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Allameh Tabataba'i University

Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages
Department of English Language and Literature

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Transcending Toward a True Self: Moments of Epiphany and Aesthetic Experience in Novels of Iris Murdoch

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We hereby certify that the thesis entitled

**Transcending Toward a True Self:
Moments of Epiphany and Aesthetic Experience in Novels of
Iris Murdoch**

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چکیده

الف . موضوع و طرح مسئله (اهمیت موضوع و هدف):

بررسی یک مفهوم فلسفی به نام تجربه زیبایی شناختی و یک مفهوم عرفانی و ادبی به نام اپیفنی (تجلی) در رمانهای یکی از فیلسوف – رمان نویسان تأثیرگذار قرن بیستم به نام آیریس مرداک.

ب . مبانی نظری شامل مرور مختصری از منابع ،چارچوب نظری و پرسشها و فرضیه ها:

پرسش مهم در تحقیق حاضر این است که آیا تجربه زیبایی شناختی و لحظه های ناب تجربه در زندگی انسان می تواند او را به سمت خوبی رهنمون شود و از او شخصیتی بهتر و یا حتی یک هنرمند بهتر بسازد.

پ . روش تحقیق شامل تعریف مفاهیم ، روش تحقیق ، نمونه گیری و روشهای نمونه گیری ، ابزار اندازه گیری ، نحوه اجرای آن شیوه گردآوری و تجزیه و تحلیل داده ها :

ت . یافته های تحقیق :

مفهوم اپیفنی در آثار فیلسوف پرکار قرن بیستم آیریس مرداک مفهومی است بسیار با اهمیت در ساختن شخصیت داستانهای او و البته این مفهوم ارتباط نزدیکی با دو واژه ای دارد که آیریس مرداک وارد دنیای فلسفه اخلاق کرده است. این دو واژه در حقیقت همان مفاهیم "توجه" به لحظه های خاص و تجربیات ناب انسانی است که منجر به این میشود که شخص از آن خود توهمی رها شود و به واقعیت هستی خود پی ببرد و به طبع آن به سوی بهتر شدن برود که هدف اصلی فلسفه ی آیریس مرداک است.

ث . نتیجه گیری و پیشنهادات : بررسی مفهوم اپیفنی همواره میتواند موضوع تحقیقات بیشتری حتی در ادبیات ملل مختلف از جمله ایران انجام شود و نیز این مفهوم نزدیکی خاصی با مفهوم "تجلی" در فرهنگ عرفانی ادبیات فارسی دارد که میتواند موضوع بسیار تازه ای برای تحقیق باشد.

صحت اطلاعات مندرج در این فرم بر اساس محتوای پایان نامه و ضوابط مندرج در فرم را گواهی می نمایم.

نام استاد راهنما:

سمت علمی:

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رئیس کتابخانه:

اپیفنی‌ها لحظاتی از تجلی و استحاله هستند که طی آن نوعی نیروی خارجی برتر، حقیقت را بر ما آشکار میکند. در طول قرن‌ها نویسندگان بسیاری با این لحظه‌های پیچیده مواجه شده‌اند که نگاه آنها را درباره‌ی زندگی روشن کرده است. این تجربیات روشنگر زندگی‌های بسیاری را نیز تغییر داده است. وقتی کسی چنین لحظه‌هایی را تجربه میکند آنهم از طریق اتفاقات روزمره و معمولی، این مرحله از آشکار شدن حقیقت شخص را قادر میکند تا نوعی قضاوت زیبایی‌شناختی و برتری نسبت به زندگی و هنر پیدا کند. این تجربیات هم می‌توانند تجربیات مذهبی و معنوی باشند و هم تجربیاتی روزمره و کاملاً ساده. شخصیت‌های یک رمان همچون شخصیت‌های واقعی و هنرمندان می‌توانند از طریق این لحظه‌های ناب که در ادبیات به آن اپیفنی می‌گویند راه بهتری را در زندگی انتخاب کنند و تبدیل به انسان‌هایی "خوب" و با فضیلت شوند و بر اساس و ماهیت چیزها پی ببرند.

اپیفنی میراث تراژدی یونان است که با حضور نشانه‌های مسیح در نزد عالمان زرتشتی در شرق تبدیل شد به تجربه‌ای مذهبی. بعدها رمانتیک‌های قرن هجدهم از این لحظه‌های ناب به نام "جرقه‌هایی در زمان" یاد کردند و این "لحظه‌ها" تا زمان مدرنیست‌های اوایل قرن بیستم همچنان موضوعی مهم شدند تا آنجاییکه جیمز جویس زندگی و هویت تازه‌ای به این واژه یعنی "اپیفنی" می‌بخشد.

در این مطالعه این مفهوم ادبی در دو رمان آیریس مرداک با نام‌های "زنگ" و "اسب شاخدار" و با توجه به دو مفهوم دیگر معرفی شده توسط مرداک به دنیای فلسفه بررسی شده است. شخصیت‌های این رمان‌ها هر یک به نوعی با تجربه‌ی "اپیفنی" یا "تجلی" مواجه شده‌اند در برچه‌هایی سخت از زندگی‌شان و تغییراتی در نوع نگاهشان به زندگی ایجاد شده است که از آنها انسان‌هایی خوبتر ساخته است.

کلید واژه‌ها: لحظات اپیفنی و تجلی، تجربه‌ی مذهبی، تجربه‌ی زیبایی‌شناختی، توجه، دوری از "خود".

To

PAIN,

To

Truth

And to

ART,

Sanctuaries of Beauty...

Acknowledgements

The best way to express my gratitude is just simply saying, thank you, Iris Murdoch for existing and for creating such ART in order for generations to explore into your land. You taught me to “**be good and love**”. You never believed in any sort of GOD, yet I am certain that there was a divine intervention behind what you dedicated to art and to me, a student of your school.

By looking back at the years I had been engrossed in literature in an academic mode, I sincerely remember a man of honor who bestowed upon me the power to value ART as a way to inhale life in. Therefore, I would like to thank him: Dr. Ghaderi. Thank you for sitting in my class and telling me: “never say that: ‘you are absolutely right’”, and now I am not sorry to disobey and acknowledge that “you were absolutely right when you talked about art in my class”. The initiation of this appreciation that grew in me for ART was established by those nice afternoons in the third floor, class number 310 where your presence lightened my soul and led me forth. THANK YOU.

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Abstract

Epiphanies are moments of revelations in which an external divine force reveals the truth. For centuries many writers have been possessed by these perplexing moments which had enlightened their vision toward life. These revelatory experiences have shifted many lives. When a person is experiencing such moments by beholding trivial objects in his surroundings, this process of truth's coming into being enables him or her to have a superior aesthetic judgment and appreciation in life as art or art as life. These immediate insights into life in real world which are not necessarily mystical or religious and can at times even be trifle, secular experiences as well, have led to making of great artists; therefore, it may plausibly occur in the world of fiction, too, to make a character morally good and virtuous by epiphany. Characters could transcend by these experiences, and by so doing, they would come to perceive the essence of these moments in their development toward a moral being.

Epiphany as a legacy of ancient Greek tragedy is Christianized by the manifestation of the Christ to the gentiles in the person's of the Magi (three wise men from the East who paid homage to the infant Jesus), and later, the giant Romantics regarded it as "Moments" and "Spots of Time". It comes to be secularized in modern times. However, despite this journey of the concept through literature, religion (mysticism) and philosophy, here, epiphany in Joycean sense of it, in Heideggerian term as *Aletheia*, in philosophical term as aesthetic judgment; and ultimately, in theological sense as religious experience is going to be surveyed as a technique to develop the story line in accordance with two of Murdochian terms, namely, *attention* and *unselfing* in making of a character or an artist and indeed will show the link between these terms and epiphanic patterning in Murdochian novels.

For this aim, that is, to see whether a character can be transcended by experiencing such moments of revelation and understanding, from among 26 Murdochian novels, two of Iris Murdoch's novels are being discussed. *The Bell* and *The Unicorn* are assessed to pursue how Murdoch's moral philosophy and aestheticism is merging into her novels in order to allow characters to experience epiphanic moments when they're facing their dilemmas, and afterwards; by application of the truth which has come to their perception, they are being transcended.

Key Terms:

Epiphanic moment, revelation, religious experience, aesthetic experience, psychological epiphany, attention, unselfing

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Chapter One:

Introduction

We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality.

Iris Murdoch

I. General overview

“Where do you start with a man who wrote over the course of his whole life?”

“You start with a moment that left a mark on his life.”

Sartre, J.P.

Sartre asks this question concerning Flaubert’s biography; and thus is the general idea of the present study, namely, to seek the moments that left a mark in one’s life, whether an artist or a character in a novel. Perhaps according to this claim, it is assumed that this thesis shall start with giving some biographical notes over the artists who are nominated to be discussed, however, it is not the aim, rather, we shall have a theoretical debate of the *moments* and then apply it in practice to the novels under study. In fact these moments which can be alternatively called: moments that made a difference, key episodes of a life story, vital moments, revelatory moments causing paradigm shifts afterwards, peak experiences, mystical experiences, illuminated moments, climactic moments, sudden dramatic and startling moments, flashes of light, the unattended moment, falling of some veil¹ are put plainly and literarily, epiphanic moments, throughout pages of this thesis. The story of epiphany is narrated as the term journeyed from the time it was used as a dramatic device in ancient times into the modern usage of it. The journey seems a long one in history of a term. Yet its splendor is with us since one’s life can never be called a “life” without such moments of experience in both secular and mystical sense.

¹ Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s poem (1828-82): *Sudden Light*: “But just when at that swallow’s soar/ your neck turn’d so/ some veil did fall, -- I knew it all of yore.”

There is a strong acclamation in literary world that epiphany often involves a character's recognition of himself in a person his society has excluded. Though this might be true about the epiphanic experiences Joyce's Stephen may undergo and may be emancipated by means of this to reach the self, in Murdoch's epiphanic mode it might be complexly reversal. Along with this line of enquiry in Joyce and Murdoch we shall come to realize how vital the concept of epiphany in history of literature as astute art is. This term is going to last, as did Joyce and Murdoch.

II. Review of Literature

Man's creative struggle, his search for wisdom and truth, is a love story.

Iris Murdoch

As Iris Murdoch calls man's search for wisdom and truth a "love story", in this study it is claimed that the researcher, indeed, endeavors to tell a love story here, for she has been aspiring to nothing but truth and wisdom in the philosophy of the word "epiphany" which is a truth-seeking tool *per se*. To fulfill this quest, the researcher has looked into many enquiries after this term. In most of these inquiries the concept has been traced back to its origins and practices throughout the literary history and frequently happens to be mentioned in literary and religious pieces as a plain characteristic of many texts from the Romantic period on to the modern times and in popular fiction of 60s and 70s, and ultimately comes to be specified as unique as

“postmodern epiphany”. This is the trend which will be followed here as well; excluding the postmodern approach, for it absolutely requires a more giant scale than this thesis.

One of the widely mentioned books which have looked at the concept from philosophical and literal perspectives is Morris Beja’s *Epiphany in Modern Novel: Art as Revelation*. Though the book is entitled to be concerned with the modern novel and modern concept of the term epiphany, Beja traces the pre-history of the concept from Saint Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus and Saint Augustine’s conversion all the way to the Romantic poets noting Wordsworth’s magnitude and his “Spots of Time” in *The Prelude* and Shelly’s “best and happiest moments... arising unforeseen and departing unbidden” in his *A Defence of Poetry* and earlier novelists like Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and (lest yet doubt) Marcel Proust. Furthermore, he figures such people as Henry Bergson, William James, G.E. Moore and D.T. Suzuki very influential in this regard. Also, he is the pioneer scholar to divide epiphany into two major types, **retrospective** and **the past recaptured**, both of which absolutely opened the gates of understanding to modern interpretations of the term. The main difference between the two consists in the fact that the formers are the ones in which “an event arouses no special impression when it occurs, but produces a sudden sensation of new awareness when it is recalled at some future time”; the latter reminds us of Proust and his *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Morris Beja in defining epiphany states that: “I would call it a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phase of the mind. The manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces (Beja 18). Beja’s standpoint is that epiphany is very versatile and handy in letting artists as Joyce and his fellow writers grow mature.

Patterns of Epiphany from Wordsworth to Tolstoy, Patter and Barrette Browning by Martin Bidney is another endorsed book which gives a good history of “puzzling but private moments” and “sudden gifts of vision” designating an event in which the essential nature of something- a person, an object- is suddenly perceived leading to aesthetic experience of the participant or the beholder of that event. Therefore as Bidney says in his book, “literary epiphanies are felt as aesthetically privileged (Bidney 1). In this study, Martin Bidney has a discussion about three main characteristics of epiphany stating that “a literary epiphany, then, is a moment that is felt to be **expansive**, **mysterious** and **intense**”. Epiphanies compose of elements, motions, and/or shapes. (Bidney 3) [Emphasis is added] By looking at each author’s epiphanic moments, Bidney has two intentions: in one hand, he strives to determine how these moments are made, and on the other hand, to tell what distinguishes such moments in one author’s work from those in another’s. The reasons why this book is considered as an indispensable part of the study are first because of the link it tries to find between aesthetic experience and these moments of revelations and second, because the author here proposes a method for a systematic study of epiphany and applies that method to a series of literary epiphanies chronologically from Wordsworth to Patter. Hence, the present study will largely benefit from this systematic scrutiny.

William James’s now classic book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is still referred to in many discussions of the term epiphany, though it seems that he was never inclined to use the term straightforwardly. The book which is a series of lectures that James gave on psychology of religion abounds in giving assorted and documented examples of religious revelations. James intensely and deeply claims that “there are moments of sentimental and mystical experience” which the reader must be expecting to

be shown throughout the book. He goes further to discuss in his very first lecture the question which is of great significance in discussions related to epiphany: “what the peculiarities in a thing should be which give it a value for purposes of revelation?”(James 23) This is the issue with which other writers of epiphanic literature also deal profoundly. Therefore the book seems to be an intense study of the theological aspect of epiphany which will serve as a key concept in the present study as well. In addition, James’ book is vastly regarded as a stepping stone in beginning a series of studies from a psychological point of view on which we would also depend to acquire a deep understanding of characters in two novels we are going to analyze.

Along with the book just mentioned on the theological or religious aspect of epiphanic revelation, Nicholas Everitt in his monumental book² *The Non-Existence of God* brings about a fine discussion of some of the central problems in the philosophy of religion and whether it is feasible to prove the existence of a higher entity, i.e. God by means of religious faculties or not. Considering that he takes an atheistic side on the issue, wherever one looks for a newer approach he might have this book on mind. The book maintains that: “there are good reasons for thinking that theism can be *proved* false; and even if those reasons are found not to be compelling, overall there are further good empirical grounds for the falsity of theism” (305, Everitt’s emphasis). Everitt’s discussion typically offers a fair representation of other viewpoints, and his own case is invariably worth hearing, even if one supposes that it is not entirely the truth of the matter. When he turns, later in the book, to the question of religious experience *exclusively*, in fact, he has something to contribute to our study on how some religious

² I personally call it so since it was a very marvelous book I came across to in my studying.

conversions are to be accommodating to an understanding of God or the presence of a greater goal in the pursuit of creation. (151)

In fairness, James Joyce was the one who gave the credit and life-long modernist literary meaning to the term epiphany. Joyce, very influentially mingles the aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas with his perception of the moments of vision, namely, epiphany in his *Stephen Hero*, an early draft of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and in this regard he is to be noted primarily. Thus, a number of books have been enquired into in order to shed light on his position in the discussion.

Apropos of aesthetics and its links to Joyce, there are two obliging essays in *Twentieth Century Interpretation of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* edited by William M. Schutte. The one written by Maurice Beebe, that is, “Joyce and Aquinas: the Theory of Aesthetics” (1957) abounds in studying the aesthetic theory of art and the formation of an artist in James Joyce according to Aquinas’s aesthetics in which the defining properties of beauty are said to be *Claritas*, perceiving an object, *Consonantia*, apprehending it, and the third which is elucidated in epiphanic moments only, *Integritas*. They cause the beholder to see the thing in itself, as Stephen describes “its soul, its whatness as the supreme quality of beauty”. The other essay, “Art and Life: the Aesthetics of a Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man” is by S.L. Goldberg again concerning James Joyce’s epiphanies and his aesthetic theory. However, in this essay the effort is to show that Joyce’s epiphanies are and ought to be considered nevertheless as secular epiphanies with no ideological or theological depth as some would claim. Goldberg gives the idea that no actual evidence is found to divulge that Joyce gave any of his aesthetic terms a theological meaning or that he intended at any stage to reveal through art the ordered spiritual vision of Christianity. (66)

In order to pay somewhat perfect homage to books on the subject of Joycean epiphany, Morris Beja has edited a book on James Joyce, *Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, a Casebook*, in which he gives a whole account on Joyce's drafts and how he formed his aesthetic theory which he calls "applied Aquinas" from the time he started to collect such tiny sketches later called "epiphanies". In this book, even the only 12 sketches left are mentioned. The epiphanies mentioned are in fact stepping-stones of later development of the term in *Ulysses* and *Dubliners* and *Stephen Hero* and additionally, his notion of making of an artist is examined wholly as Stephen (Joyce) grow up and leave their earlier life of innocence and naivety and go away to a self-imposed exile to "not to serve" the old dogmatic sort of living in the center of paralysis, that is, Dublin.

Indeed, a great deal of books about epiphany concern James Joyce. There is hardly a book about Joyce with any mention of his epiphanies. Of these, two comprehensible books, *James Joyce, the Citizen and the Artist*, by C.H. Peake and *Joyce Effects on Language, Theory, and History* by Derek Attridge have been painstakingly bringing the epiphany to more light in the modern sense of it and of course the primary part is given to Joyce. Thus, in discussions of Joycean epiphany these two books will be conferred thoroughly.

Because arriving at any understanding of revelatory experiences requires at least a basic reaching after the notion of aesthetics on the whole and aesthetic experience in particular, some books on the subject were consulted which proved really versatile. Among them, there was a book entitled *Aesthetic Experience, Beauty, Creativity, and the Search for the Ideal*, by George Hagman, in which we encounter the aesthetical and psychological aspect of beauty and its impact on the beholder's soul and how it is

considered a way to seek the truth in art, truly praiseworthy for its praising of the goddess of art in the altar of truth by means of the revelation it causes in us: “ the responsiveness that we find in a great work of art involves a **feeling of revelation** that is renewed with each viewing”(59). [Emphasis is added] The author, indeed, very amiably invites us to a dialogue the “concretized imagination” of the artist has with our own sensibility and shows us how the artist endeavors to create or restore a perfect state of resonance with an ideal form in order to please the perceiver. This book is particularly important in discussing Dora’s experience in National Gallery in *The Bell*, an aesthetic experience that alters her vision of life.

In addition to the book on aesthetic experience it was inevitable not to read a book on aesthetics, or as it is eminently branded, the philosophy of art. In this branch of philosophy as in all others a plethora of books can be found almost all of which seem substantial, however, from the series of Contemporary Debates, one on the aesthetics was selected and assuredly enough it gave a broad viewpoint to the present study: *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art*, edited by Mathew Kieran. Perhaps not much is said on the issue of aesthetics here, yet the present study couldn’t have gone anywhere without an understanding of it as a whole both in Murdoch’s theory of art and morals and epiphany’s application on art world.

About the nature of experience and above all aesthetic experience John Dewey’s book, *Art as Experience* perhaps is considered classic, still it had its undeniable merits to open the researcher’s mind and heart to new dimensions of art world and also mere experience of human being. In this illuminatingly wide book John Dewey regards art as intensifying experience and admiration. He says: “ we do not have to travel to the ends of the earth nor return many millennia in time to find people for whom everything that

intensifies the sense of immediate living is an object of intense admiration.(6) In addition, this book gives the reader good backing reasons how to distinguish aesthetic understanding from the typical pleasurable experience: aesthetic understanding – as distinct from sheer personal enjoyment- must start with the soil, air, and light out of which things aesthetically admirable arise and these conditions are the conditions and factors that make an ordinary experience complete” (12) so accordingly, every experience cannot be considered aesthetic as later Murdoch will also add to this notion in her theory of aesthetics. He also starts his discussion by claiming that for understanding an experience which is going to be hailed highly, one must be aware of the meaning of the normal experience and that has something to do with “conditions of life” for everybody, thus accentuating the subjective nature of experience. When order is added to a form, experiencing it will be able to be remembered admirably: “order is admirable”. Because that makes the “restoration of the union” for the artist which may trigger tension, yet it is going to end in a unified and total experience of something magnificent, that is, a work of art. An Artist needs that tension to create. What an artist needs is not perfection; rather, he needs to “create out of imperfection, out of chaos”. (17) This is what we see in Joyce’s Stephen when he tries to continue the life of an exiled artist in a chaotic world of Dublin and world in general. He wants to create his art in the world which does not seem hospitable to his genius.

Apart from literature review on epiphany, two of Iris Murdoch’s novels are being subjected in this study; therefore, it seems critical to bring up some important books commenting on her novels and also books which have been written to shed light on her philosophical background in her novels.