TRANSCENDENCE AND TRANSFORMATION: EXPLORING SPIRITUAL AND PERSONAL GROWTH IN IRIS MURDOCH'S *THE BELL*

[1]KiruthigA D, [2]Dr. V. Gnanaprakasam

[1]Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu.

[2]Associate Professor, Department of English , Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu.

[1]kiruthibala1213@gmail.com, [2]drvgpau@gmail.com

Annotation

Iris Murdoch's novel The Bell, focusing on its central themes of transcendence and transformation. The study examines how Murdoch portrays the spiritual and personal growth of her characters as they navigate love, faith, and self-discovery within the cloistered world of Imber Abbey. Central figures like Dora Greenfield, Toby Gashe, and Michael Meade undergo profound journeys of personal change, with moments of epiphany and revelation marked by the symbolic tolling of the bell. Through these transformations, Murdoch explores the possibility of transcending mundane existence and reaching a higher state of understanding and fulfillment. The novel's complex narrative techniques, such as symbolism, allegory, and psychological depth, further highlight the philosophical dimensions of Murdoch's work, inviting readers to reflect on existential and ethical questions. This study also engages with critical interpretations, offering a dialogue with diverse scholarly perspectives and contributing new insights into the novel's depiction of the tension between human frailty and the quest for spiritual enlightenment. By synthesizing literary analysis and philosophical inquiry, this paper provides a deeper understanding of Murdoch's exploration of the complexities of human existence and the search for transcendence in a morally ambiguous world.

Keywords: Transcendence, Transformation, Human existence, Spiritual growth, Self-discovery.

Iris Murdoch was a prolific British novelist and philosopher whose literary works have left an indelible mark on the landscape of British literature. Born in Dublin, Ireland, Murdoch grew up in London and attended Oxford University, where she studied classics, philosophy, and literature. Her academic background profoundly influenced her writing style, characterized by intricate plots, philosophical themes, and complex characters. Murdoch's literary career spanned over five decades, during which she authored 26 novels, numerous essays, and works of philosophy. Her

debut novel, *Under the Net*, marked the beginning of a distinguished literary journey that would establish her as one of the leading voices in post-war British fiction.

One of Murdoch's most notable contributions to British literature lies in her exploration of morality, existentialism, and the complexities of human relationships. Her novels often delve into philosophical inquiries, grappling with questions of ethics, truth, and the nature of reality. For example, in *The Bell*, Murdoch writes, "We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality" (Murdoch, *The Bell*). This quote encapsulates her preoccupation with the contrast between illusion and reality, a theme that recurs throughout her works. Peter J. Conradi elaborates on this point, stating:

"Murdoch's novels function as intricate studies of the human psyche, where characters are often trapped by self-delusions and fantasies. In *The Bell*, as in many of her works, we find a philosophical inquiry into how individuals construct realities that obscure moral truth. Her concept of 'unselfing'—the need to move beyond ego-driven illusions—offers readers a moral challenge to acknowledge the world as it is, rather than as they wish it to be" (Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life*).

Murdoch's philosophical background infuses her narratives with intellectual depth, inviting readers to contemplate profound themes while captivating them with compelling storytelling. Beyond her thematic richness, Murdoch's narrative style is characterized by intricate plots and vivid characterizations. Her novels are populated with a diverse array of characters, each grappling with their own moral dilemmas and existential crises. As Dora in *The Bell* reflects, "I hate solitude, but I'm afraid of intimacy. The truth is, I hate everything, and nothing matters" (Murdoch, *The Bell*). This illustrates the emotional and psychological complexity of Murdoch's characters, many of whom wrestle with existential crises that mirror the philosophical discussions underpinning the plot. As A.S. Byatt notes:

"Murdoch's characters are drawn into moral conflicts that are as intricate as the worlds they inhabit. What makes her work exceptional is the way she blends the daily minutiae of life with philosophical rigor. Her characters are ordinary people confronting extraordinary moral challenges, and in doing so, they illuminate what it means to be human in a universe often indifferent to their struggles" (Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom*).

Murdoch's keen insight into human nature allows her to create multi-dimensional characters whose struggles resonate with readers on a deeply human level. In *The Bell*, the characters are often forced to confront their own moral failings, as Michael Meade reflects, "There is no necessity that what happens be meaningful, but we can give it meaning" (Murdoch, *The Bell*). This statement ties into Murdoch's broader exploration of the human condition where meaning and morality are not inherent but are constructed by individuals navigating a complex, often indifferent, world. Martha Nussbaum highlights this aspect of Murdoch's fiction:

"Murdoch's novels serve as ethical laboratories, where characters confront situations that demand moral clarity in the face of chaos. Her work insists on the possibility of moral development—characters evolve through suffering, love, and loss, but this evolution is not guaranteed. What Murdoch offers is a moral universe where progress is hard-won and fragile, but nonetheless real. The moral vision of her characters evolves, and through this, Murdoch invites the reader into a dialogue about the nature of goodness and the complexity of ethical decision-making" (Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*).

In addition to her literary achievements, Murdoch's impact on British literature is also evident in her role as a public intellectual and cultural commentator. Throughout her career, she engaged in social and political discourse, addressing issues ranging from feminism to environmentalism. Murdoch's outspokenness and willingness to confront societal norms added another dimension to her legacy, cementing her status as a figure of influence both within and beyond the literary sphere. Anne Rowe asserts:

"Murdoch's influence as a public intellectual is as significant as her fictional work. Through her novels and philosophical essays, she challenged prevailing ideologies and asked her readers to reconsider their most deeply held beliefs about ethics, love, and freedom. Her moral philosophy, steeped in a Platonic tradition, resisted the moral relativism of her time. Instead, she

emphasized the importance of goodness as a central, objective pursuit in both life and art, a pursuit that defines much of her literary and philosophical output" (Rowe, *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*).

Overall, Iris Murdoch's legacy in British literature is one of profound intellectualism, moral inquiry, and artistic innovation. Her novels continue to captivate readers with their philosophical depth and narrative brilliance, ensuring her lasting presence in the pantheon of great British writers.

The Bell is a seminal work by Iris Murdoch, first published in 1958. Set in an English country abbey, the novel explores themes of transcendence, transformation, and the search for meaning in a complex and often contradictory world. At its core, *The Bell* is a compelling narrative that delves into the inner lives of its characters as they navigate the challenges of love, faith, and personal growth. The novel centers around the character of Dora Greenfield, a young woman trapped in a loveless marriage to the dull and authoritarian Paul Greenfield. Seeking escape from her unhappy domestic life, Dora flees to Imber Abbey, a secluded religious community, where she encounters a cast of eccentric and enigmatic characters, including the charismatic spiritual leader Michael Meade and the troubled young Toby Gashe.

As the story unfolds, *The Bell* explores the transformative power of love, both romantic and spiritual, as well as the complexities of human desire and longing. Murdoch skillfully weaves together multiple narrative threads, including Dora's journey of self-discovery, Toby's struggle to come to terms with his past, and the tensions simmering beneath the surface of the abbey community. In one pivotal moment, Dora reflects on her inner conflict:

"It was strange to feel one's life being shaped by some event one had not chosen and could not control, as if an outside power had laid its hand upon her and driven her on" (*The Bell*).

This moment captures the theme of transformation, where Dora is forced to confront her own powerlessness and begin her path toward change.

Central to the thematic exploration of *The Bell* is the concept of transcendence—the idea of reaching beyond the limitations of the material world to attain a higher state of being or understanding. Michael Meade, the abbey's spiritual leader, grapples with this notion as he strives for spiritual purity while confronting his own human frailties. In a moment of reflection, Michael states, "We should seek to be good, and not just to do good. The two are different, though often confused" (*The Bell*). This insight reflects Murdoch's ongoing philosophical inquiry into the nature of goodness and morality. As philosopher Martha Nussbaum notes,

"Murdoch's characters, particularly in *The Bell*, wrestle with the tension between moral aspiration and human fallibility, offering readers a rich exploration of the ethical struggles that define the human experience" (Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*).

Moreover, *The Bell* also delves into the theme of transformation—the process of personal growth and change that occurs as individuals confront their innermost selves and grapple with the complexities of existence. Murdoch portrays transformation as both a painful and necessary aspect of life. As Dora observes, "Perhaps love makes us better people, but only if we struggle against it at the same time" (*The Bell*), highlighting the complexities of romantic and spiritual love. The characters' transformations are rooted in the moral ambiguity that Murdoch so often explores. Peter J. Conradi writes,

"In *The Bell*, Murdoch confronts the reader with the moral labyrinth of her characters' lives, revealing that transformation is rarely linear and is often fraught with ethical dilemmas. The search for self-improvement is interwoven with the recognition of one's limitations and failures" (Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life*).

As the characters navigate the challenges and conflicts of their lives, they undergo profound transformations, shedding old identities and embracing new possibilities. Toby Gashe, a young man who initially arrives at Imber Abbey with naive idealism, experiences a painful awakening as he confronts his desires and the reality of human imperfection. His journey encapsulates the broader theme of personal transformation through suffering and self-awareness. A.S. Byatt remarks,

“Murdoch’s characters often undergo moral and spiritual crises that force them to confront uncomfortable truths about themselves. In *The Bell*, this theme of transformation is most vividly illustrated through Toby’s descent from innocence to experience, a process that is both redemptive and tragic” (Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom*).

Throughout the novel, Murdoch’s narrative is imbued with a sense of ambiguity and moral complexity, inviting readers to ponder deeper philosophical questions about the nature of morality, free will, and the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe. Michael Meade’s internal struggle with his spirituality, coupled with the disillusionment of the other characters, emphasizes Murdoch's philosophical perspective that human beings must navigate an uncertain moral landscape without the comfort of easy answers. Anne Rowe argues that “Murdoch’s work, particularly *The Bell*, challenges the reader to engage with moral ambiguity, leaving us with the unsettling conclusion that moral clarity is an elusive goal, yet one worth striving for” (Rowe, *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*).

The Bell stands as a powerful exploration of transcendence and transformation, offering readers a rich tapestry of characters and ideas to ponder. Through its compelling narrative and thematic depth, Iris Murdoch's novel continues to resonate with readers, inviting them to embark on a journey of self-discovery and spiritual exploration.

The research objectives outlined for this study on Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* provide a comprehensive framework to explore the intricate themes of transcendence and transformation within the novel. Through close reading and textual analysis, key passages will be scrutinized to identify the motifs and symbolic elements that underpin these central themes. Furthermore, the study aims to trace the individual and collective journeys of transcendence and transformation of major characters, such as Dora Greenfield, Michael Meade, and Toby Gashe, to understand how Murdoch uses these characters to convey her philosophical and spiritual ideas.

In *The Bell*, Murdoch presents transcendence as a core theme, examining how characters attempt to move beyond the limitations of their material existence to seek a higher truth or spiritual awakening. Michael Meade, the spiritual leader of the abbey, personifies this quest for transcendence. As Murdoch writes, “Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unselfish truth. The desire to see things as they are, the desire for the individual to transcend their own perspective, is at the heart of goodness” (*The Bell*). Michael’s philosophy of love, humility, and compassion exemplifies this aspiration toward self-transcendence, making him an influential figure for other characters like Dora and Toby.

The abbey itself acts as a physical and symbolic space of potential transcendence, offering a sanctuary where characters are removed from the distractions of everyday life and confronted with their inner selves. Anne Rowe captures this in her analysis of the novel:

"The abbey in *The Bell* represents more than just a religious retreat; it functions as a metaphysical space where characters are able to grapple with questions of faith, identity, and morality. It is a liminal space where ordinary time seems suspended, and the possibility of spiritual awakening becomes palpable, yet remains elusive for some" (Rowe, *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*).

Moreover, the theme of transcendence is intricately linked to moments of epiphany or revelation that character’s experience in the novel. Dora Greenfield, initially trapped in her turbulent and unsatisfying marriage, finds herself drawn toward a more profound understanding of herself and her desires. Her encounter with the abbey bell, an event both symbolic and transformative, marks a turning point in her perception. In this moment, Dora reflects: "The sound of the bell seemed to pierce through her skin, touching something deep and unfamiliar, calling her to acknowledge a truth she had long buried” (*The Bell*). This represents a critical moment of self-realization, where Dora begins to transcend her former limitations.

Similarly, Toby Gashe's character arc illustrates the painful yet necessary confrontation with the past as a path toward transcendence. Through his experiences at the abbey, Toby grapples with his trauma, his sense of guilt, and ultimately reaches a state of acceptance. A.S. Byatt’s reflection on Toby’s journey underscores this theme of personal growth:

"Toby's character arc in *The Bell* is emblematic of Murdoch's preoccupation with the moral and spiritual development of her characters. His journey from innocence to experience, and ultimately to a kind of quiet transcendence, reveals how suffering and self-awareness are integral to the transformative process that Murdoch so often portrays in her work" (Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom*).

Additionally, the novel emphasizes collective transcendence, illustrating how the abbey community as a whole experience's moments of spiritual awakening. Michael's role as a leader extends beyond his personal quest for enlightenment, he becomes the catalyst for communal growth, encouraging others to reach beyond their individual concerns and connect with a higher, more universal truth. Martha Nussbaum notes this collective dimension of Murdoch's work, arguing:

"Murdoch's novels, particularly *The Bell*, explore the idea that true transcendence is not an isolated act of individual realization but a shared experience that involves the recognition of others' humanity. Through her depiction of the abbey's inhabitants, Murdoch suggests that communal love and the recognition of the Other are essential to achieving moral and spiritual transcendence" (Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*).

The novel also portrays transformation as an ongoing and multifaceted process. Murdoch challenges the notion that personal change occurs in a linear or easily defined way. Characters such as Dora and Toby are continuously in flux, navigating the moral ambiguities and emotional complexities that define their paths toward personal growth. Dora's journey of transformation is particularly poignant, as her evolving sense of self reveals the difficulties of reconciling personal desires with ethical responsibility.

This study aims to investigate the layered depictions of transcendence and transformation in *The Bell* by analyzing the characters' development and the symbolic role of the abbey in facilitating these changes. Through an interdisciplinary approach that draws on literary theory, philosophy, and religious studies, the analysis will contribute new insights to the ongoing scholarly discourse on Murdoch's novel. By synthesizing textual analysis, character study, and critical engagement with secondary sources, this research seeks to deepen the understanding of how Murdoch's exploration of transcendence and transformation in *The Bell* resonates with larger philosophical and existential concerns.

In *The Bell*, Iris Murdoch uses complex character development, layered symbolism, and philosophical inquiry to explore the intricacies of personal growth, spiritual transcendence, and transformation. Central to this narrative is Dora Greenfield, a young woman who, at the start of the novel, finds herself trapped in a loveless marriage and a life devoid of fulfillment. The tolling of *The Bell* at Imber Abbey catalyzes her self-realization and emotional growth. Dora's experience resonates with Murdoch's assertion that "the self, the ego, is what we are always trying to transcend, to escape from" (*The Bell*). This idea underscores Dora's emotional transformation as she ultimately gains the courage to pursue her own happiness and self-acceptance.

Murdoch creates a compelling dynamic between Dora and Michael Meade, the spiritual leader at Imber Abbey, whose own internal conflict serves as a reflection of the novel's central themes. Michael's charismatic exterior slowly unravels as the novel progresses, revealing his vulnerability and moral ambiguity. His self-examination exemplifies the difficulty of true spiritual transcendence, as noted by Murdoch: "In a world where everyone is striving for goodness, we must also recognize that goodness is hard to define, and even harder to practice without ego" (*The Bell*). Michael's eventual recognition of his flaws echoes the broader theme of transformation, not just as personal growth but as a painful process of confronting one's limitations.

Toby Gashe, another key figure in the novel, embarks on a journey of redemption and self-forgiveness. When Toby arrives at the abbey, he carries with him the burden of past traumas and feelings of alienation. However, through his relationships with others, especially Dora and Michael, he begins to heal and transcend his past. Scholar Peter Conradi explores this aspect of Murdoch's work, suggesting that "Toby's transformation is a testament to Murdoch's belief in the importance of community and moral support in achieving personal growth" (Conradi, *Iris*

Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist). Toby's journey reflects Murdoch's interest in the moral and psychological complexities of healing.

In *The Bell*, Murdoch not only focuses on individual transformations but also incorporates a broader symbolic and allegorical framework. The bell itself represents spiritual awakening and the call to transcend the material world. When Dora first hears the bell, it "pierces through her confusion," marking a moment of epiphany where she begins to comprehend the larger questions of faith and selfhood. Scholar Anne Rowe remarks that "the bell in *The Bell* functions as a metaphysical symbol, drawing characters towards moments of epiphany while simultaneously representing the elusive nature of spiritual fulfillment" (Rowe, *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*). The abbey, as a sanctuary for self-reflection and transformation, further solidifies this theme by providing a space where characters confront their inner conflicts.

The tension between transcendence and the realities of human frailty is central to Murdoch's philosophical vision. As Michael Meade struggles with his own moral dilemmas, he begins to recognize that absolute transcendence may be unattainable. His relationship with Toby and the rest of the community forces him to confront his personal failures. As Nussbaum explains, "Murdoch's novels, including *The Bell*, suggest that moral progress is often incremental and filled with setbacks, as individuals struggle to reconcile their desires with the demands of moral goodness" (Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*).

Murdoch's philosophical concerns permeate the narrative through her use of detailed internal monologues and psychological depth. These techniques allow readers to explore the rich inner worlds of the characters, revealing their desires, conflicts, and moments of realization. For example, Dora's inner turmoil, as she reflects on her unhappiness, is captured with great psychological realism: "It was not the noise of *The Bell*, but something deeper, something that she had failed to notice within herself for so long, that now demanded attention" (*The Bell*). This illustrates Murdoch's interest in how self-awareness serves as the first step toward transformation.

The Bell offers a profound exploration of transcendence and transformation through its complex characters, symbolic structure, and philosophical depth. The journeys of Dora, Michael, and Toby highlight the difficult but necessary process of self-examination, the pursuit of personal growth, and the quest for spiritual fulfillment. By weaving together individual stories with broader philosophical questions, Murdoch invites readers to reflect on the nature of transcendence and the limitations of human understanding. Through this intricate narrative, she challenges her audience to consider the possibility of personal and spiritual awakening in a world that often resists simple answers.

The research article on Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* focuses on its intricate portrayal of transcendence and transformation, revealing key insights into the novel's themes, character development, narrative techniques, and scholarly interpretations. Through a detailed exploration, several key findings emerge regarding the ways in which Murdoch grapples with the search for spiritual awakening and personal growth amidst the constraints of everyday life.

In *The Bell*, transcendence serves as a central theme that characters like Dora Greenfield, Michael Meade, and Toby Gashe confront throughout the novel. They grapple with existential questions, seeking moments of epiphany and spiritual awakening. Murdoch's use of the bell as a symbol resonates with the quest for something beyond the material world. Dora's encounter with the tolling of the bell initiates her journey toward self-realization, while Michael's facade of spiritual authority unravels as he battles inner doubt and moral ambiguity. Scholar Anne Rowe notes that "the bell serves not only as a catalyst for personal transformation but also as a reminder of the ever-present tension between the material and the spiritual realms" (*Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*).

The novel's characters undergo profound inner changes as they confront past traumas and face ethical dilemmas. Dora evolves from a state of discontent and confusion to a place of emotional growth, ultimately embracing autonomy. Similarly, Toby's journey from guilt and alienation toward redemption illustrates Murdoch's belief in the transformative power of communal support. Peter Conradi asserts that "Murdoch's focus on transformation is not confined

to individual morality but extends to the influence of a nurturing community" (*The Saint and the Artist*). Michael's moral struggle embodies the novel's broader philosophical exploration of human imperfection and the challenge of authentic spiritual growth.

Murdoch's novel is steeped in symbolism and allegory, with and the abbey *the bell* functioning as powerful symbols of transcendence. *The Bell'*s tolling acts as a moment of spiritual awakening for several characters, representing the novel's deeper metaphysical questions. Scholar Martha Nussbaum writes that "Murdoch's use of allegorical elements, such as the abbey as a sanctuary of spiritual retreat, invites readers to reflect on the tension between worldly distractions and the quest for spiritual clarity" (*The Fragility of Goodness*). The novel's evocative prose and rich symbolism invite readers to delve into a world marked by both mystical elements and deep psychological introspection.

Scholarly interpretations of *The Bell* vary, with debates surrounding the nature of transcendence and the role of community in personal growth. While some critics view Murdoch's portrayal of transcendence as hopeful, others highlight the ambiguities and unresolved aspects of the novel's ending. A tension between spiritual optimism and the reality of human frailty runs through the narrative, leaving readers with questions about the possibility of attaining true enlightenment. Scholar Pamela Osborn suggests that "Murdoch's refusal to provide easy resolutions mirrors the complexity of the human condition itself, where moral clarity is often elusive" (*Murdoch and the Mystical*).

The study also outlines various avenues for future research, including comparative studies with other literary works that explore themes of transcendence and transformation. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches, drawing from philosophy, psychology, and religious studies, could further enrich the understanding of Murdoch's exploration of spiritual growth. Feminist perspectives could shed light on the ways in which female characters, particularly Dora, navigate societal expectations and seek agency in their spiritual and personal lives. Psychoanalytic readings could delve into the unconscious desires and inner conflicts that drive the characters' development. Examining the novel's cultural and historical context would provide further insights into how Murdoch's philosophical beliefs and experiences influenced the novel's thematic depth.

The Bell stands as a nuanced exploration of the complexities of human existence, personal growth, and the quest for transcendence. Through richly drawn characters, symbolic imagery, and psychological depth, Murdoch crafts a narrative that continues to resonate with readers and scholars alike. As Nussbaum observes, "Murdoch's philosophical rigor and literary sophistication ensure that *The Bell* remains a vital text for exploring the enduring mysteries of human consciousness and the pursuit of meaning in a secular world" (*The Fragility of Goodness*). Further research promises to yield even richer insights into the novel's exploration of transcendence, transformation, and the multifaceted nature of spiritual awakening.

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