy and she regrets the lack of interest in this area. The basis of Murdoch's moral philosophy is the concept of "goodness". She delicately focuses on how significant and necessary this concept is since she witnessed the World War II, the ugliest face of the twentieth century. Despite being a successful and well-known author, the fact that she prefers to remain in the background and is referred to as a saint by many of her acquaintances demonstrates how deeply she has embraced the concept of "goodness," which forms

the basis of her philosophy. Murdoch's sincerity, according to Lewis, makes even someone meeting her for the first time feel like one of her closest friends (2002; 153). With these aspects, it is seen that the philosophy on which she worked was deeply reflected in her life.

II. Discussion

As previously stated Murdoch's philosophy is reflected in her works. Many topics and situations are highlighted in both her fiction and her philosophy, such as the relevance of mental state for moral status, religion for ethics, the meaning of virtue, and self-respect for ethics. Moral philosophy is Murdoch's principal philosophical theme. The author, who believes that moral philosophy has lost much of its potency in the twentieth century, underlines the importance of intellectuals refocusing on moral philosophy and bringing it to the forefront. Ruokonen emphasizes the difficulties of defining certain aspects of ethics in abstract terms of ethical theory (2008; 78). This is one of the reasons why Murdoch turned to literature. Literature and philosophy have many common areas of interest. It has been claimed that Murdoch successfully merged philosophy and fiction, that she did not leave the worlds she built in her novels under the pressure of philosophy, but rather enhanced them with it (Kaehele, 1967; 555). In other words, her literature and philosophy do not create confusion; on the contrary, they form a unity.

Murdoch is influenced from Plato when reconstructing her philosophical notions. According to Schwarz, she is one of the leading figures in Neoplatonism in the twentieth century (2009; 315). Murdoch's understanding of metaphysics, on the other hand, is based on the restructuring of Plato's thoughts (Antonaccio, 2000; 27). Murdoch, who compares finding virtue and truth to a journey, explains the situation with Plato's famous cave allegory. People are under illusion, according to this allegory, and only a small percentage of them can comprehend the truth directly. Murdoch inserts that the barrier between man and reality is one's own self. In this regard it can be stated that Murdoch's problem is with 'self'.

Murdoch argues that the majority of individuals are congenitally defective and this is related to the individual's self. She believes that the individual can only overcome this flaw by overcoming the illusion of self. Getting rid of one's self is identified with the concept of kenosis in Christianity by some scholars (Baker, 2008; 282). Kenosis is the individual's renunciation of his own will, surrendering himself completely to the will of God. Murdoch, on the other hand, is concerned with an individual's emergence from his or her own self and realization of external reality. Individuals are held captive by their own self, ego, dreams, and consciousness. Individuals place themselves at the center of their lives and view the things from the perspective of their own awareness (Vice, 2007; 61). In this regard the self functions as a veil between individual and the reality.

The question that arises here is why the self is not eager to see the reality. The answer lies in the painful nature of truth. Seeing the facts as it is hurtful for the soul of the individual, that's why he consoles himself by daydreaming and fantasizing. It takes a long journey to see the truth, and this journey is both time-consuming and difficult. But Murdoch takes challenges as a guide. According to her a challenge is a light, but an insurmountable challenge is a sun (Antonaccio, 2000; vi). According to Murdoch, the average person in the world is probably in a hopeless state. Considering that the vast majority of humanity lacks "goodness", she states that it is not possible to talk about complete

goodness (Murdoch, 1992; 498). She thinks that people need a light because she believes that people are not happy. Murdoch suggests that it is a correct assumption that the path to reality is difficult and that the individual suffers during the moral development process (Murdoch, 2001; 67). Murdoch claims that in order to see the truth, a person living in a world of illusions must face specific events and facts. She defines the process of getting rid of the self and seeing the truth with the concept of 'unselfing'. In other words "unselfing" describes how an individual who is trapped in his illusion of self might find the truth and begin to recognize it.

There are various concepts, events, and truths that can help an individual get close to reality. The first and most important of these, according to Murdoch, is art. Other concepts and occurrences that, in Murdoch's philosophy, will lead individuals to reality include beauty, nature, an intellectual discipline, the experience of coming face to face with death, humility, and love. Great art is impersonal because it clearly shows people the real world, the world in which they live. This truth initially surprises the individual and offers him enormous pleasure. This is because the individual is not used to looking at the real world at all. Great art also teaches one not to be ambitious of one's self and how to look at real things, how to love, without being carried away by their greedy desires. A true artist looks at the items he will use, whether good or bad, from an impartial, just and compassionate point of view.

Art is about the pilgrimage from appearance to reality (the subject of every good play and novel) and exemplifies in spite of Plato what his philosophy teaches concerning the therapy of the soul. This is the 'universal', the high concern which Tolstoy said was the proper province of the artist. The divine (intelligent) cause persuades the necessary cause so as to bring about the best possible... The great artist, while showing us what is not saved, implicitly shows us what salvation means... The good artist helps us to see the place of necessity in human life, what must be endured, what makes and breaks, and to purify our imagination so as to contemplate the real world (usually veiled by anxiety and fantasy) including what is terrible and absurd. (Murdoch, 1997; 456).

A great artist, according to Murdoch, is a good and truly free person because of the art he produces. In order for the art consumer to rise, he or she must be as disciplined as the artist. Murdoch describes this situation as follows:

The appreciation of beauty in art or nature is not only (for all its difficulties) the easiest available spiritual exercise; it is also a completely adequate entry into (and not just analogy of) the good life, since it is the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real. (...) The greatest art is impersonal because it shows us the world, our world and not another one, with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all. (Murdoch, 2001; 63)

In this context, she defines the artist as a model and great art as an educator, revealing the truth. Murdoch poses the following question to the reader: What can we learn from Shakespeare's and Tolstoy's characters, as well as Velasquez's and the Titan's paintings? She answers the question as follows. What is learnt here is the true nature of human nature, which the artist imagines with fair and loving precision, distant from the self-centered rush and bustle of ordinary life (Murdoch, 2001; 63-4). Because of these outstanding missions, Murdoch puts great artists like Shakespeare and Tolstoy in a very privileged place. Because they teach us how to transcend the insatiable self to look at real things and to love selflessly. The qualities of the great artist are also great; He is brave, truthful, patient, and humble. Art consumers who are sufficiently disciplined can see these virtues of the great artist in their

works of art. "The great artist sees his objects (and this is true whether they are sad, absurd, repulsive or even evil) in a light of justice and mercy. The direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world, and the ability so to direct attention is love" (Murdoch, 2001; 65). Art is more important than philosophy for the salvation of humanity as a whole or individually, and literature is the most significant branch of art. It is because literature is the most important and fundamental part of culture. It provides a better understanding for individuals by portraying human-related issues. Literature and philosophy share many similarities. Both are sciences that seek and reveal the truth. Truth and knowledge are also tied to goodness. Literature, which Murdoch calls great art, assists the reader in moral imagination. Thus, the reader pays attention to the characters in the novel and understands their personalities, backgrounds and motives.

In this way, the reader can reflect the vision obtained from the novel in his own life. In this context, Murdoch argues that literature may share some of the aims of moral philosophy. Because writers like Shakespeare have a great role in developing the moral imagination of the readers, according to Murdoch, besides being great men of letters, they can also be considered as moral philosophers. It is stated that:

If great literature is good for the soul – as Murdoch believes it is – perhaps it is because it can lead us to ask more of ourselves in our daily lives, or because it can grant us more compassion toward others, seeing how goodness is so difficult. (Pinede, 2002; 90)

Art enables to overcome the selfish and obsessive limits of the individual and to increase the sensitivity of the art consumer. Great art reveals truths that the shy and selfish individual cannot see. The realism of the great artist should not be understood as a photographic reality, the realism of the great artist is a sense of compassion and justice. According to Murdoch, human life is incomplete and unclear, so the duty of art branches such as tragedy, comedy and painting is to show pain without frightening people, and to teach people the reality of death without being consoled.

Murdoch argues that mediocre art, which is far from perfection, is the result of a mediocre motive, imagination, and that the self and ego of the person who produces that art permeates that art. Mediocre art obscures the reflection of the real world. Therefore, the art consumer cannot have a pure and sincere love for mediocre art. Since the imagination of the producer is mixed in the mediocre arts, the artist produces it with the instinct of consoling himself. Almost all art is a product of imagination and consolation. That is, very few amount of art meets the requirements of real art. Mediocre art is the things produced by the individual who has not succeeded in "unselfing" and has not been able to get rid of the illusion in himself. They have the opposite effect on the great and beautiful art. In mediocre and unsuccessful art, dreams enter, the self intervenes, and art does not watch the real world clearly, but through a fogged window.

Very few artists have been able to realize the truth in their works. Because many artists could not get rid of their selves and could not prevent their selves from penetrating the works of art they produced. In this context, the self that prevents reaching the truth is a concept that Murdoch emphasizes heavily. On this subject, Gordon has argued that no novelist writing in English since, Lawrence, or even Aldous Huxley has dealt with the theme of 'ego' with as much sustained intensity as Iris Murdoch (1990; 116). Murdoch states that mediocre art results from the inability of the individual to overcome his ego. It is not an easy task to silence one's personality and ego, and thus to think and describe nature with a clear view. This is seriously strict moral discipline, a level that can

finally be reached. In this context, a good artist is a good person and at the same time a free person. Because the greatest goal of freedom for people is freedom from illusions. Freedom is a fundamental concept in Murdoch's novels. Slaymaker states that Murdoch's twenty-six novels are somehow connected with the idea of freedom (1982;166). Illusions, which are the biggest obstacles to freedom, are self-centered goals and images, and they are the biggest traps that distance the individual from reality.

Love and affection, which have an important place in Murdoch's moral philosophy, are also central concepts. In order to accept and embrace others in an impartial way, one has to transcend the self and eventually destroy the self. There is no 'me' in real love. But this love is different from romantic love. In romantic love, the lover attributes these elements to the object he loves and identifies with it, instead of forgetting the psychological characteristics that he must forget in order to be virtuous. The romantic lover does not care about the existence of others, he only idealizes his beloved in his eyes. The lover cannot see his beloved as a real, free, idiosyncratic and possible person. He sees it as an illusion and idea that he created himself. On this subject, Aksoy states that:

Since the being that the subject loves is a product of his imagination, the subject's power of satisfaction is also limited to the power of organizing, embellishing, and therefore objectifying the being, which is the object of love of the imagination. However, it is a completely different situation for the subject to perceive the beloved being as a subject like himself. In this case, the loved being is a being that has individuality and particularity just like the loving subject, and can objectify the subjects when it appeals to the imagination, just like the subject itself. When we see love as an event in which only subjects take part, our attention is turned to the subjective-particular nature of each subject, its widest, deepest world. As long as our attention remains on the subject's world of this nature, we will not be able to understand it in a consuming way. In this sense, we become conscious of the fact that our 'action' of love will never be an unfulfilled love, that the more we know and understand the being we love, the more we need to understand it, that we cannot acquire the subjectivity that makes it the same, in short, the insatiability of our love is inevitable. (1989; 20-1)

On the basis of the contrast between Murdoch's philosophy of life and Sartre's and Freud's philosophies of life lies the difference in their understanding of 'self'. Sartre and Freud see life as self-centered and they state that the individual always thinks about himself (Murdoch, 1999; 90). Sartre defines love as "the desire to reveal oneself and to be liked by another person". Murdoch suggests that such a love is like "the situation of two hypnotists in a locked room", both hypnotists try to enslave each other. According to Murdoch individuals try to pull everything into this world from the outside, they do not try to understand the reality and independence of others, they turn others into their own imaginary objects (Murdoch; 1959; 45). Therefore, not everyone can reach true love. Murdoch strongly opposes egocentrism and fights for the reality of non-self subjects. Reality is outside the self and other than 'self'. If there are no selfish concerns, the individual begins to see the other person with objectivity. One of the factors that starts a relationship by comparing 'I' with 'you' is love. Love connects the 'self' to the other. While doing this, the 'I' draws its attention away from itself and focuses it on the other person. Goodyer argues that, according to Murdoch's understanding, the inner world and the outer world are not interconnected (2009; 218). The individual, lost in his inner world, turns to the outer world by loving someone else. Murdoch argues that in this way, love will be purified and will enter the service of goodness. Love is also an energy that has the power of unlimited descent and ascension. While it causes humiliation when it is in the name of the self, it enters the service of goodness when it is purified from the self.

The greatest enemy in moral life is the self of man. The self is an illusion, it prevents us from seeing the other. There are many things around us that enable us to see reality, and these are what Murdoch considers beauty. Emphasizing the importance of being intimate with beauty, the author points out that this is a vital concept that needs to be emphasized and that it is a common value shared by nature and art. Beauty plays an important role in the process of "unselfing", that is, seeing the truth.

III. Conclusion

According to Murdoch's understanding of ethics, aside from worrying about self, the individual should forget itself. It is because the self, where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness is an attempt to see the things other than self. The self is adept at producing false and comforting veils that veil the world, the truth. And the biggest obstacle to seeing reality is personal dreams. When the self is immersed in personal fantasies, access to knowledge becomes impossible. If the individual does not look at the world with a virtuous consciousness, he will not be able to see the world as it is, with its reality. Therefore, in order to see the facts as they are, it is necessary to eliminate the fastidious demands of the self and focus on things outside the self. It is necessary to train oneself not to love the itself, but the things worth loving and desiring. Living ethically requires making an effort to be right. In other words, there are barriers between man and truth, between man and ethics. The most important of these obstacles is the self. Because, it is the self that prevents the individual from seeing the truth. Since self paints everything with the paint of his own consciousness, it prevents events and facts from being perceived correctly. The individual must transcend this self in order to reach reality. For this, it has to go through a difficult process. Murdoch believes that challenges are great opportunities for the individual to mature and reach the truth.

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