

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337985881>

# Love and Desire in Coetzee's Disgrace and Waiting for the Barbarians: A Levinasian Approach

Article · December 2019

DOI: 10.22452/sare.vol56no2.6

---

CITATIONS

0

READS

199

1 author:



Mahdi Teimouri

Khayyam University

10 PUBLICATIONS 4 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

## Love and Desire in Coetzee's *Disgrace* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*: A Levinasian Approach

**Mahdi Teimouri**

*Khayyam University, Mashhad, Iran*

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the possibility of presenting a philosophical analysis of two novels, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace*, by J. M. Coetzee, through a Levinasian ethical perspective. Levinas's philosophy is premised on the ethical responsibility of the self for the other. Redefining philosophy as the wisdom of love, Levinas embarks upon a revisionary approach to re-defining concepts such as love, desire, and responsibility that dominate and mediate the relationship between the self and the other. These reconfigured terms accommodate Levinas's distinctive ethical standpoint, one that is geared towards valorizing the other over the self. The novels examined in this article similarly manifest a tendency to prioritize the other in its destitution and vulnerability. My discussion of *Waiting for the Barbarians* will be built around the relationship between the Magistrate and the Barbarian girl. I contend that their non-carnal relationship can be interpreted in terms of a transcendental and non-ontological conception of desire. As such, desire becomes an obsession which cannot be shaken off. Desire of this kind liberates the self from egoism. In *Disgrace* I will explore the concept of love as maternity. Lucy's refusal to abort her pregnancy reverberates with Levinas's argument about maternal love as a self-effacing form of devotion. In both novels the question of the ethical body and its vulnerability will also be examined. The aim is to show how insatiable desire and maternal love can be manifestations of the ethical responsibility expounded by Levinas.

**Keywords:** Levinas, ethical responsibility, corporeality, vulnerability, desire, maternal love

### **Introduction: Coetzee and Alterity**

Published to critical acclaim, J. M. Coetzee's oeuvre has been read in terms of its critique and repudiation of rational thinking. The Swedish Academy premised its choice of Coetzee as the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature for 2003 on his portrayal "in innumerable guises [...] of the outsider" (Nobel Prize). His attention to living ethically with difference and alterity (Attwell, "Exclusive Interview") has predisposed critics to read Coetzee's fiction in the light of Levinasian ethical philosophy; Levinas, like Coetzee, is concerned with salvaging the other from the reign and tyranny of the same. Levinas's philosophy is not overtly of a militant kind but works from within to reveal the oppressive foundations and egocentric *modus vivendi* of the colossal machinery of Western philosophy. Levinas aims at rewriting philosophy from the standpoint of the other. The core argument of his philosophy can be summed up as the emphasis on the irreducibility of the other to any categories of thought. As a result, for him, philosophy is not 'love of wisdom' but 'wisdom of love'. Building on this premise, he then proceeds to argue that the self is locked in an asymmetrical relationship of responsibility with the other in which

the latter, in its anteriority and exteriority, is beyond the conceptual grasp of the self. Such a non-reciprocal relationship is a “relation without relation” (Levinas, *Totality* 80), because it refers to an unprecedented openness and non-closure. It is a relationship that does not form a whole or end in closure. The point is that Levinas tends to avoid terms that indicate completion and closure. To this end and to eschew the dialectical inclinations of Western thought he is caught in a double bind: to use language in a way that conveys meaning by simultaneously undermining the sense of semantic completion. This approach is comparable to the Derridean idea of keeping concepts under erasure.

By placing the self in the service of the other, Levinas recounts the way in which the former is divested of authority as it enters a face-to-face relationship with the other. The encounter with the face of the other pulls the self out of its cocoon of egotism, interrupting its smug imperturbability and complacency. Prior to this encounter, the self’s relation to the world is mediated by reason, desire, language, feeling and one’s subjectivity, all of which appear initially to be adequate and efficient. However, Levinas’s view of ethics as first philosophy necessitates the reconsideration of these notions in a way that the ethical relationship becomes the *raison d’être* for them; ethics is the provenance of human relation to the world. The point is that any of these notions which can serve the totalizing objectives of the self, when introduced to the ethical framework of Levinas, are invariably refracted to accommodate the ethical requirements of an asymmetrical relationship. The introduction of this lopsided asymmetry is an effective strategy to pre-empt the ultimate subsumption of the other by the same which has usually been glossed over under the pretext of reciprocity and equality. Another way of countering the reductionism of Western thought is to point to the inadequacy of its reductive *modus operandi* by presenting the other as infinite and transcendental. The titles of his two magnum opuses—*Totality and Infinity* (1961/1979) and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974/1991)—clearly substantiate this point. The *infinition* of ‘infinity’ and the implicit *self-effacement* of ‘otherwise than being’ allow for the possibility of seeing the relationship between the self and the other in a radically different light.

Among the concepts that undergo a reconfiguration in Levinasian ethics are love and desire. These two concepts have already been the subject of philosophical ruminations throughout the trajectory of Western thought for both resonate with different semantic possibilities. I do not intend to go into details over the multifarious meanings and associations connected to these terms here as it is beyond the scope of this paper. I will limit myself to that aspect of Levinas’s ethically-informed conception of desire and love which can help elucidate some of the complexities of Coetzee’s selected novels. The purpose is to show how Coetzee’s novels under scrutiny here display affinities with the ethical thought of Levinas.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* (henceforth *Waiting*) Coetzee depicts a Magistrate, an official agent of Empire, who develops an obsession for a mutilated, unnamed Barbarian girl. Drawing on Levinas's discussion of desire, I explore the possibility of mapping the Magistrate's obsessive attention to the girl that ends not in carnal satisfaction but the disruption and persecution of the self. My analysis of *Disgrace* follows a different line of argument. Here, I am concerned with love as the sacrificial gesture of self-effacement epitomized by the maternal love of Lucy for the child conceived through rape. The characters in both novels are similar in that they embark on an initiative that is marked by contingency, uncertainty and irrationality. Thus Coetzee's novels can be read against the backdrop of a postmodern ethos. Levinas has also been branded a postmodern philosopher simply because his version of ethics debunks totalization. By the same extension, Coetzee's antipathy to totalizing thought is evidenced in the inscrutable behaviour of his characters that defies logic and rationality. In a familiar vein, Coetzee's fiction shows how the other cannot be incorporated into the same. And if such assimilation happens it is a coercive one accompanied by injustice, violence and rationalization.

Levinasian philosophy speaks of the same inadequacy in systems of thought which ignore the priority of the ethical relationship for other ways of relating to the other. Respect and responsibility for the other are terms that fare well with Levinas. Laura Wright observes that what is "extrapolated by Coetzee's critics from the perspective of Levinasian philosophy" is that "one can never fully comprehend the other and must respect the alterity—the insurmountable difference—of the other despite the impossibility of imagined identification with the other" (93). In the following sections, I use the two key words of desire and love, to initiate an analysis of the two novels from the standpoint of Levinas to see how these concepts are imbued with a sense of other-orientedness.

### **Facing and Desiring the Other in *Waiting for the Barbarians***

Like many of Coetzee's novels, *Waiting* concerns the implications of meeting the other. Central to this narrative is the uncanny relationship that develops between a first dutiful and later dissenting Magistrate and an unknown Barbarian girl. The story can therefore be divided into the events that lead to the Magistrate's accidental familiarity with the Barbarian girl and the aftermath of this relationship. The girl, whose body bears the scars of torture inflicted upon her during her interrogation, belongs to a throng of displaced Barbarians who have been brought to the town by the infamous Colonel Joll's army. As an agent of empire, Joll and his troops have been stationed in the frontier town to preempt any attack on the imperial territory. Seeing the Barbarian girl's deplorable conditions, the Magistrate moves her to his room and lets her work in the kitchen. During this time, he develops an obsession with the girl's body and after she retreats to his room, he disrobes her, and engages himself in a soporific ritual of washing and rubbing her deformed body and maimed feet which culminates not in sex but in a stupor. He is

intrigued by the scars and the marks of torture on her body and is inquisitive to know how she was treated by her interrogators. Finally, unquenched as his burning desire about the girl's story is, he decides to return the girl to her folks. He sets out on a journey accompanied by a few soldiers from the barracks. It is an arduous expedition as they suffer from cold, hunger and exhaustion. It is during this trip in the middle of nowhere that he consummates his relationship with the girl. After the girl is delivered to the Barbarians, the Magistrate is arrested by the Third Bureau guards upon his arrival at the town. He is charged with "treasonously consorting with the enemy" (*Waiting* 77) and abandoning his post. He is incarcerated in the same room that the girl was originally tortured in and is later subjected to humiliation, interrogation and torture at the behest of a Warrant Officer named Mandel who, in the absence of Colonel Joll, is in charge of the barracks and the town. In the end, Colonel Joll returns vanquished after Mandel and his men desert the town following the famine.

The Magistrate's relationship with the girl is ambivalent. Her body is both a source of attraction and repulsion for him. The Magistrate says: "I see myself clutched to this stolid girl, unable to remember what I ever desired in her, angry with myself for wanting and not wanting her" (46). His behaviour towards the girl is inexplicably bizarre. He strokes her body but cannot bring himself to enter her. He is at a loss: "I know what to do with her no more than one cloud in the sky knows what to do with another" (47). The "closed, ponderous [...] [and] beyond comprehension" (58) body of the girl interrupts the fulfilment of his carnal desires. To desire a woman in the Magistrate's view means "to enfold her and enter her, to pierce her surface and stir the quiet of her interior into an ecstatic storm; then to retreat, to subside, to wait for desire to reconstitute itself" (59). This way of conceiving desire is consonant with the kind of self-interestedness that Levinas identifies in totalitarian thinking which aims at closing or at satisfying desire. The closure or fulfillment attained thus imparts to the self a sense of freedom which stems from "the knowing being encountering nothing which, other than with respect to it, could limit it" (Levinas, *Totality* 42). The definition of freedom is therefore wrongly construed as contingent on "maintain[ing] oneself against the other, despite every relation with the other to ensure the autarchy of an I" (*Totality* 46). In *Waiting* the Magistrate desperately strives to explain his preoccupation with the girl. The Magistrate considers himself "enslaved" (59) to the Barbarian girl, unable to understand the roots of his obsession with her.

The appearance of the Barbarian girl in the Magistrate's life seems to exercise an uncanny influence on his perception of the world. Before her arrival, the Magistrate is in full command of his life and desires and, by extension, his body. Getting to know the girl seems to have brought his complacent attitude towards his life, job and his own body into crisis as he appears to lose mastery over his passions, thoughts and ways of relating to the world. The girl as 'the other' seems to be driving a wedge between him and his desires. The Magistrate's sense

of freedom arising from his autonomous self is eroded as he experiences moments of unintelligibility. For Levinas “intelligibility [...] is a total adequation of the thinker with what is thought, in the precise sense of a mastery exercised” (*Totality* 123). Levinas equates intelligibility with representation and maintains that “Intelligibility, the very occurrence of representation, is the possibility for the other to be determined by the same without determining the same, without introducing alterity into it; it is a free exercise of the same. It is the disappearance, within the same, of the I opposed to the non-I” (*Totality* 124). The Magistrate experiences these moments of unintelligibility as he encounters the strange Barbarian girl. The exposure of the self to the other, according to Levinas, materializes in relation with the face of the other. The other with whom I am not able to form a totality is “the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself. [...] He [the stranger] escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal. He is not wholly in my site” (*Totality* 39).

The resistance that the self experiences in encountering the face of the other derives its defiant power not from hostility but, paradoxically, from its helplessness, nakedness and defenselessness which disarm the self and question the practice of the same. In other words, the power of the other does not lie in its indomitability or invincibility but in its destitution and nudity expressed by the “epiphany of a face” (Levinas, “Meaning” 95). The relation between the self and the other is described by Levinas thus: “There is here a relation not with a very great resistance, but with something absolutely *other*: the resistance of what has no resistance—ethical resistance” (*Totality* 199). The other calls the same into question and this calling into question “by the presence of the Other” is what Levinas defines as ethics (*Totality* 43).

Dominic Head (1997) argues that the Magistrate undergoes an ethical awakening as a result of the encounter with the Barbarian girl. Robert Spencer (2008) similarly argues that “The immediate catalyst for what the Magistrate later calls ‘a change in my moral being’ is his relationship with a Barbarian girl” (182). Such a personal awakening makes him find himself implicated in the injustice of Empire:

as the colonizer makes his colony conform to his own template, so does the magistrate’s phallic possession involve the subjugation of a foreign body to the repetitive pattern of his own (unquestioned) desire. The Barbarian girl, however, gives him pause for thought: this is a foreign body he cannot immediately comprehend. (Head 84-85)

The incomprehensibility of the Barbarian girl and the resultant questioning of the desiring self resonates with the Levinasian argument about the impact of the face (of the other) on the self. Levinas says that “the relationship with the other puts me into question, empties me of myself and empties me without end” (“Meaning” 94). For Levinas such an impact is short-lived and transitory because it is quickly overwhelmed by rationality and

consciousness. The face is a trace that eludes thematization in consciousness. While Levinas equates intelligibility with representation, what breaks free, even momentarily, from such an equation is the face or “the stroke of the other [which] however short, turns representation upside down” (Der Ven 107). This explains why there are times when the Magistrate finds it impossible to remember the girl as if his mind balks at or fails in retaining a mental picture of her. The Magistrate refers repeatedly to the face in his dreams and wakefulness. However hard he tries in his dreams, he “cannot imagine the face between petals of her peaked hood” (15) and when he succeeds in catching a glimpse of the face it is “blank and featureless” (52). While the Magistrate is sleeping with his ‘bird-woman’, he reflects on the face of the Barbarian girl but his efforts to remember her face are largely in vain, making him conclude that ““She is incomplete!”” (58).

There is a relation between the face and the body of the girl. Her face, as the Magistrate ponders on it at different points, is uncannily associated with her body or body parts: “it is not a face at all but another part of the human body that bulges under the skin” (52) he says initially. Later the association becomes stronger as the face and the body form a seamless whole: “I have a vision of her closed eyes and closed face filming over with skin. Blank, like a fist beneath a black wig, the face grows out of the throat and out of the blank body beneath it, without aperture, without entry” (58). The repeated use of the adjective ‘blank’ is noteworthy. The blankness that was first attributed to the face permeates the body leaving an abysmal gap: “I can remember the bony hands of the man who died; I believe I can even, with an effort, recompose his face. But beside him, where the girl should be, there is a space, a blankness” (65). Unlike the bird-woman who “flutters, pants, cries as she comes to a climax” (58) the Barbarian girl shows no signs of excitement to his touch and yields no pleasure to him: “With a rush of feeling I stretch out to touch her hair, her face. There is no answering life. It is like caressing an urn or a ball, something which is all surface” (67). The face and the body do not yield to the cognitive maneuvers of the Magistrate. The Barbarian girl cannot be comprehended in the economy of pleasure and representation.<sup>1</sup>

The face becomes an idea of infinity that withstands inclusion in thought. The way Levinas describes the face tends to give us the impression that it is an abstraction: “The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face” (*Totality* 50; emphasis in original). According to Edith Wyschogrod, “Levinas reaches for objects which resist incorporation into knowing acts and for experiences which bypass discourse” (“God and Being” 148). The face in Levinas is imbued with an ethical authority that summons us to the state of being-for-the-other. The face’s command comes as an “*expression*” as the face “*expresses itself*” (*Totality* 51; emphasis in original). In *Waiting*, the face is associated with desire as it becomes interchangeable with the body. It is no surprise that the elusiveness of the face translates into sexual frustration for the Magistrate. The deformed body of the Barbarian girl as the ‘doubly other’ problematizes the adequacy of desire for

comprehending alterity. Here the body fails to be subsumed as the object of desire. It transforms into an object of care. The Barbarian girl's body is a surface that turns the grasping hand into a caressing hand. Instead of grasping the body it takes a different direction. "The caressing hand" writes Bauman, "characteristically, remains open, never tightening into a grip, never 'getting hold of'; it touches without pressing, it moves obeying the shape of the caressed body" (*Postmodern* 92). To grasp something means to control and dominate it in the interest of 'the present'. However, in caressing, the tactile movement of the hand follows the topography and contours of the body.

The ambivalent status of the girl, as she changes from an object of desire to an object of care, creates confusion. The Magistrate wonders about the nature of his relationship with the girl: "Did I really want to enter and claim possession of these beautiful creatures?" (62). The Magistrate's questioning of his intentions and his association with Empire does not appear to be incongruent. The catalytic presence of the Barbarian girl seems to have started exerting an influence on the Magistrate. The question is whether this is related to the "ungraspable" quality of her face. "The face", explains Lawrence Burns, "is a disturbance of the subject's egoistic enjoyment" because it engages the subject in a conversation which disrupts the solitude of the subject's life (323). Levinas describes the relation with the other as "[c]onversation, [which] is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation" (*Totality* 51). "The face, experienced as epiphany", according to Wyschogrod, "gives prediscursive meaning to ethical existence prior to the formation of moral rules" ("God and Being" 148). How can the face trigger ethical responsibility? Burns, arguing against the dismissal of the face "as an 'empty abstraction'" (316), elaborates that "the disturbance" caused by the face can be ethically accounted for: "the face discloses a fundamental injustice for which the subject has to assume responsibility. In other words, the face expresses the other's suffering" (323).

In considering the Magistrate, I would like to argue that his being literally in touch with the suffering of the other in its haptic form puts an end to his prevarication with respect to the suffering and pain of the other. The trajectory of the Magistrate's evasion of responsibility for the other follows an almost sense-wise pattern. This point can even be supported in connection with the notion of desire. It is commonly known that desire grows out of need. The absence created by need stokes desire. With the fulfillment of need, desire in the Magistrate's words retreats and subsides, waiting to reconstitute itself (*Waiting* 59). For Levinas and his subversive ethical thought, desire is of a different order and is therefore assigned a different function. Levinas turns the common egoistical conception of desire on its head and defines the relation between desire and need in terms of an ethical responsibility. Levinas favours "metaphysical desire" which "tends towards *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*" (*Totality* 33; emphasis in original). The metaphysical desire is unquenchable because it "links the I with the idea of infinity. The idea of infinity is a desire" ("Meaning" 97-98). Such a desire is a desire for



goodness that cannot be satisfied because nothing can complete it. It is a desire that causes estrangement in the I, making it move out of itself to assume an infinite responsibility for the other. For the Magistrate, desire “bring[s] with it a pathos of distance and separation” (*Waiting* 62), that is, it is an indifferent desire rooted in the Cartesian disparity of the subject from the object. Ethical responsibility makes sense in a transcendental order of desire because “the disparity between my enjoyment and the declaims of the other” renders me “conscious of the injustice suffered by the other . . . [as] I learn to question why and how I am implicated in the injustice I see” (Burns 324).

As previously articulated, the Magistrate, from the beginning of the narrative, deliberately ignores or avoids the suffering of the other. This is an attempt to shield himself from vulnerability. He knows very well that his sense of comfort is inseparable from the situation of the other: “it is the knowledge of how contingent my unease is, how dependent on a baby that wails beneath my window one day and does not wail the next, that brings the worst shame to me, the greatest indifference to annihilation” (*Waiting* 30). The Magistrate tries to stay away from the chamber of torture by absenting himself from it or by pretending not to have heard the screams of the prisoners (9). Mapping the trajectory of the Magistrate’s dealings with the other, it can be noted that these dealings begin with the denial of the suffering of the other. This period is followed by the intermediate phase of getting to know the Barbarian girl, involving sheltering, feeding and experiencing tactile contact with her. It is during this time that the Magistrate’s sense of complacency and freedom is undermined. He experiences a measure of alienation from his own desires. In returning the girl to her people, the Magistrate ventures out of his comfort zone, moving toward the uncharted no-man’s land of the beyond. Stepping outside the borders of Empire is metaphorically tantamount to the embracing of contingency and uncertainty. It is equal to trespassing the bounds of the familiar into the unfamiliar. Delivering the girl to her people is a risky expedition. Upon arrival he is charged with treason, imprisoned and later exposed to torture and humiliation. His ultimate act of self-denial and denouncing “the empire of pain” happens when he stands up for the captive Barbarians by intercepting the scene of their punishment, calling attention to their humanity and subsequently, exposing himself to further pain. I agree with Michela Canepari-Labib’s argument that the Magistrate moves from blindness to sight but I disagree with her on the way in which he acquires this status. Canepari-Labib asserts that “it is only when he is tortured and nearly hanged that the Magistrate starts to speak in a more humane language [...] [as] he recognizes the absolute arbitrariness of the words justice and legality” (91). However, I contend that the passage from blindness (lack of sight in its sensory and intellectual sense) to sight is mediated through a haptic field. By touching and feeling the scars on the Barbarian girl and later experiencing the pain in his own body he comes to a realization of the

vulnerability of the body which paves the way to ethical responsibility, a point I will return to in the concluding section of the paper. I turn next to addressing the question of love in *Disgrace*.

### **Love, Maternity and the Materialization of Ethical Subjectivity**

In *Waiting*, the transition from desire to care happens through the female body and in *Disgrace*, the female body becomes the embodiment of ethical subjectivity. Levinas's treatment of and approach to the question of the female body remains a contentious issue in his ethical philosophy. Critics such as Luce Irigaray have objected to the way Levinas (ab)uses female corporeality.<sup>2</sup> Attempts have however been made by some critics to vindicate Levinas's apparently crass and biased approach. The point of contention is Levinas's elucidation of the role of women in *Totality and Infinity*, which has raised feminist objections because of what they see as the perpetuation of the myth of female inferiority. Arguably, Levinas is aware of the stereotypical image of femininity he appropriates in *Totality and Infinity* and the role he assigns to women in his ethical paradigm. Thus, in his second major book, *Otherwise than Being*, he introduces a redeeming idea of female embodiment in his philosophy of ethics. While I acknowledge this welter of conflicting opinions regarding Levinas's treatment of women, my discussion is not concerned with this. Suffice it to say that the novels under discussion here arguably furnish examples for scholars to reprobate Levinas's sexism. Those with this condemnatory attitude might find the Magistrate's treatment of the female Barbarian reprehensible as her body becomes, as in my reading, a catalyst for his ethical awakening. In *Disgrace*, likewise, Lucy's body becomes the site of historic negotiation and retribution. In the following section, drawing on Levinas's ideas, I will explore the issue of maternal love as the manifestation of the ultimate form of love in *Disgrace*.

Lucy, the daughter of David Lurie, a professor of English literature, who has sought shelter in his daughter's country smallholding after he is charged with rape allegations, is brutally raped by three black locals. On the morning of the attack, Lucy and David are visited by three geese which show up on her farm every year. Later they are attacked by three men. Mythologically speaking, there is a connection between the three geese and the three thugs. Geese have various symbolic and mythical meanings in different cultures which range from parenthood to providence and vigilance.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, the thugs are messengers of parenthood and maternity. They are rapists and looters whose visitation brings a change to the world of the Luries.

Commenting on the arrival of the geese, Lucy utters this anticipatory remark: "I feel so lucky to be visited. To be the one chosen" (*Disgrace* 88). Levinas makes frequent use of being "chosen" in order to communicate a sense of unique and unconditional responsibility for the other to the extent of being a hostage: "In the face of the other man I am inescapably responsible and consequently the unique and chosen one" (Levinas, "Ethics" 84).

Lucy's pregnancy is a strong indication of Lucy's embodiment as an ethical subject. Maternity—a condition that is imposed on Lucy in her utter passivity—in, Levinas's terms, represents the ultimate manifestation of being-for-the-other where one is held hostage by and in the service of the other by way of subjection and substitution. Before offering further explanations of 'subjection' and 'subjectivity', I stress that for Levinas the relation between the self and the other is construed as proximity, a notion that refers to a kind of contact which "signifies an immediate attachment to the Other wherein I am no longer free to move away or sever ties, as though the Other were under my skin" (Atterton and Calarco 60). Proximity, just like other terms such as obsession, persecution, hostage and subjection, indicates the absence of volition and will. It suggests the way the self is pre-conceptually and pre-cognitively affected in the proximity of the other. These terms are unavoidably interconnected to one another. For example, Levinas argues that the other, in its infinity, overwhelms consciousness, amounting to an obsession which is tantamount to a kind of persecution (*Otherwise* 101). Levinas first of all asserts that responsibility means being "a hostage". A self without responsibility for the other is devoid of subjectivity, because being-for-the-other has a constitutive function for the self. Therefore, "subjectivity is being a hostage" (*Otherwise* 127). Subjectivity and responsibility in Levinas's philosophy are thus inseparable. Furthermore, responsibility is not defined in the synchrony between the self and the other. Because being-for-the-other is always the past of the present of the other, the self is always late. As such, the existence of the self is a burden for the other, placing the self in a position of always being in debt to the other. In other words, the self is always already late in responding to the command of the other. The subjectivity, the one-for-the-other is responsibility for the other "before showing itself as a said, in the system of synchronism, the linguistic system" (*Otherwise* 77). Levinas considers subjectivity as a form of subjection which materializes in proximity: "it is in proximity, which is a relationship and a term that every commitment is made" (*Otherwise* 86). In a Lacanian gesture, Levinas reverses the formation of subjectivity, locating its provenance and origin not in any essence or being of the self but in *the otherwise than being*. Levinasian subjectivity is not stasis or stagnation but a process of signification predicated on the outside/the other/the neighbour. It is inextricably bound up with our being responsible for the other, or with our being-for-the-other, that is, on substituting self for the other: "substitution", he says, is "signification" (*Otherwise* 13). In Levinas's terms, substitution is not a change from one substance to another or enclosing oneself in another identity, nor fusion. Levinas conceives of substitution or "the subjectivity of the subject [...] as expiation" which is "traceable back to the vulnerability of the ego, to [...] sensibility" (*Otherwise* 14).

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas uses the female body and the act of gestation as the metaphorical description of the ethical relationship between the self and the other. The self lovingly nurtures, nourishes and protects the other at the cost of itself. Therefore, the uterus during the gestation becomes both literally and

figuratively the hospitable home of the other. For Levinas, maternity represents quintessentially an ethically responsible situation: “In maternity what signifies is a responsibility for others, to the point of substitution for others and suffering both from the effect of persecution and from the persecution itself in which the persecutor sinks. Maternity, which is bearing par excellence, bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor” (*Otherwise* 75). Etymologically, as Levinas has noted, the word ‘uterus’ is associated with the concept of ‘mercy’.<sup>4</sup> Maternity is thus the manifestation of supreme responsibility.

I believe that Lucy’s resolution to carry the illegitimate child in her womb represents her responsibility and her non-indifference for the other. Critics have differing views about Lucy’s response to her rape. For example, Mike Marais (2001) considers Lucy’s silence and passivity on the question of her rape as her determination to refuse to perpetuate the domination/counter-domination cycle as the only existent and logical course of action. Marais’s discussion is premised on the desire for ascendancy or the “cycle of domination and counter-domination” of the Hegelian theory of history “in which individuals who strive to fulfill their need for recognition are entrapped” (35). For Marais, characters such as Magda from *In The Heart of the Country* (1977) and Lucy follow a similar pattern in reacting to the instances of the assertion of power from those who have been historically marginalized (the black servants and labourers). By rejecting her supplementary role in the Hegelian dialectics of power and recognition, Lucy accomplishes two things: first, “through her passivity she refuses to perpetuate the cycle of domination and counter-domination” and second, her “passivity is comparable to the silence of, say, Michael K and Friday” which “is an index to the otherness” that “cannot be contained” (37). Marais’s view overlaps with mine because I believe that this cycle is the war of egoisms which insist on their being. Being makes us blind to our ethical duties to the other. Genuine freedom is generated by way of breaking free from the being’s insistence on being.

According to Colin Bower (2008) Lucy’s decision to keep the baby “pushes credibility to the limit” (16). Colin sees Lucy’s would-be colored baby as “the bridge [...] between the old and the new, between black and white, the oppressor and the oppressed” (16). Colin excoriates Coetzee for creating a character who is the representation of “extreme, unrealistic, and an unlikely option outside of the pages of a work of fiction” (17). I agree with Colin that Lucy’s refusal to seek legal avenues to get even with the rapist seems irrational. But if we define rationality as a form of calculative reasoning then decisions made or actions done in the interest of the other must be deemed to be inevitably irrational. Levinas says that “the aim of being is being itself” but “there is something more important than my life, that is, the life of the other. That is unreasonable. Man is an unreasonable animal” (Levinas, “The Paradox” 172). To put an end to this irrationality one is required to love the other, to forego the right to self-assertion. The value of this kind of love lies in its asymmetry. It is feeling more responsible

and always one step ahead of the other. Love is asymmetrical generosity in the incomparable relationship of responsibility. It is love without requital.

Lucy's refusal to abort her unwanted pregnancy (an experience which becomes all the more horrible considering her sapphism) and to report the crime highlights her ethical responsibility in a Levinasian sense as her decision stems from an intersubjective sense of moral responsibility. It also illustrates an interpersonal idea of justice which is predicated not on a totality such as state-administered justice but rather on temporal exigencies. Instead of leaving the farm or selling it, she decides to stay under the matrimonial protection of Petrus. She refuses to prosecute the rapists or carry out an abortion. In other words, she does not resort to rationally endorsed and socially and legally approved solutions whose purpose is to breed certainty and assurance. Lucy seems to be proceeding in the opposite direction. To quote Bauman from his discussion on postmodernity, Lucy seems to be willingly "embracing [contingency] as a welcome destiny" (*Intimations* xvii). Her acceptance of contingency at the expense of authoritative procedures is clearly reflected in her idea of justice as well. Lucy is working out her relationship with the other not by taking recourse to a totality, which in her case is the impersonal law, but by insisting on her moral responsibility, which precedes the intervention and formation of the state because "moral drives have a pre-societal origin" (Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* 198). Societal organizations elide the uniqueness of the other in order to facilitate the meting out of justice. *Disgrace* therefore opens a space for an irreducible and unique responsibility for the other by contesting the totalizing approaches which advance national reconciliation through the perfunctory display of justice carried out particularly by the TRC in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Lucy's moral responsibility enjoys an anteriority that precedes the impersonality of the law of the state.<sup>5</sup>

While Lucy can be considered an ethical subject, whose assent to carry the baby brings to the fore her selflessness, her father, David, is lagging far behind in this respect. The subject of love is raised by him on different occasions throughout the novel. At one point Lurie avoids characterizing his relationship with others as love, preferring to call it affection. "Affection may not be love, but it is at least its cousin" is the way he describes his relationship with Soraya (*Disgrace* 2). With Melanie it is "strange love" (*Disgrace* 25) stoked by the mythological goddess, Aphrodite. He speaks of managing "love too well" (*Disgrace* 171) in his visit to Melanie's family. He writes a chamber opera about love and death: "a meditation on love between the sexes in the form of a chamber opera" (*Disgrace* 4). In short, his idea of love is associated with sexual gratification, reciprocation and exploitation. But his sojourn in Lucy's smallholding reveals another form of love: love of the land, animals and the stranger, none of which is dependent on reciprocity and mutual recognition. The process of change in David begins in the aftermath of the rape. He seems to be on the verge of reconsidering his earlier understanding of love.

His solipsism shows signs of abatement after the humiliating ordeal of being locked in the bathroom and sustaining burn injuries on his ears and part of the face while his daughter is being raped in another room.

The title of the novel, 'Disgrace,' can thus be seen in connection with the practice of the self-interested kind of love represented by David Lurie. Based on this argument, living disgracefully means relating to 'the other' in a self-seeking and self-affirmative way, or at most in a way that ensures reciprocity. In contrast to this view, grace constitutes gracious giving and gratuitous kindness and care. In Levinas's words, grace is "something that one does gratuitously [...]. Grace begins there. It is gratuitous, a gratuitous act" (Levinas, "The Paradox" 176). Lurie's disgraceful behavior is reflected in his tendency to objectify women. For example, he says that he "was enriched by the experience" (56) of sleeping with Melanie and has learned something about himself through his relationship with women which "to that extent they have made [him] a better person" (70). These remarks disclose a prevalent indifference in Lurie's attitude toward the other. Lurie's perspective is also analogous to the way the French philosopher, Pascal, sees love as concupiscence: "an assuming and an investing by the *I*. The *I think* reconstitutes presence and being, *interestedness* and immanence, in love" (Levinas, "God" 178; emphasis in original). For Levinas, love is transcendence which is beyond essence. Lurie's absurd obsession with the dogs toward the end of the novel is noteworthy here. Lurie's Levinasian love materializes in response to the silent, helpless authority of the dogs. The letters D, O, G comprising 'dog' are the word reversal of God and Levinas maintains that "God is a commandment to love. God is the one who says that one must love the other" (Levinas, "The Paradox" 177). It is toward the end and in the final scene that Lurie is qualified to use the designation 'love' to describe his relationship with the forlorn dog: "He has learned by now, from [Bev], to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love" (219).

### **Conclusion: Susceptible Corporeality**

While in the middle of nowhere, en route to delivering the Barbarian girl to her people, the Magistrate, lying in the tent, reflects thus, on the question of his obsession with the girl: "is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears? [...] No thought that I think, no articulation, however antonymic, of the origin of my desire seems to upset me" (81). Then he comes to the conclusion that "perhaps it is the case that only that which has not been articulated has to be lived through" (81). Just like the geese and their arrival in *Disgrace*, this statement, in a way, can serve as an adumbration of the fate of the Magistrate. He is made to 'live through' the pain and torture inflicted on the Barbarian girl first by force and later by consent. Both the Magistrate and Lucy come to a point where they suffer for the other and the other's other. In this regard, the path they traverse starts from the ethical and ends in

the political. Put in another way, they negotiate their way from ethics (involving the other) to justice (including the other's other) through pain and wounding, which are prices paid for the love for the other. The question that might be asked is: what is the relationship between corporeality and ethical subjectivity? Or in other words, "why [...] is the ethical body identified with the body as a sensorium, specifically with tactility as vulnerability, as susceptibility to pain?" (Wyschogrod, "Towards" 63). As mentioned earlier, the relationship between the other and the self can be defined in terms of proximity, which as Levinas explains:

is not a simple coexistence and rest, but non-repose itself, restlessness. Not an intentional movement tending to fulfillment, [but] a hunger, glorious in its insatiable desire, a contact by love and responsibility. Is love a pleasant, tactile sensation, or a way to still seek him who is nonetheless as close as he can be? ("Language"120).

Much emphasis has been placed on the importance of sensibility as opposed to cognition in Levinas's writings. Sensibility, affectivity or vulnerability "is the capacity to be affected by things [...] to be afflicted by them, susceptible, exposed not only to their sense but to their force, capable of being pained by them" (Lingis xx). Vulnerability as a corporeal phenomenon is closely associated with tactile sensation. Of all the senses, tactile encounter is basically other-oriented, simply because, as Wyschogrod elaborates, in seeing and hearing "I do not know the organs that see and hear, the eyes and ears, but must observe them from the outside as if they were some else's organs. But, when my hand is touched, I know that I cannot pretend the hand belongs to another" ("Towards" 61).

A peculiar characteristic of both the Magistrate and Lucy is their being or becoming sentient through contact with the other. Lucy's pregnancy—reminiscent of the condition of the other being under my skin (Atterton and Calarco 60)—and the Magistrate's ameliorative ritual of caressing the Barbarian girl's body allude to the fragility of the body as a whole. Love and desire in the ethical sense propounded by Levinas can only make sense through the fragility of the other, which according to Wyschogrod "evokes one's own capacity for experiencing pain, for emptying oneself of egoistic orientation" ("Towards" 63). To love means to forego one's positionality with respect to the other. Since this kind of love demands self-denial it is intrinsically ethical in Levinas's terms. In *Disgrace*, Lucy's abnegation of her socially and historically acquired privileges is comparable to entering the moral space that Bauman, following Levinas, describes as arriving at the moral party of the I and the other: "disrobed of our social trappings, stripped of status, social distinctions, handicaps, positions or roles [...] reduced to the bare essentiality of our common humanity" (*Postmodernity* 46). In *Waiting*, the relationship between the

girl and the Magistrate assumes allegorical dimensions. Their relationship is mediated by a kind of desire whose features are analogous to Levinas's conception of it: transcendental and unquenchable. Such desire questions the self and leads to the development of a politics of empathy according to which the self enters the moral party with the other without letting it be dissolved in reciprocity. In the end, like Lucy, the Magistrate embraces a broader and more inclusive view of humanity on the basis of our common vulnerability.

## Notes

1. According to Wyschogrod, representation "is related to pure sensibility and [...] is also a form of intelligibility. [...] Both aspects are required in representation: without the hyletic dada of sensibility, the represented could not arise, but without the meaning bestowing acts of consciousness we would be inundated by a field of undifferentiated sensible" ("God and Being" 147).
2. For an insightful discussion of the various interpretations of Levinas's patriarchal view and language see "From Eros To Maternity: Love, death, and 'the feminine' in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas" by Claire Elise Katz. In this article, Katz covers many of the major feministic critiques of Levinas.
3. Cirlot writes that geese are connected with destiny, "representing the dangers and fortunes of existence, prior to the return to the maternal bosom" (120). Ferber analyzing *Odyssey* cites the scene in which Helen offers an interpretation of Telemachus seeing "a mountain eagle carrying a white goose from a yard" (88). Helen believes that the omen means "that Odysseus will return home and take revenge on the suitors" (88).
4. Katz's article (see Works Cited) refers to the etymological similarity between the biblical term "Rakhamin" meaning "mercy" and the word "Rekhem" meaning "uterus" mentioned by Levinas. I cannot help noticing that in Farsi, the word for mercy and womb or uterus is the homograph "رحم", pronounced *Rahem* meaning uterus and *Rahm* meaning mercy.
5. In a recent article entitled "Nationhood and Justice in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*", I have explored the ethical implications of Lucy's nonconventional reaction to her rape in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Drawing on Homi Bhabha and Levinas, I attempted to show that Lucy's unorthodox perspective resonates with Bhabha's performative view of nation and Levinas's ethical justice.

## Works Cited

- Atterton, Peter and Matthew Calarco. *On Levinas*. Wadsworth, 2005.
- Attwell, David. "An Exclusive Interview with J.M.Coetzee." 2003-12-08, <https://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/an-exclusive-interview-with-j-m-coetzee>. Accessed on 25, July, 2019.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Intimations of Postmodernity*. Routledge, 1992.
- . *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Polity Press, 1989.
- . *Postmodern Ethics*. Blackwell, 1993.
- . *Postmodernity and its Discontents*. Polity Press, 1997.
- Bower, Colin. "JM Coetzee: Literary Con Artist and Poseur." *Scrutiny*2, vol.8, no.2, 2003, pp. 3-23.



- Burns, Lawrence. "Identifying Concrete Ethical Demands in the Face of the Abstract Other: Emmanuel Levinas' Pragmatic Ethics." *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol.34, no.3, 2008, pp. 315-335.
- Canepari-Labib, Michela. *Old Myths – Modern Empires: Power, Language and Identity in J.M. Coetzee's Work*. Peter Lang AG, European Academic Publishers, 2005.
- Cirlot, J.E. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. Translated by Jack Sage, Routledge, 1971.
- Coetzee, J.M. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Penguin Books, 1980/1999.
- . *Disgrace*. Penguin Books, 1999/2000.
- Der Ven, Naud Van. *The Shame of Reason in Organizational Change: A Levinasian Perspective*. Translated by David Bevan, Springer, 2011.
- Ferber, Michael. *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Cambridge UP, 2007.
- Head, Dominic. *J.M.Coetzee*. Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Katz, Claire Elise. "From Eros to Maternity: Love, Death, and 'the Feminine' in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas." *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, vol.3, edited by C.E. Katz, Routledge, 2005, pp. 190-212.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. "Ethics as First Philosophy." *The Levinas Reader*, edited by Sean Hand, Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp. 77-88.
- ."God and Philosophy." *The Levinas Reader*, edited by Sean Hand, Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp. 166-190.
- . "Language and Proximity". *Collected Philosophical Papers of Emmanuel Levinas*, translated by Alfonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987, pp. 109-127.
- ."Meaning and Sense." *Collected Philosophical Papers of Emmanuel Levinas*, translated by Alfonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987, pp. 75-102.
- .*Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1974/1991.
- ."The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Levinas." *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the other*, edited by Robert Bernasconi and D. Wood, Routledge, 1988, pp. 168-80.
- .*Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alfonso Lingis. Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1961/1979.
- Lingis, Alphonso. Introduction. *Collected Philosophical Papers of Emmanuel Levinas*, translated by Alfonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987, pp. vii-xxxii.

- Marais, Mike. "Very Morbid Phenomena: 'Liberal Funk', the 'Lucy-Syndrome' and JM Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Scrutiny* 2, vol.6, no.1, 2001, pp. 32-38.
- Spencer, Robert. "J.M.Coetzee and Colonial Violence." *Interventions*, vol.10, no.2, 2008, pp. 173-187.
- Teimouri, Mahdi. "Nationhood and Justice in J.M.Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Forum for World Literature Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2019, pp. 345-362.
- "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2003 - Press Release." [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/press.html). Accessed 25, July, 2019.
- Wright, Laura. "'Does He Have It in Him to Be the Woman?' The Performance of Displacement in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Ariel*, vol.37, no.4, 2006, pp. 83-102.
- Wyschogrod, Edith. "God and 'Being's Move' in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas." *Journal of Religion*, vol.62, no.2, 1982, pp. 145-55.
- . "Towards a Postmodern Ethics: Corporeality and Alterity." *The Ethical*, edited by Wyschogrod and Gerald P. Mckenny, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, pp. 54-66.