

Against Dryness: A Polemical Essay by Iris Murdoch

Iris Murdoch Tarafından Ele Alınan ‘Kuruluk’ Kavramının řerhi

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Abstract

In this very study, the term “dryness” is to be analysed within the framework of Iris Murdoch’s polemical sketch ‘Against Dryness’. The term ‘dryness’ is to be elaborated on in great depth. Some of her novels are going to be alluded to in the study. In the context of Iris Murdoch's work, "dryness" can refer to a lack of emotion, depth, or authenticity in human relationships and interactions. It can also suggest a sense of emptiness, boredom, or stagnation in one's life. Murdoch often explores the idea of dryness in her writing to highlight the importance of genuine connections, moral integrity, and emotional authenticity in our relationships with others and with ourselves. Dryness may symbolize a lack of spiritual or emotional fulfillment, a disconnect from one's true self or values, or a superficiality in our interactions with the world around us. In essence, Murdoch uses the concept of dryness to challenge readers to seek deeper, more meaningful experiences and connections in their lives.

Keywords: dryness, Romanticism, crystal clear, self-containedness, journalistic

Öz

“Kuruluk’a Karşı” sıkıştırılmış ve kısa bir denemedir. Bir manifesto ya da başka yerlerde tartışılan sonuçların bir özeti gibi okunabilir, ki gerçekten de öyledir. Murdoch 'kuruluk' kavramını ortaya atıyor ve bunun kültüre, özellikle de edebiyata ne kadar zarar verebileceğini gösteriyor. Kuruluk, "küçüklük, açıklık [ve] kendine yeterlilik" özelliklerine sahip yazıları tanımlamanın bir yoludur. 'Kuruluk' esasen Murdoch'un kendi yazdıklarının tam tersi gibi görünmektedir. Murdoch 'kuruluktan' hoşlanmaz ve sanatın, özellikle de edebiyatın, toplum ve refah devleti nedeniyle kuru, tarafsız hale geldiğini öne sürer. Toplum sadece sınıfsal değil, ahlaki açıdan da daha az yapılandırıldııkça, edebiyat da daha az yapılandırılmış, daha az "kristalize" hale gelmiştir, çünkü insanlar ve dolayısıyla yazarlar, Murdoch'a göre keşfedilmesi, anlaşılması ve ardından hakkında yazılması "gereken" çevrelerindeki dünya hakkında daha az meraklı hale gelmişlerdir. Eğer romanlar, "romanın büyük çağı" olan 19. Yüzyılda olduđu gibi yeniden "kristalize" hale gelirse, "kuruluğun" tam tersi olacak ve bu da ahlak ve erdemlerin topluma geri dönmesine yol açacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: kuruluk, Romantik akım, kristalize açıklık, kendine yeterlilik, gazeteciliğe özgü

Introduction

In her essay “Against Dryness,” Murdoch’s main argument is that with a society centred on science, people in the twentieth century abandoned religion and lost their concepts through morals and politics. For Murdoch, this loss can be saved by literature, which hence fulfills its own purposes. Murdoch believes that literature has replaced the responsibilities of philosophy and is therefore capable of filling in these gaps by suggesting a new vocabulary of experience and a truer picture of freedom. Rather than revising original moral concepts, Murdoch demands that the contemporary novel depict the struggles of real people in higher complexities and aim to appear more realistic through its use of language.

Murdoch’s actual question in her essay is, as Reynolds and Noakes put it, “How can human beings who crave the consolation of order, come to terms with a lack of pattern in a haphazard universe?” (Reynolds & Noakes, 2004). Murdoch was seeking an answer to this question in all of her essays and novels. According to Murdoch, the use of literature in life is to rediscover a sense of density in life. It helps people to recover from the ailments of Romanticism. “If it can be said to have a task, now, that surely is its task. But if it is to perform it, prose must recover its former glory, eloquence and discourse must return” (Murdoch, 1961).

It is argued that the novels of the twentieth century polarized into two groups: one group, which she characterized as 'crystalline' and described as being typically small, allegorical, self-contained and designed to enshrine a network of themes. An example of the first group might be Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. As to Woolf's novel, "with regards to portraying a woman artist's striving in this way, *To the Lighthouse* is a significant work," says Erdem Ayyıldız. On the other hand, the other group, which she designated 'journalistic', consisted of large, rambling works with many characters and containing both stories and facts. Antony Burgess's *Earthly Powers* can be exemplified. In both cases, Murdoch saw these kinds of novels as essentially consolatory and ordered, comforting myths for both writer and reader. However, she proposed that the terms of her own work should be an imitation of life, not consoling, but involving chaos, chance, coincidence and contingency (Reynolds & Noakes, 2004).

This essay advocates that the emphasis is on the need for the novelist to depict 'real' characters and their rejection of the primacy of the author's consciousness. At the end of her article, she returned to a brief discussion of Sartre's ideas and she ended her argument with a consideration of 'truth' in literature (Spear, 2007).

Against Dryness is a compressed and short essay: It reads somewhat like a manifesto or a summary of conclusions argued elsewhere, as indeed it is. The title alludes to T. E. Hulme's comment, "We must find beauty in small dry things" (SBR 273). Murdoch disagrees: what the novelist must seek to produce is not small, dry objects, like the poems of Mallarmé, but rather things which present the great, ungraspable variety of real people (AD 20). In frankly contingent relations- works which should, among other things, break the fantasy-myths that dominate existentialist literature. The paper repeats the complaint that 20th century novels are typically 'either crystalline or journalistic' (AD 18). The essay extends the criticisms of the liberal and existentialist conceptions of man and the reality surrounding him (Broackes 34).

Murdoch initially mentions that she is about to address a problem that novels are currently encountering. The problem concerning novels has to do with the background in which they are written—the era and society of the time. She states that as a society, 20th century people are scientific and no longer nearly as religious as they once were; moreover, they are still damaged by two world wars and the 'experience of Hitler' which has taken away the romanticism of the culture and perhaps forced us to become more rational. Due to all the factors of our past, such as the various and diverse eras, our view of 'human personality' has become blurred. The development of science has led to a more clinical and less emotional perspective of life and the world. The modern man is rational, free and responsible for all his own actions. A philosopher named Moore wanted to reduce the mechanics of society and draw attention once again to the 'inner life'; however, it was seen as being too flimsy a concept for the modern, exact scientific world we live in. The modern world is now removed from any moralistic background, according to Murdoch. Furthermore, truth in society has transformed into sincerity. Our concerns have shifted to education and technology, from religion and human personality. Overall, the connection between 'art and moral life' has diminished because the moral world itself is disappearing. Murdoch believes that we need to remember the mystery of philosophy and the world in which we live, rather than assuming that we are fully aware of our surroundings and therefore losing inspiration to write about it. However, there is hope. Murdoch states that literature has the ability to influence us to reconsider our lives, even over philosophy.

Murdoch argues that our philosophies have left us with insufficiencies and challenges remaining from the 'Enlightenment' to 'the modern liberal world,' calling upon a new set of moral concepts in our society. While both 19th-century and 20th-century novels fail to tackle

these problems, Murdoch is reminded of the 'dryness' deriving from Romanticism and symbolism, resulting in a 'fantasy' rather than reality.

Murdoch presents the concept of 'dryness' and illustrates how damaging it can be to culture, particularly literature. 'Dryness' is a way to describe (usually prose) writing that features "smallness, clearness [and], self-containedness". 'Dryness' essentially seems to be the opposite of Murdoch's own writing. Murdoch dislikes 'dryness', and suggests that art, specifically literature, has become dry because of society and the Welfare State.

As society becomes less structured in terms of not only class but morality, literature has also become less structured, less "crystalline," because the populace and writers have become less curious about the world around them, which in Murdoch's view "needs" to be explored, understood and then written about. If novels become "crystalline" once again, as they were in the 19th century, "the great era of the novel," they will be the opposite of "dryness," which will lead morals and virtues to return to society.

In her novels, Iris Murdoch often explores the concept of dryness as a lack of depth, emotional engagement, and spiritual fulfillment in the lives of her characters. Dryness manifests as a sense of disconnectedness, apathy, or moral emptiness, leading to a superficial existence devoid of meaningful relationships or genuine human connections.

Murdoch's characters struggling with dryness often grapple with existential questions, ethical dilemmas, and the search for meaning in a world seemingly devoid of purpose. They may find themselves trapped in a cycle of self-absorption, intellectualism, or emotional detachment, unable to break free from their own inner emptiness.

Through her nuanced and complex characterisations, Murdoch delves into the psychological and moral implications of dryness, examining how it can impact individuals' relationships, decision-making, and sense of self. By portraying the consequences of emotional and spiritual aridity, Murdoch challenges readers to reflect on their own capacity for empathy, compassion, and moral engagement in a world that can often feel indifferent and bleak. Murdoch's exploration of dryness in her novels serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of cultivating inner richness, emotional authenticity, and ethical integrity in order to live a truly meaningful and fulfilling life.

In her novel *The Bell*, Iris Murdoch explores the theme of dryness through the character of Dora Greenfield, a woman who feels disconnected from her emotions and struggles to find fulfillment in her life. Dora is torn between her desire for independence and her need for human connection, leading her to make impulsive and destructive decisions that ultimately leave her feeling empty and lost. Through Dora's journey, Murdoch examines the consequences of living a superficial and self-centred existence and the importance of cultivating deeper relationships and a sense of moral and spiritual purpose in order to combat dryness and find true fulfillment. Ultimately, *The Bell* serves as a powerful meditation on the consequences of emotional and moral emptiness and the transformative power of connection and self-discovery.

In her novel *Under the Net*, Iris Murdoch juxtaposes the themes of dryness and romanticism through the character of Jake Donaghue, a struggling writer and intellectual. Jake embodies a sense of dryness in his detached and cynical worldview, believing that he is an outsider to the emotional and moral complexities of life. However, his encounters with various characters, particularly his romantic entanglements with two very different women, force him to confront his own emotional emptiness and search for deeper meaning in his relationships and his work.

Through Jake's journey, Murdoch explores the tension between intellectual detachment and emotional vulnerability, highlighting the ways in which romantic ideals can both inspire and deceive us. The novel ultimately suggests that true fulfillment lies in

embracing the messiness and complexity of human emotions rather than retreating into a dry and cynical intellectualism. By weaving together themes of dryness and romanticism, Murdoch offers a nuanced and thought-provoking exploration of the complexities of human relationships and the struggle to find meaning and connection in a disconnected world.

Murdoch criticises the view of the individual held by society, of the “independent self” that stems from Romanticism, as she believes too much value is placed on each single self. She finds it difficult to comprehend how, “after Hitler” and the horrors which came from his power, that people still see the good and have an “optimistic picture of ourselves” while not believing in the evil of others. ‘Against Dryness’ urges people to create art and not be afraid of “incompleteness,” as “reality is incomplete.” Murdoch wants art and literature to represent society clearly and honestly, as it is, not to give a “journalistic” and misleading representation of it.

Murdoch argues that literature has changed over time, but for the worst, and it is due to society’s increasing detachment from religion and science. She believes that the twentieth-century novel is the “degenerate descendant of the nineteenth century novel” (AD 18)). According to Murdoch, twentieth-century novels cannot portray characters in the way a nineteenth-century novel did. This is due to the ‘journalistic’ nature of modern novels; they focus on discussing the ‘human condition’. Another contributing factor to the degeneration of the novel is “that the structure of society is less interesting and less alive than it was in the nineteenth century” (AD 18) and this is because “[we]lfare economics have removed certain incentives to thinking” (AD 18).

Then Murdoch argues that the issues raised during wars and movements, like the Romantics and Enlightenment, have not been overcome but rather shaped a flimsy idea of self. She explores philosophical behavioural arguments and their relation to literature. The Human side stated that inner life can only be judged by social concepts, which are identified through overt behaviour. Kant and Hume argue for the free will of man and his capability for self-knowledge (AD 16). In French philosophy, Sartre’s argument is that “there are no degrees of freedom” but the “isolation of will” and that the “only virtue is sincerity” (AD 17). By encouraging people to think they are free, they surrender the values of reality. Murdoch states that nineteenth-century novels combine ideas of the person with class, creating a view of merging and progression (AD 18). She explores the varying viewpoints of the novel as a form of art and expression. T.S. Eliot views the novel as a documentary form and not a symbol of expression like poetry (AD 19). Tolstoy believes art to be a perception of religion (AD 19) while Kant describes how imagination is frolicking with understanding (AD 19). Murdoch argues that we are confined by our ideas of freedom and need to be awakened from fantasies to the ‘complexities of moral life’ (AD 20).

Murdoch describes the way in which society has changed its views on virtue. She claims that the era of romanticism has been ruined by the wars and by Hitler and that these events have inclined us to take a more rational approach to our sense of ‘good’ and ‘right’. The technological and scientific advancements and the secularisation of society have formed an incorrect view of morality and politics that we abide by. “What we have never had, [is] a theory of man as free and separate and related to a rich and complicated world from which, as a moral being, he has much to learn” (AD 18) and what “We need [is to] return to from the self-centred concept of sincerity to the other-centred concept of truth” (AD 20). However, literature is able to do this as it can play the role of a moral philosopher in today’s society.

Conclusion

According to Murdoch, dryness in the moral and spiritual sense is a lack of depth and richness in one's emotional and intellectual life. It is a state of being disconnected from one's

own feelings and from the world around us, leading to a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness. Dryness results in a lack of empathy, compassion, and inner peace and can lead to a sense of alienation and dissatisfaction with life. To combat dryness, we must strive to deepen our connections with ourselves and others, cultivate a sense of wonder and curiosity about the world, and actively engage in activities that nourish our souls and give our lives meaning and purpose. Moreover, she emphasises that we should return to other-centered concept of truth with the following statements: “We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy. [...] what we require is renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life” (AD 20).

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