

Representation of Old Age and Pain in *Iris*¹

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Abstract

Adapted for the screen by Sir Richard and Charles Wood and directed by Sir Richard Eyre, *Iris* tells the life story of famous British philosopher and novelist², Iris Murdoch. Her husband, John Bayley writes two books entitled *Iris: A Memoir* and *Elegy for Iris* with reference to the health problems, Murdoch has towards the end of her life. Relying on these two books, the movie *Iris* came out in 2001, three years after Murdoch's death. In the movie, it is shown how Iris suffers from loss of brain power and Alzheimer as she gets older and how this situation gives pain both to her and her husband, Bayley. Hence, in this study, how lives of elderly and their loved ones change after illnesses and their pain will be analyzed in reference to Iris Murdoch's real life story as it is depicted in the movie, *Iris*.

Key Words: Iris Murdoch, John Bayley, Alzheimer, old age, gerontology, pain.

1. INTRODUCTION

Iris Murdoch's life story is shot as a movie and directed by Sir Richard Eyre, — whose own mother suffered from this appalling form of dementia- (Wilson, "Saint or Traitor?") and written by Sir Richard and Charles Wood, based on the books *Iris: A Memoir* and *Elegy for Iris* by John Bayley.

In this movie, we see pain of Iris facing Alzheimer and her loss of brain power, which gives a strong psychological pain to her and her husband. Routine of their daily life also changes as in line with the changes in her mood, which was negatively influenced by her disease. In this movie, how lives of elderly and their loved ones change after illnesses are depicted in reference to Iris Murdoch's real life story. Meanwhile, we as the audience cannot help admiring her husband's way of coping with the problems, patience and his infinite love for Iris. Accordingly, health problems of old people in Britain will be analysed and how their life conditions may be

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² Like many other "[w]omen seeking to get their rights saw literature as a field where they could express themselves best" (Durgun: 2014,147) , Murdoch also perceives literature as a place, where she is free to be herself and create new words and stories as she likes.

improved will be discussed in this study by studying NHO and patient rights in UK and by giving examples from *Iris*.

2. ALZHEIMER DISEASE

First, let us have a look at the definition of Alzheimer to understand the disease better:

Alzheimer disease is a pervasive [kind] of dementia that [influences] both cognitive and social functioning and progressively [gets worse as time goes by]. Cognitively, the first signs are generally seen in declining reasoning, executive function, and working-memory skills (Gagnon & Belleville, 2011). Socially, declines are [seen] in the inability to draw correct inferences from social cues, stimuli, semantic relevance, and narrative comprehension, as well as changes in information retention and behavior (Marques, Sartori, & Cappa, 2011). Thus, “old age constitutes rather in physical and mental [decay] and should be viewed accordingly (25).

Creamer and Schmitter-Edgecombe (2010) claim that memory problems are the prominent distinctive quality of Alzheimer. Other problems such as “cognitive, social, emotional, behavioral, and biological” ones are thought to be “a secondary response” and are straightforwardly linked to the memory problems observed in sufferers of Alzheimer (Healey and Renes: 2014, 141). Ralf Dahm declares that “[f]ew illnesses are as devastating as Alzheimer disease”. Memory severely fails, complicated tasks become harder to handle with, and well-known situations and people suddenly seem to be strange, even frightening. After several years, sufferers of Alzheimer lose nearly all abilities and yield to the disease (148). The influence of Alzheimer disease is also observed on those around the person who is afflicted with the disease of Alzheimer. Generally, spouses, children, and other close relatives serve as the caretakers for the patients of Alzheimer (qtd. in Healey and Renes: 2014, 141).

In Iris' case, it is her husband John Bayley, who acts as the caretaker for her during the last years of her life or in her own words during “her sailing into the darkness”, that is into the unknown, dark waves of Alzheimer disease. Interestingly enough, what is described as sailing into the darkness is expressed in a similar way by Auguste Deter, whom is diagnosed with Alzheimer disease in medical history for the first time, as “I have, so to speak, lost myself...” (Dahm: 2017, 148). Only in the last stages of the disease, Bayley put Iris in a nursing house. In these scenes, the audience sees the conditions³ in nursing-homes and also informed that Iris is put into one, which is extraordinarily privileged⁴ one. Thus, most of the people suffering from Alzheimer disease do not have access to a similar nursing-home as shown in the movie in Britain⁵.

3. ASSISTED LIVING HOMES AND NURSING HOMES

³ Researchers like Bennett believes that “[i]t is imperative for district health authority officers to take a keen interest in developing and fostering cooperation with the private sector in order to achieve the mutual goal of good patient care...” (1986: 870).

⁴ However, it is essential “designing more compassionate and equitable practices and policies for those who provide and receive care” (Trzcinski, 2003, 566).

⁵ To have more information about nursing homes in Britain, you may have a look at “Survey of Private Nursing Homes in Seven English Counties” by Jennifer M. Henry, Isobel A. MacPherson and Sheena C. Donald in *BMJ: British Medical Journal*.

In Britain and USA, there “assisted living homes”, “nursing homes” and “respite-care centers” (see Stocker’s “Six Tips for Caring for Aging Parents”, *The American Journal of Nursing*. 33) for the elderly⁷ or the disabled people:

Assisted living homes are not [designed] for people, who need constant professional nursing care. They provide a combination of housing, personalized supportive services and health care designed to meet the needs of people, who require assistance with the activities of daily living. [Whereas], Nursing home residents rely on assistance with most or all activities of daily living, such as meals, bathing, dressing and toileting. Regular medical supervision and rehabilitation therapy are available [there]. (see “Assisted Living Homes and Nursing Homes” and Castle’s “The Search and Selection of Assisted Living Facilities”: 2007, 731).

Stephanie Gebel, whose grand-mother lives in an assisted-living facility defines the main differences between nursing homes and assisted-living homes in the following words:

[Comparatively speaking], ... the [main] difference is in the level of support they would offer an elderly and/or disabled person (historically, both were just for the elderly, but as they are a less expensive option than long term hospital or rehabilitation center stays, they have become the choice of insurance companies for individuals with injuries or mental illness as well). For the elderly in the U.S., who are not fortunate enough to stay at home or have a loved one take care of them, there is a common progression of Assisted Living Facility followed by Nursing Home... At an Assisted Living Facilities, they may receive assistance with planning activities (social), meal preparation (usually served in a cafeteria), laundry, etc. When individuals can no longer feed themselves or lose mobility, etc., they may progress to the added assistance provided in a nursing home. Each may have their own particular systems of support, but that is the gist of [the senior housing types. (personal communication, May 9, 2016).

Apart from this, in Castle’s study, it is emphasized that when people refer to Assisted living, “boarding homes, rehabilitation facilities, domiciliary care homes and community group homes”(2007: 731) are excluded, which provide care for the people who are in need of it.

4. AGE/OLD AGE

Baltes and his friends suggest that there are some factors in a person’s decline with age. And in Iris’ case, “childlessness” might be one of the factors since “childlessness can have a [big influence] on the emotional well-being of women during middle adulthood (qtd.in Healey and Renes: 2014,139), but going through their memoirs, there is no reference to such a thing in John’s account of their life:

Women are [mostly give birth to] children during young adulthood, and childlessness can have a [significant] impact on the emotional wellbeing [and identity] of women during middle adulthood (Baltes, Kotter-Gruhn, Scheibe, & Blanchard-Fields, 2009; Kail & Cavanaugh, 2013). Baltes et al. (2009) ... the wish [to have] children can [come forth] as a life longing [wish] and can recur as an intense desire. They further state that “the absence of children may [cause] to feelings of imperfection and incompleteness, may challenge an individual’s perception of a utopian state or life, and may [cause to ambiguous] feelings with [reference] to emotional stability”. Iris [preferred to take] a different path[in regard to] the desire to have children. (Healey&Renes: 2014, 140).

⁶ See Solon’s “Physicians’ Participation in Nursing Homes” to get further information about the medicare given there and to see the challenge “whether the nursing home will [become known] as a genuinely medical institution or continue rather to be identified simply as a kind of [replacement] for the family dwelling” (487).

⁷ In fact, Assisted Living is known by approximately twenty-six different names, such as personal care and residential care (see Castle’s “The Search and Selection of Assisted Living Facilities” in *Medical Care*, pg. 729). Further, we can add “retirement communities” and “special care units” (Castle: 2007, 737) to the “institutional-care options” (Castle: 2007, 729).

Therefore, in John's book, he does not talk much about "a desire to have children". On the contrary, rather than longing for children, Iris' middle-ages seem to be "filled with career goals" and many travels and lots of social activities. Relying on John's narrations, there is no mention of a void that existed during their marriage neither on the side of Iris nor on the side of John, which implies that they longed for children. John likens "Murdoch's passion and energy for writing to the same care required for motherhood" (Healey&Renes: 2014, 140). Hence, her focus seems to be on her brain-children, that is her writings throughout her whole life.

Also, there is a hypothesis suggesting that "depression would increase the [following] risk of Alzheimer disease" (Andersen: 2005, 233, 238), but we do not have a clear cut information revealing that Iris might have suffered from depression in her last years.

In relation to old age and the measures that should be taken against Alzheimer are given within the framework of "successful aging plan" (see Lewis's successful aging criteria mentioned in Healey and Renes: 2014, 140). Accordingly, "emotional well-being, community engagement, spirituality, and physical health" are the four characteristics of successful aging and until the development of Iris's Alzheimer disease, John and Iris met three of the four characteristics of Lewis's... successful aging (Healey and Renes: 2014, 140).

Despite meeting most of these criteria, we see that "Iris's decline from a fully functioning independent [grown-up] individual" to "a childlike companion" (Healey and Renes: 2014, 140 and Stocker, 33) could not be prevented totally, but only be slowed down.

While Bayley suffered a lot witnessing Iris' loss of health, having not recognised Iris's mental decay, many critics and lovers of literature⁸ criticized Iris' last work, *Jackson's Dilemma* very severely. Peter Garrard⁹, who works at the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience in London did a comparative study with his colleagues. They compared and contrasted the text of [her] previous novels *Under the Net* with the critically acclaimed *The Sea, The Sea with Jackson's Dilemma*. They found out that all of these texts illustrate similar grammatical intricacy, but the last document brings out far fewer new words, particularly not frequently used ones. "This shows Alzheimer has an influence on creative writing, and might be diagnosed years before clear symptoms [emerge]," declares Garrard... When critics criticized severely Iris Murdoch's last novel for having strangely impoverished and repetitive style, they didn't recognize that encroaching Alzheimer's disease may already have taken a toll on her imaginative skills. Thus, widely known as one of the UK's greatest novelists and philosophers, Murdoch's change of style¹⁰ in the 1995 novel *Jackson's Dilemma* may have been an early sign of her dementia, movingly performed by Judi Dench in the 2001 movie *Iris* ("Iris's Early Signs of Decline"). Likewise, in many Alzheimer patients all over the world, it has been observed

⁸ Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill* regretfully states that "it becomes [very] strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature" (3-4) and in Iris' case, even literature lovers could not recognize her mental decay in its early stages and she becomes the target of harsh criticism. It is only later, her husband's memoir books give the inspiration to film makers to deal with her disease, Alzheimer in their recent studies as "[t]o look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion tamer" (Woolf: 2002, 5).

⁹ In 2004, Peter Garrard analysed three novels of Iris Murdoch, who was afflicted with Alzheimer's, and argued that dementia's onset could be [observed] in written [work] "before anyone has the remotest suspicion of any untoward intellectual decline." Later, Ian Lancashire, [who is] an English professor at the University of Toronto, and his colleague Graeme Hirst, from the computer sciences faculty, investigated "linguistic [models] in Christie's novels". And all these studies reveal the early symptoms of the disease can be [found out] by [scrutinizing] the written [works]. (Kingston: "The Ultimate Whodunit", 2009)

¹⁰ Whether textual analysis will ever become a routine diagnostic tool is a question mark. A decline in written skills can be a significant early marker of Alzheimer's, says Morris Freedman, the head of neurology at Baycrest. "Because writing is a learned, not a natural skill, it breaks down early," he says. (Kingston: "The Ultimate Whodunit", 2009)

that there is “a [profound decline] in vocabulary”, which indicates “cognitive degeneration” (Kingston, “The Ultimate Whodunit”).

Such changes in one’s usage of language could be helpful in diagnosing and treating the diseases earlier in its progression. In relation to that

[a]Audiences watched the young Iris (played by Kate Winslet), a tousled tomboy cycling round Oxford, her head full of philosophy and the fiction which would make her name. Then we saw Dame Judi Dench (as the older Iris) in a cardie, becoming at first muddled, and then more or less witless. Iris's husband, John Bayley, in old age, was [performed] by Jim Broadbent, an avuncular,[trustworthy and] gentle figure, whose devotion to his wife was saint-like. (Wilson, “Saint or Traitor?”)

Being an altruistic person, Iris’ husband, John Bayley is able to have empathy with Iris and really has deep feelings for her. Therefore, he does everything to lessen her sufferings and pain (see also Landay’s *Be Prepared*).

However, surprisingly enough, one of Iris’s close friends, Wilson suggests that beneath the surface of love lies “a monstrous possessive desire” at the very depths of John’s heart. She says:

When I [read] his [depictions] of their life together, and of her illness [again], I came to [conclude] that, [inspite of] his love and willingness to care for her, other things had been going on as well. One was a possessive desire to have Iris all to himself. Another was a little like vengeance. His [depictions] of her 'in her water-buffalo guise' — a reference to her lumbering movements — are not very loving. The descriptions of her loss of bodily control, of her dirtiness, of his need to hose her down when she was doubly incontinent, are profoundly shameful. These descriptions, and the subsequent movie, had the effect of almost [wiping] Iris Murdoch's fame [out] as a writer. She was no longer the woman who, for three decades and more, had written witty novels about the emotional chaos in which we live. She was the Alzheimer's lady [performed] by Dame Judi. (see Wilson’s “Saint or Traitor?”)

Wilson, in her study, questions if John might have depicted Iris (in the way as mentioned above) on purpose? While giving her doubts, she claims that despite being an Oxford don and literary critic, John was an unsuccessful novelist and he might feel inferior in comparison with Iris and her literary career. And unconsciously, this might create jealousy and resentment on his side.

Taking Wilson’s arguments into account, it can be suggested that Alzheimer might give John Bayley the chance to possess Iris totally to himself and it may be likened to the obsessive desire of the surgeon in another movie, *Boxing Helena*. Whatever the reasons for his devotion to Iris, still we, as the audience, could not help appreciating his efforts during the hard times, she goes through. On the other hand, some critics claim that it is highly possible that John Bayley, in his book, tells the reader not the truth, but his own version of the truth, as how he perceives the events or life around him and Iris. Meanwhile, as the narrator of book, *Elegy for Iris*, John might have manipulated the reader’s/Iris’ fans’ empathy with him to be recognized in the literary arena as a writer rather than being just a literary critic (see Wilson’s “Saint or Traitor?”), we cannot know exactly, but what we can know is that his dedication and patience is quite admirable during all this struggle with Alzheimer disease. Until the last stages of the disease, until she “becomes less able to function independently”(see Mahoney: 2003, 566 and Morris’ *How to Care for Aging Parents*), he does not put her into a nursing home, even when “Iris requires constant supervision... John [was there] and [took voluntarily] the role of [caregiver without any hesitation]” (Healey and Renes: 2014, 140).

Taking John’s all efforts into consideration, even when Iris is “bedridden with little brain function in the later phases” (Healey and Renes: 2014, 142), his patience is quite admirable:

John [Iris' husband] in his books (2000) clearly illustrates both the general and specific impact of Alzheimer disease and suggests the way Alzheimer disease [influences] an individual is unique and contextualized... [However], John's [description] of Iris's experience with Alzheimer disease is much different than the experience of [many other Alzheimer sufferers]. [For instance], [w]atching Teletubbies and constantly repeating herself seemed to be the most extreme behaviors that Iris exhibited. (Healey and Renes: 2014, 142)

Luckily enough, she does not illustrate the pessimism or violent tendencies, which might be observed among some other sufferers. Moreover, John has a positive stance towards the disease and this point is underlined by some researchers as well: “[Like John], [t]hose family members who were able to come to accept the [disease], find positive [sides] in the experience, and see possibilities for the future were able to renew their hope every day and better [deal] with the experience” (142) declare Healey and Renes.

Hence, throughout the movie, “the importance of hope when continually responding to the challenging experience of interacting with a person with dementia” (Healey and Renes: 2014, 142) is emphasized and given with minute detail through the character of John Bayley.

Yet, not surprisingly, there are moments of despair and helplessness in some scenes as well. We witness to the significant decline in Iris’ “cognitive abilities, working memory, and social and behavioral functioning” (Healey and Renes: 2014, 143). And this brings the events narrated in the movie closer to real life and shows that “spouses of victims of Alzheimer disease also suffer in many ways” (Healey and Renes: 2014, 140) too. At that point, individual efforts become insufficient and needs outside help such as social facilities supported by the state¹¹. Though, Britain is famous for its social services, after the budget-cuts in NHO, especially during the Thatcherite period, the case of people with health issues become more problematic.

CONCLUSION

As a consequence, in the light of all these findings, it might be suggested to review the policies and plannings related to NHO and nursing homes so that care takers (like Iris in the movie) and care givers (like John in the movie) should have a more decent life. For people living with Alzheimer's disease and their family, to reduce the impact of Alzheimer disease on their lives, measures should be taken by official authorities as well. Firstly, the amount of budget given to National Health Organisations and the Ministry of Health should be increased in order to apply better patient rights. And it is absolutely necessary to provide people living with Alzheimer's disease and their family with “psychoeducation”. “Psychoeducation is suggested as a way to inform and support family members and caretakers” (Healey and Renes: 2014, 135). In doing so, these psychoeducation trainings might also help family members and caregivers “improve coping skills and develop problem-solving strategies”, which have been shown to benefit both caregivers and patients and reduce caregiver stress. (qtd.in Healey and Renes: 2014, 142). In addition to these, more comprehensive health insurances and services should be included within the NHO facilities or the ministry of Health. Thus, the movie, *Iris* and all related literature draw our attention to the importance of improving the life-conditions and care given to the Alzheimer sufferers and their immediate family or circles by giving us a chance of observing the experiences of a family member, whose loved one, suffer from Alzheimer disease

¹¹ In order to improve “[t]he future care of the patient”(Bennett: 1986, 870), “alternative styles of care should be explored, such as having more nursing input into social services homes” (Bennett: 1986, 870). Also, “[t]he possibility of extending the facility of NHS in service training departments to untrained staff in the nursing home sector – for example, in teaching basic nursing skills – has been suggested by Young and Day and Larder” (Bennett: 1986, 870).

as described by Bayley. Thus, movies such as *Iris* could be used all over the world to raise consciousness about these issues and to improve the life conditions of Alzheimer sufferers and to provide them with better care due to the fact that literature/movies/art mirrors many aspects of life in order to improve the well-being of humanity.

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