

Uniting Form with Contingency: Female Characters' Self-Liberation in Iris Murdoch's Novel

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Abstract

This paper discusses the growth of female self-consciousness fulfilled by women's attempt to unite form and contingency in their life and the liberation for androcentric fantasy by scrutinizing Murdoch's novel *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* and her philosophical texts. Murdoch applies her philosophical concepts of form and contingency to the characterization of female figures and attempts to combine the fixed form of the world with the uncertainty of life. The paper reveals that the vacillation in women's opinion between form and contingency proves their speculation quality, which is essential for the growth of self-consciousness and demonstrates the growth of female self-consciousness along with rethinking their life and reevaluating themselves with full self-consciousness in this novel.

Keywords: Iris Murdoch, form, contingency, female-consciousness

1. Introduction

In *The Fairly Honourable Defeat*, the complex and delicately interwoven plot moves smoothly through philosophical insights and emotional turmoil while the cynical biochemist, Julius King, manipulates insensitively people's emotions and masterminds a real life drama between friends, siblings, lovers and spouses in an effort to illustrate his beliefs in the fragility of human's love, in the inability of people to communicate openly and honestly due to their own ego and vanity, and in man's misunderstanding of goodness and evil. As for the female characters, Murdoch mainly focuses on the characterization of the siblings Hilda and Morgan respectively as a typical example of traditional women and modern educated women. Higher education empowers Morgan with more job opportunities and more freedom to have the life she wants, which is beyond traditional women's wildest dream but fails to bring her happiness as expected. She is struggling in the toils of emotional disputes with her husband Tallis and her lover Julius, who represent the world of contingency and the world of form respectively. To relieve her depression, she spends beyond her means on useless stuff.

According to Murdoch, form is the rigid need for order or controlling patterns that are characteristic of the forced imposition on others and the invasion to both life and fiction. And contingency is defined as the "random elements of life that are beyond an individual's control" (Grimshaw, 2005, p. 20) and is associated with "a truer picture of freedom" since it "is destructive of fantasy and opens the way of the imagination" (Murdoch, 1997, pp. 294-295). Although "the satisfaction of the form is such that it can stop one from going more deeply into the contradictions or paradoxes or more painful aspects of the subject matter" (Dooley, 2003, p. 10), "contingency must be defended for it is the essence of personality" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 285). William Hall, Steven Cohan, and Deborah Johnson have discussed the representations of form and contingency in Murdoch's fiction, analyzing the threat to the patriarchal world of form when it is confronting the female world of contingency and the hard lot of female characters when they are faced with the male's imposition of form. Based on these analyses, Tammy Grimshaw questions whether the contingent has the primary association with the female in Murdoch's view and concludes that Murdoch's "representations of both the male's and the female's involvements in contingency are convincing examples of realism" (Grimshaw, 2005, p. 19) since she believes the involvement of the real life in the "random elements of the contingent" (Grimshaw, 2005, p. 19). Since both the male and the female are likely to get involved in form and contingency, these analyses lead one to query how women could balance these two factors in their life after they get rid of the traditional contingent image and own more freedom than before.

Compared with Morgan's emotional perplexity, economic hardship, and male contempt, Hilda's affluent life, happy marriage and her popularity among the male indicate Murdoch's reluctant admission that women still live in the androcentric world where the women's self-improvement are not widely welcome. The revelation of the truth, followed by Rupert's death, awakens both Morgan and Hilda, the women of different types, to rethink their life and reevaluate themselves with fully self-consciousness. In this novel, Murdoch demonstrates the growth of female self-consciousness along with the struggle out of the traditional male dominance and the difficulty in the integration back into the androcentric world.

2. Attempt to Unite Form with Contingency

Murdoch's preoccupation with the individual confrontation of form and contingency informs her fictional portrayal of women's dilemma in the process of establishing their self-consciousness while attempt to unite form and contingency in their life. In *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, the characterization of Morgan is a good illustration of Murdoch's view on this issue. As one of Murdoch's freest character, Morgan experiences an increased contact with the contingent and has more freedom from the restrictions of gender to unite form and contingency in her life. She struggles to acquire the female self-consciousness by reassessing her position in the interpersonal relationships with the men around her: her marriage with Tallis, her extramarital love with Julius and her brother-in-law Rupert respectively, and her immoral emotion with her nephew Peter. Her female self-consciousness is greatly enhanced in her attempt to unite the form and contingency in her chaotic love life, especially when she wavers between Tallis Browne and Julius King. According to the definitions of form and contingency given by Murdoch, Julius represents the traditional patriarchal power and the world of form while Tallis illustrates the world of contingency. So Morgan's struggling relationships with them reveals the process of obtaining the female self-consciousness by her attempt to unite the elements of form and contingency in her world with more freedom as what the advocates of the Women's Movement expect.

Tallis Browne, whose life is inundated with the contingent, initially appears to be unattractive for his homely appearance and is presented as a good and gentle being in the novel:

Tallis was a rather short man with short jagged ginger hair and bushy orange eyebrows. He had a shiny bumpy forehead and very wide apart very light brown eyes and a short shiny nose and a small and slightly prissy mouth. (Murdoch, 1997, p. 73)

Although Tallis has a messy and unorganized life and filled with the people with problems: his wife's affair with Julius, his sick and raging father Leonard, and Hilda and Rupert's deviant son Peter, he "displays both correct vision and right conduct, traits which Iris Murdoch associates with the good" and is considered as "Murdoch's most successful and sustained rendering of a good character" (Spear, 2007, p. 72). Unfortunately, his goodness is not recognized by others until nearly the end of the story. He does not care enough about himself to clean his house or to prepare his food properly. His house is "never cleaned... littered with filthy junk of every sort... smells like the Zoo" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 12). So in the eyes of Morgan's sister Hilda, he is "hopelessly incompetent" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 12) in helping others and "[h]is activities are all so wet and dilettante and disconnected" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 13). Hilda considers it as "a symptom of fatal ineptitude" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 13) that Tallis still addresses her father Daddy. And she blames him for his feebleness because Tallis fails to achieve or finish anything like "[a]ll that bitty adult education and dribs and drabs of social work" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 13). In Hilda's eyes, everything Tallis does is "so wet and dilettante and disconnected" that he is "the last thing [she] should have chosen" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 13). And Morgan complains that, "with Tallis there were no forms and limits, things had no boundaries" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 81). His extremely untidy and chaotic flat and his lack of a clear vision of plan, as the characteristics of contingency, result in his failure to regain his wife's affection that he wants it desperately and then to his insufficiency to connect to the world of form.

Unlike Tallis, Julius King leaves a relatively positive impression on others at the very beginning of the novel as a successful biochemist in nerve gas, "a tremendously straightforward person" with "a passion for cleanliness and order" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 92). He voluntarily helps Tallis clean up his kitchen whenever he visits his house and willingly gives him some money to reorder his life. Ironically, as a man who "acted on principle" (4), Julius is so solipsistic that he cannot see any viewpoint of others but of his own and utterly rejects goodness for he believes that "It is not just that human nature absolutely precludes goodness, it is that goodness... is not even a coherent concept, it is unimaginable of human beings" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 206). He gives up his research in America not because of the shame for its meddling with warfare but of his own boredom. After Rupert's death as a victim of his crafty plot to prove his ability to "divide anybody from anybody" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 214), he is "still entirely self-obsessed and self-indulgent" and find it unnecessary to "reassess his world" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 72). His temptation to impose his life philosophy and conception of world, that is form according to Murdoch,

inappropriately on people and things.

Partly liberated from the role as the subjugated object of men in the patriarchal society, women are provided with more access to education and gain more lifestyle options as the achievements of the Women's Movement. In *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, Murdoch's characterization of Morgan reflects the distractions and confusion of women about the reposition of their social role and put forward the interaction between form and contingency after their liberation from the household with more freedom. Moreover, Murdoch depicts the formation of the female self-consciousness while she portrays Morgan's attempt to unite the two forces in her life when confronted with Julius's imposition of form and Tallis's attraction of contingency to her.

As an intellectual woman, Morgan has much more freedom when she is deciding whom to marry. Her sister Hilda holds the view that "she's so clever [and] ... could have married whoever she wanted" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 13). The breakaway from the traditional restriction on women makes Morgan to choose a marriage of different kind which could maintain her independence and freedom. Therefore, to Hilda's surprise, Morgan married to "spiritless" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 13) Tallis, "a muddler" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 13) who should be "with more dignity" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 13). Without "a reasonable amount of efficiency" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 13), "a sort of ordered completeness of life and an intelligent use of one's talents which is the mark of a man" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 13), Tallis is completely opposite to the traditional male image of power. And the reason for Morgan's decision to marry him is his inconceivable differences from her.

Marrying Tallis was a sort of – action. Just an action...but I simply felt he was somebody I could not leave. ... Some crazy incoherent tenderness led me to marry that man.... My feeling about Tallis was like one's feeling about animals. I mean, that awful sort of naked pity and distress.... Everything about him wounded me. I mean, through him I was vulnerable to the whole world. It was like grieving over an animal. And it wasn't quite pity either, it was much more than that. Just by existing he tore my heart-strings. (Murdoch, 1997, p. 49)

However, Morgan admits that she was "childish and half asleep" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 195) when she married Tallis because of his "terrible fatal tenderness" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 82) which started to annoy her soon after. Hilda points out bluntly that "Tallis was one of Morgan's dreams. Tallis represented holy poverty or some such stuff. Then she woke up one morning and saw she just had a weak and unsuccessful man for a husband. That hurt her pride" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 202). Disappointed and dissatisfied with her marital life, Morgan chooses to leave for America, where she has a two-year love affair with Julius, to "get away from Tallis, to escape" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 82). When she comes back, she believes that she has got to "get rid of this blasted dream figure" and "go through – some ordeal – to set [herself] free" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 48).

Tallis's reaction to Morgan's return to England and what she did in the past two years has distinctive features of his contingency. When Tallis knew that Morgan came back without notifying him, he "felt crippled with pain" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 98) and did nothing else but make his room "filled with the appalling thought of Morgan" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 98).

Now that she was back, every day and every hour of her silence turned that hope into torture. She was no longer outside the world. ...No, he had no plan. He did not even wonder whether it was pride which made him idle when every tormented nerve yearned to cry out: come back!...He knew that for the moment he could do nothing. He just thought about he and about the past. (Murdoch, 1997, pp. 98-9)

In spite of his violent inner struggle and intense yearning for Morgan, he did nothing but wait. He disagrees to a divorce for he deceives himself that Morgan will come back if there is no divorce. He tells himself that he must do something, he must see her. But he denies this idea without a try for the lack of confidence because "it's always such a rotten failure" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 312) and he is "so clumsy and stupid with her" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 312). Then Tallis decides to write to Morgan instead of talking with her face to face. Rupert reminds him of "a much more direct and obvious responsibility" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 165) as a husband. And in "a more primitive society" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 164), it would have been his "duty to fetch her back to his house by force if necessary" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 165). There are two implications in Rupert's preach: one is that Rupert doesn't have the power that traditional husbands had; the other is that the wife doesn't function in the house under the husband's control as usual.

Tallis's insistence on writing to Morgan without any replies makes Julius feel "incomprehensible" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 369) and then explore the reason for it by asking him why not go around and see her. Tallis gives a thoughtful explanation to it as "a form of cowardice" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 369).

I just feel so bloody tired and discouraged at the moment. I know I'll bungle everything if I go and see her. There's a sort of pattern to it. She's got a picture of what she wants me to be and I'm just not it and it simply exasperates her. I can't bear that exasperation. I'm bloody miserable enough at the moment without a ghastly interview with Morgan to look back on. I suppose it's cowardly to write letters. But if one writes letters one can go on hoping. (Murdoch, 1997, p. 369)

And at the end of the novel, Tallis recalls what happened in the past and misses Morgan "vaguely and without urgency" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 411). Though he has no idea about whether he and Morgan would meet again, Tallis still "let[s] her continue to occupy his heart" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 411). Tallis's contingent features are fully illustrated in the way he deals with his marriage crisis and saves his love life. He allows his personal life under the control of the random elements of life and performs no intervention in the situation. With much more freedom than the traditional women in the marriage, Morgan finds that her new role in the family is not as satisfying as expected when her husband fails to meet her needs without the traditional power. So she changes her husband's position in her heart from being her "virtue" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 195) to being her "vice" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 195). Hilda points out that "Morgan needs a strong hand" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 13) instead of the freedom to make choices by herself.

Morgan, as other modern intellectual women usually do, intends to pursue a new kind of marriage life and change her role in the family since education brings her more job opportunities, economic independence, and a wider knowledge of the world. The process of the family revolution is synchronized with the establishment of female self-consciousness. The reposition of women in the society as well as in the family promotes their self-understanding and urges them to rebalance their life after the disruption of the old order. However, the process is not always smooth. Disappointment and dissatisfaction with her trial to build a new order in the marriage make Morgan decide to leave for America where her encounter with Julius puts her in close contact with the form imposed by the patriarchal power. She is expected to "respond to his magic" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 49), "be predictable" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 49), "be gay at the right times, quiet at the right times" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 49), "live to his timetable" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 49), and "cook" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 49). Moreover, Morgan realizes that the need to fulfill these male expectations may cause her to fashion herself into the prescribed masculine view of womanhood. But the eagerness to rebuild her order of life makes her want Julius "in the rapacious way" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 49).

Murdoch illustrates that Julius's great attraction to Morgan comes from her preference to be more closely aligned with the world of form rather than with the force of the contingent. However, Morgan's love for Julius and her craving for the form that Julius could offer are paradoxical since they are against her desire for freedom. And her increasing confusion in her love affair with Julius makes her contact with the world of the contingent increasingly, which brings about Julius's disaffection with her because he exclaims, "I dislike excitable muddled women, as you know. You once seemed to me not to be one. You once seemed to me, in this respect, exceptional" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 89). Even though Morgan tells Julius that she is willing to conform to the societal expectation of feminine subjugation: "I love you now a thousand times more, a thousand times better. Julius, I could be your slave" (128), she fails to reconcile with Julius because he does not "want a slave" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 128) at all. Morgan's indulgence in their love affair makes their relationship lack the sense of form. Therefore, Julius gets bored with her, which drives her to leave him without the consideration of her own career.

I can't think how I ever got away from him, how I got myself out of the house. It was torture. I felt he'd abandoned me in his heart and he was somehow willing me to go. Yet none of his appeared openly. Anyway it's over now. (Murdoch, 1997, p. 48)

When Morgan recalls her departure, she says, "literally I left Julius, but spiritually he left me" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 44). The breakdown with Julius makes Morgan reconsider the roles of form and contingency in her rebuilt order of life by questioning herself: "Would it all have become easier and better if there had been no Julius? Or would her restlessness have, whatever happened, invented a Julius?" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 108). Furthermore, she concludes the reasons for the failure of their relationship first as "[h]e expected too much of me" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 108) and then as that: "[h]e really had so few claims and expectations, perhaps too few. It was as if he bored me, except that it wasn't boredom. We are made of different material" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 108). The two opposite conclusions interact with each other as both cause and effect. Too much imposition of form on Morgan makes her realize the position of feminine subjugation is not what she struggles for.

Rejecting the trajectory of traditional women's life, Morgan intends to open up a new road for her own life with full knowledge of her limitations as a female and her advantages as an intellect. Unfortunately her first two trials,

with contingency and form respectively, all ends in failure. She is in bewilderment when she fails to balance the random and uncontrollable elements of life and the rigid need for order in her life. Tallis points out that her problem is that she is “hopelessly theory-ridden” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 195) and need “deep belongingness and connections and stability” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 195) but not chases “empty abstractions” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 195).

Driven by the urgent need to go back home, Morgan can't stop her wavering between form and contingency. On one hand, she feels “an agonizing almost humiliating need to see her husband” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 104) and admits that Tallis “haunted her and drew her” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 104). Although she admits that Tallis's “consciousness binds” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 47) hers and he has “an obsession” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 48) over her, in her meeting with Tallis, Morgan presents her resistance against the contingent as being “cold and hard and purposeful and vile” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 106) in order not to “give way to that ghastly heartbreaking tenderness, that animal feeling” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 107). She tells Tallis that she really enjoys the wonderful “adventurous time (Murdoch, 1997, p. 111)” in the past two years and dislike to go “into any more cages (Murdoch, 1997, p. 111)” because their marriage is a mistake. Inconsequently, Morgan refuses to divorce for “Everything about divorce is ugly and destructive and horrible” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 83) and objects to come back because “There's no use in my coming back. I should only run away again” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 111):

Living with Tallis was like living in a gipsy encampment. At first all seemed very unworldly and spiritual and free. Later it was depressing. Later still it was frightening. It made me lose my sense of identity. I resented the muddle but I couldn't dominate it. The trouble was that Tallis didn't expect me to, he didn't expect the right things of me....Oh it's hard to explain. In the end everything about him began to irritate me terrible, even his freckles. (Murdoch, 1997, p. 81)

Morgan's failure to dominate the muddle that she resents reveals women's inability to dominate their family life as well as their own life even though they have more education than before. Moreover, her paradoxical attitudes towards her marriage show her willingness to find a better life and her reluctance to break away from the old societal order. Morgan decides not to undergo Tallis again because she feels ashamed of him and his “false simplicity” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 195), which is away from her path of life. And she explains the reasons for her changes before and after they got married:

I think I wanted to sink down into some deep deep sea with you. When I married you I felt I was killing myself. It seemed somehow wonderful at the time. But I couldn't kill myself. I couldn't even love in the end, down in that deep sea. I have to be outside, in the open, in the clear air, on the high places, free, free, free. It's only out in that clear fresh air that I can really love people. I have to follow the kind of love that I am capable of. Everybody must be guided by that. (Murdoch, 1997, pp. 195-96)

Morgan's refusal endows her with “[a] sudden sense of freedom [that] made her feel light and unconfined as a dancing shadow” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 113). Morgan's incompatible attitudes to her marriage and her husband Tallis reflect her reluctance to live in a world of contingency as well as a world without it.

With the apparently severed but actually connected relationship with the contingent, Morgan resorts to Julius, the world of the form and the “liberating force” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 372), for the way to restore the order of her life. She promises that she could do anything Julius wants and perform any penance just to find her way back to him. Her humble supplication for the reconciliation with Julius doesn't have any positive effects but makes Julius “get really bored” with her and “feel a sort of disgust” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 372). Julius complains that, “I've kept clear of Morgan. I find her company very lowering, even the pleasures of curiosity have palled” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 372). Julius refuses Morgan's application for love not to mention “friendship, support, understanding” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 89) that she wants. Julius's impact on Morgan can't “vanish into nothing” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 213) as Morgan claims, “Julius is in me. I haven't solved Julius. All my moods have been modes of consciousness of him” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 213). Then Morgan uses three words “[f]irst ecstasy, then misery, then cynicism” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 213) to summarize the three stages of their love affair. She consoles herself that they shall “never be finished with each other” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 213) and it is “only the beginning of a drama which will last the whole of [their] lives” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 213), just like the inseparability of form from her life.

Julius's complete abandonment of her forces Morgan to ponder deeply over these two important men in her life. For Morgan, “the thing with Julius was fantastic. But really Tallis is ineffaceable” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 47). Julius provides her with the worldly comfort just as what a traditional husband does for his wife. Morgan comments on Julius that,

But he's mythical. Men have mythical fates.... Julius and I lived like gods. ...Julius turned me into an angel. Julius is all soul, all inner life, all being, and he filled me with being and made me solid and compact and real. ...Julius is almost all myth. That was what took me. (Murdoch, 1997, p. 49)

For Tallis, the case is totally different for he fails to offer the protection that Morgan needs. After the deep analysis of the two important men in her life, Morgan concludes that both of them are "simply not designed for her at all" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 287) since "Julius was far too erratic and domineering, and Tallis was too uncertain in his grip and too hopelessly eccentric" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 287).

When Morgan looks into the future, "[h]er thoughts about her new life had not really comprehended Julius any more than they had really comprehended Tallis" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 213). She also finds "with a sort of relaxed despair, how in these two relationships she was not yet changed" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 213). Furthermore, Morgan realizes that the failure to change herself to fit in with the marriage life and love affairs leads her to the current awkward situation. Therefore, she becomes fiercely determined to change herself. These thoughts help Morgan become conscious of the respective roles of form and contingency in her life and enlighten her for the way to unite them.

Murdoch indicates the way for Morgan to unite form with contingency and put her life in order through the description of Rupert's love philosophy. In Rupert's opinion, "[t]rue love is something impressive, something beautiful (Murdoch, 1997, p. 165)" and "[l]ove is the last and secret name of all the virtues" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 83). Furthermore, "Be calm. Calm of mind is so terrible important. Be quiet and let yourself sink. Sink into the depths of your own spirit and lost your fretful ego there" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 83). According to Murdoch, the appropriate uniting of form and contingency can be only through "the exercise of a love founded on tolerance and understanding" of others (Joneson, 1987, P. 86). Inspired by the love philosophy, Morgan sighs with emotion that she is beginning to see herself clearly at last. She confesses to Julius that

Ever since I've been grown-up I've been some sort of slave. I was always stupidly in love. Then there was that idea with Tallis. Then you – ...I suddenly got a vision of what it would be like to be free. ... I suddenly saw how marvelous it would be to have free affections.... But anyhow I suddenly saw how wonderful it would be to love a whole lot of people, not in a frenzy, but freely, in innocence. (Murdoch, 1997, p. 210)

Then she decides to sort herself out first, and then "find out how to love people with [her] kind of love" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 210) that she has never really done before. Her declaration of love indicates her change of focus from her individual to others after being fully conscious of what she is and what she wants.

3. Self-Liberation from Androcentric Fantasy

The examples of Hilda and Morgan illustrate women's quest for female self-awareness and their attempt to unite form with contingency in their lives. The accumulated female consciousness empowers women to question the male authority and their fantasy upon women since they are still being evaluated by the patriarchal values and formed into "women" in the androcentric society. As Murdoch's novel depicts, two female characters are set into contrast with each other. Morgan is distinct from her sister Hilda in both life-style and consciousness. From the comments made by the men around on them, Murdoch reveals the fact that traditional women are still widely welcomed and popular in the male-dominated society. However, the increasing female consciousness awakens them to realize how much they make their way through life and liberates them from the world confined by patriarchal ideology.

In *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, Murdoch also explores women's state of being in many variant relationships and shows women's struggle to define themselves through a relationship, especially those with a shaky self-consciousness. After Morgan found that her husband's contingency fails to provide the order she needs, she resorts to a love affair with the powerful figure Julius. When that relationship fails, she intends to simplify her love with an innocent boy, which actually imposes much more responsibility on her than she expects. Then she gets herself involved in an extramarital love affair with a father figure, which ends in disaster. Finally, she again reverts to a mother figure for the indulgent comforts. Meanwhile, her sister Hilda's interpersonal relationships are comparatively simple, whose life is family-centered or more exactly, husband-centered. Their self-consciousness are all based on and formed by the comments on them from the males in their lives. Since Hilda is a typical traditional woman and Morgan is a modern one due to the Women's Movement, the different comments on them reflects the social expectations of women.

Murdoch characterizes Hilda as a woman fortified with a strong self-security in a life that is quiet, genteel, ordered and warm while Morgan as a woman without enough perception of affection and affiliation in a life that is chaotic, messy, disordered and cold. When Alex compares them, he claims that,

Morgan means well but she's fundamentally a very silly person. Hilda is far more genuinely a rational being, though like so many women she preferred marriage to the development of her mind. Morgan's a lightweight. (Murdoch, 1997, p. 24)

And even the critical man Julius praises Hilda highly for being "so much more grown-up than Morgan, so much more of a genuinely thinking being" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 268). In his eyes, Hilda is "marvelous" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 268) and "genuinely unconventional" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 270). What impresses him most is that

She is a very good-natured and kindly person who doesn't think too much about herself. She's not *interested* in herself, the way the others are. This is what makes her so restful to be with (Murdoch, 1997, p. 270)... I so much enjoyed talking to her and being with her. She's entirely truthful and genuine, unlike her sister. (Murdoch, 1997, p. 376)

Instead, Julius considers Morgan's "company very lowering" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 376), her "sensations no longer interest" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 128) him, and her "contortions merely embarrassing" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 128). So he even doesn't want to see her any more. Rupert concludes Morgan's characteristics as "Morgan was in an electrical mood. She needed to be questioned, cornered, pinned. She wanted to be, to use her own words, put through it, told off" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 82). These widely divergent appraisals indicate what female characters are approved by the male and what are unaccepted by them.

For Murdoch the main obstacle for women to overcome their inferiority lies in education: "The problem for women is the way they think about themselves. Education is fundamental to their socially conditioned behavior of inferiority. The wretch girls are demoralized at each age by fobbing off with soft subjects unless there is a positive move for women's education, there is no hope" (Dooley, 2003, p.180). In addition, Murdoch explores further in this novel whether women could be happier and better after getting higher education through the comparison between Hilda and Morgan and then illustrates that more opportunities and the consequent freedom for the educated women in the society leads them to the new familial and marital predicaments.

From his philosophical viewpoint, Morgan's brother-in-law Rupert analyzes the causes of her present life through reviewing her course of growing up. Rupert views Morgan's world as "sordid and wretched" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 165), full of "prevarication and muddle and shabby thinking" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 165), so what Morgan needs is "the vision of a life of trust and truth and mutual devotion" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 165). Although "posed as an independent and liberated woman", Morgan has "really led a very sheltered life" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 226) and is "traversing a serious crisis of identity" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 226) which is attributed to her sister's protection that made her grow up in Hilda's shadow, school and university studies that "had absorbed the ferocious energy of Morgan's youth" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 226), and "a few scrappy love affairs" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 226) that led Morgan to choose Tallis as her husband. Morgan's growing up has been postponed by all these goings-on until now when she gets to "decide what sort of person she is and what human life is about" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 226). Here Murdoch indicates the adverse impact of education on women since the social perception of men and women remains unchanged.

Regardless of the negative evaluations by the male, Morgan never fails to get support and care from her sister Hilda who is never hesitant to safeguard Morgan against any attacks in a possessive way. She never thinks any man is good enough for Morgan. She even thinks Morgan's face is "interesting" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 13) when her husband point out that Morgan is not as beautiful as her. And she admires Morgan's life and comments: "At least she's an intellectual, not like me.... I'm not an academic type. Morgan is, to her finger tips" (Murdoch, 1997, pp. 16-7). For Hilda, to cherish her sister is "the chief business of her life, a constant unflinching source of warmth and sense" (Murdoch, 1997, pp. 379-80). However, Morgan doesn't live as confidently and vigorously as Hilda expects for an intelligent woman. Instead, Morgan repeatedly expresses her admiration for her sister's life and what she has:

God, your house is elegant, Hilda....Envy, Hilda, pure envy. I'd give my ears for a house like this and a husband like Rupert. A husband that works. Functions, I mean. (Murdoch, 1997, p. 143)

Morgan also tells Rupert that she envies him and Hilda because they've got what she needs and especially envies "Hilda having a husband that functioned" since her spouse "poor old Tallis was a broken spring" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 81). Moreover, Morgan tells Hilda that, "You always made me feel brave too....You always made me feel safe" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 51). She confesses that she has always "been afraid of Hilda's disapproval" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 84) all her life. Their seemingly contradictory attitudes towards the other's life reflect the impact that's brought to women by social changes. Due to her blind pursuit for the love, Morgan was tricked into Julius's bet that he could "divide anybody from anybody" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 214) to test "the frailty of human attachments" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 372), which causes the breakdown of Hilda's family directly and Rupert's

death indirectly. Afterwards, the reflection on these happenings endows both Morgan and Hilda with more female consciousness, makes them realize the confinement of patriarchy imposed on them, which they try to liberate from. Everything becomes different now right back to the start. In retrospect, Morgan exclaims that

Men...all the trouble in my life has come from men, the only time I was ever really happy was when Hilda and I were together, long ago when we were young. And not just long ago, but ever since in a way Hilda has been the guardian of my happiness. (Murdoch, 1997, p. 357)

Morgan takes Hilda as her “only deep and enduring comfort” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 357) and “compared with her bond with Hilda, these matters of men, of lovers and husbands, seemed utterly flimsy” (Murdoch, 1997, p. 357). After Rupert’s death at the close of the narrative, spiritually liberated, Morgan and her sister Hilda move to America and begin a new life there. Morgan resumes her intellectual pursuits and academic career, taking a university job on the west coast. As the only bond with the male in their past life and the representation of next male generation, Hilda’s son Peter, sick and immature, is taken away with her and put on probation to have psychological treatment.

4. Conclusion

In this novel, Murdoch depicts the different difficulties of traditional women like Hilda and the modern women like Morgan on their journey to quest for their female self-awareness. She also explores the struggle and waver of women between form and contingency after they obtain the female self-awareness as an individual in their inner world and then tries to establish their female self-consciousness as a social being in the outer world. Morgan attempts to obtain the female self-consciousness by uniting the elements of form and contingency in her life, which is revealed by her struggle to sort through the relationships with the men around her. Then inspired by Rupert’s love philosophy, Morgan, who has been more self-conscious after weighing form and contingency in her life, changes her focus of attention from herself to others, which is what Murdoch advocates as the way to reconstruct one’s selfhood. Murdoch illustrates the manner in which social influences have an impact upon the behavior of the female, as well as upon the choices she makes. Murdoch’s description of women’s situation is dispassionate and realistic while her reflection on women’s problems is close to the essence of human characteristics. Meanwhile, Murdoch explores philosophical ideas, concepts and theories and puts their validity to a test. In the characterization of female characters, Murdoch conveys her philosophical views on self, attention, love and goodness and expresses her concerns about women’s issues, for instance, the importance of education in women’s liberation, the likely ways to be independent and so on.

The female characters in this novel confront gloomy moments of self-recognition when they must see the world as utterly changed – Hilda when she begins to suspect Rupert, Morgan when she is deserted by Julius and then begins her affair with Rupert. The most shocking change, for both of them, is the discovery of Julius’s trick and Rupert’s death. These changes break the order of their life respectively, awaken them from the male-dominated ideology, and force them to reconsider their life’s direction. Murdoch uses this powerful theme of a changed and revised world as the social context where the female undergo the growth of female consciousness through the quest for the female self-awareness as an individual, attempt to unite form and contingency in their life and liberation for androcentric fantasy controlled by men. Finally, Murdoch offers the two sisters an increased degree of freedom in their life in America after they become more conscious of their female being but fails to point them the way how to reconstruct the order of life and establish the female identity in the changed world.

Moreover, due to her dispassionate reflection on and objective accounts of women’s situation and women’s problems, Murdoch has reservations about the feminism and women’s movements, especially those that advocate the superiority of the female over the male or the substitution of the male-dominant position. Instead, considering education as an essential way for women to improve themselves and achieve sexual equality, Murdoch also explores the women’s new plights after being educated since the male-dominated ideological changes obviously lag behind. So the more freedom of choice, more economic independence, and more control over the life that are brought by education also results in the new male discrimination against these educated women. Meanwhile, Murdoch points out the necessity of moral and spiritual growth for women’s self-improvement in spite of the importance of education.

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