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The Portrayal of the Levinasian 'Maternity' in Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* (1978)

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ABSTRACT

In her Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), Iris Murdoch displays morality and ethics through her characters' intersubjective relationships. The implied ethics in each character's relation toward the other is akin to the Levinasian ethics. Although various studies have been done on this contemporary novel, it has not been analyzed through the Levinasian ethical lens. Emmanuel Levinas tries to decipher his ethical notions using figurative language, especially metaphors. He compares responsibility, substitution, and suffering for the Other to the state of 'maternity'. This paper will argue that the narrative explores this ethical notion of 'maternity' through an implied comparison between all female and two male characters. Both sexes are included since the other aim of this research is to prove Levinasian 'maternity' to be a gender-neutral trope applicable to both women and men.

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This research will be done by the help of C.Fred Alford's critical comparative essay, since we aim to contribute to the ongoing attempt to perceive Levinas's ethical notions through a detailed analysis of one of Murdoch's ethical narratives, *The Sea, The Sea*. Although we share a common goal with Alford, this paper is a complement to, as well as a critique of his essay.

Keywords: C. Fred Alford, Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics, Iris Murdoch, Maternity, *The Sea The Sea.*

INTRODUCTION

"Women have been idealized in many ways, but the mother is the ultimate model for generosity, compassion, and altruism. She is counted on to help the helpless, even when it is to her own detriment." (Adams,2014. 27)

Murdoch's, *The Sea, The Sea*, deeply influenced by her philosophical insights, intertwines themes of ethics with the intricacies of human connections through detailed characterizations. Many scholars identify her fiction as an ethical narrative due to its depiction of ethical and moral/immoral behaviors through intersubjective relationships. Safak describes Murdoch's novel as an ethical narrative, asserting:

> Murdoch inquires the intricate nature of moral responsibility and how her characters can be at odds with the moral compass of the sovereignty of an acceptable mindset and the limits of right behavior, the themes which she manages to present with the character of Charles in *The Sea, The Sea*. […] Characters wrestle with ethical stalemates […] *The Sea, The Sea* presents an index of ethical/unethical behaviors and thoughts of its characters. (Safak,2025. 355;361)

Similarly, other critics emphasize the ethical tensions throughout the narrative. Umit believes that readers witness abuses of personal relationships. (Umit 2019.5) Describing Murdoch's characters as power-driven "solipsists", Sullivan draws on their manipulative and desire-seeking behavior (Sullivan, 1977-8. 558), while Lesser mentions their entrapment in a self-destruction circle, yet insisting on manipulation. (Lesser,1980.10) Ikonomakis identifies this novel as an ethical narrative and its ethics applicable to everyday life. (Leeson 46)

Due to these ethical dynamics, as well as the absence of a Levinasian reading of the narrative, this study approaches Murdoch's narrative through the Levinasian ethics. Alford's essay, "Emmanuel Levinas and Iris Murdoch: Ethics as Exit" helps us accomplish our analysis. Alford attempts to understand Levinas through Murdoch, stating, "My goal is to better understand Levinas by comparing him with Murdoch." (Alford, 2002, 25) While sharing this objective, we hope this essay would be a complement to that of Alford's as well as a critique on it. This paper also aims to prove the gender-neutrality of Levinasian 'maternity' through an ethical analysis of female and male characters of the novel.

Through the interactions of the characters, Murdoch highlights the philosophical conflict between egoism and ethical responsibility. This novel guides the reader on a journey into the realm of ethics, elucidating the centrality of humans relationships and their significance in each other's life, through the assistance they provide or withhold. Their ethical/unethical behavior retells Levinasian ethical philosophy, which is in contrast with prevalent Western thoughts of that time.

Levinas's ethical notion of 'maternity' illustrates the ultimate sense of responsibility and substitution towards the Other and can be best applied to the characters of this novel due to their strong exhibition of having or not having it.

The alternation of maternity in the twentieth century contextualizes this study. Movements such as individualism and existentialism consider motherhood as an obstacle to personal autonomy. One such a speculation is for Erin Davis, who considers motherhoos as "a distraction, an interruption from what should be important to me_ mainly myself and a career" (Davis, 2012.24) Murdoch's narrative explores this shift, portraying characters who evade maternal responsibility and commitment in order to fulfill their desires and freedom.

In response to these postmodern changes, philosophers and novelists returned to ethics to revive man's compassion and responsibility. Emmanuel Levinas, influenced by his experiences during the second world war, particularly the cruelty against the Jews, tried to redirect philosophical thoughts towards ethics, looking for a solution in ethical considerations. Doing so, he gave modern implications to each of them. Alterity, ethical responsibility, vulnerability, substitution, 'feminine,' and 'maternity', these two latter have brought about many criticisms, are the terms through which he communicated his ethics.

Maternal body, maternity, and parenthood have been examined from a long time prior in numerous devout and philosophical areas. The role of mothers in their children's lives is highlighted in religious beliefs, particularly in Judaism and Talmudic beliefs.

Some significant philosophers have also used maternal status as a metaphor to describe the ineffable. Plato's use of pregnancy could be considered as the first use of 'maternity' in a metaphorical sense, which turned into the source of subsequent philosophers' reference to maternity and pregnancy metaphorically, including Nietzsche and Levinas's. Mitcheson argues, "Nietzsche employs the concept of pregnancy metaphorically at various points of his writings; discussing pregnancy of philosophers (GM III, 8, BGE 292), spiritual pregnancy (EH, Clever 3; GS 72) and being pregnant with thoughts or deeds (D 552)" (Mitcheson,2023) Although their objectives differ, like Levinas, Nietzsche is accused of dishonoring women, emphasizing only the spiritual aspects of pregnancy and its product while neglecting its physical experience (Mullin,2002, 27-30). Likewise, critics criticize Levinas's use of 'maternity' as a reference only to empirical women, rendering them passive and vulnerable.

Through the ethical exploration of *The Sea, The Sea*, this essay will prove that the Levinasian 'maternity' is not exclusive to women. Since its female characters portray no true ethical 'maternity', rather, the true ethical 'maternity' is depicted through two male characters.

MATERNITY AS A TROPE IN THE LEVINASIAN SENSE

Due to the difficulty of explaining ethics, Levinas tries to decipher it using literary and figurative language, especially metaphors. His creation of 'The Saying' and 'The Said' is one way to make his ethics understood. Alford suggests,

> Levinas tries to capture this desire for words to be more than words with his distinction between saying and said […] Levinas often writes about ethical relationships as though they were real relationships with real people. The rhetorical, almost magical, power of his texts stems from this strategy. One moment the Other is a person, the next a mirror whose face is infinity. (Alford,2002, 30-34)

This might be the reason that some critics criticize him for using 'maternity' and 'feminine'. Since they believe he is referring to empirical women, however, regarding Alford's remarks, Levinas's use of words is confusing. Levinas's use of rhetorical language is a clever way to address limitations of language. Accordingly, Rosato asserts,

> Levinas uses several images to highlight and explain certain key aspects of this relation with the Other; for instance, […] 'The Saying' as opposed to 'The Said.' The trope of 'maternity' in *Otherwise than Being* is another image. (Rosato, 2012, 351)

However, using 'femininity' to represent Otherness leads to ambiguity. He writes, "The 'feminine' is Other for a masculine being not only because of a different nature, but also inasmuch as alterity is in some way its nature." (EI 65) Some critics, like Bradley, express concern, claiming that a woman might misinterpret "Otherness", reading Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, since it is hard for her to regard her own gender as other. (Bradley,2016)

Many feminists criticize Levinas's 'feminine' and believe it is based on outdated stereotypes of femininity, linking it to traditional roles, domesticity, and sexuality, thus depriving women of participating in ethical agency. For instance, Irigaray believes that it prevents women from being recognized as autonomous subjects, claiming, "For him, the 'feminine' does not stand for an Other to be respected in her human freedom and human identity. The 'feminine' Other is left without her own specific face. On this point, his philosophy falls radically short of ethics" (Irigaray,1991.113).

However, in *Otherwise than Being,* Levinas introduces 'maternity' as the ultimate vulnerability in the complete being "for-the-Other" and the "signifyingness of signification" (108). By using 'maternity', Guenther and Rosato argue that he creates a more inclusive approach, allowing women to participate in his ethical framework. Levinas defines 'maternity', asserting,

> 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 persecuting itself, in which the persecutor sinks. Maternity, which is bearing par excellence, bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor (OB 88).

Rosato argues that maternal imagery helped Levinas illustrate the Self's responsibility towards the Other as "the restlessness of someone persecuted". Because it allows him "to illustrate vividly his claim that the suffering brought about by this "persecution" is both the result of the demands the Other makes in presenting himself to me and the result of my responsibility for those demands themselves" (Rosato,2012, 354-5).

Although some labels him as a misogynist, his ethics opposes the ontological categorization, believing that ontology groups people into categories like superior, inferior, or subhuman. He argues that categorizations influence how we treat others and that forcing people into specific roles ignores other parts of their identity. It becomes dangerous when identities such as Jewish or Black are seen as lesser. The Holocaust highlights the consequences of such thinking. Levinas's "Is Ontology Fundamental?" changes this ontological way of thinking, starting with the Other rather than "I". Accordingly, the idea of "alterity" is important, showing that we can never fully define others based on our own views. Rather, we should understand their differences and value what makes them special; otherwise, identity suppression, or as Levinas calls it violence, will occur (Bradley, 2016, 35). Due to his views on the value of human identity, Levinas should not be considered as a man who oppresses women, at least intentionally. However, critics such as Chanter, Katz, and Sikka criticize the ambiguity of his language, claiming he is not successful in separating metaphorical feminine and empirical women (Bradley, 2016, 33).

Levinas advocates for an alternation in philosophical discourse, as he wants first philosophy to focus on ethics. Moreover, to show how language falls short in expressing ethics and to overcome these shortcomings, he uses the language itself, creating 'The Said' and 'The Saying'. 'The Said' refers to the limits of the language and its direct meanings. He uses the limited language to fulfill its own lacks. It is the same deconstruction that Alford associates to Levinas, saying, "It is this aspect of Levinas's work that many deconstructionists have become so intrigued with, as it seems to justify what is sometimes called reading against the grain." (30) Moreover, Alford calls Levinas a proto-feminist, which can be aligned to Levinas's examination of gender roles, by the applicability of his 'maternity' across genders through this paper. Critchley illustrates 'The Said' and 'The Saying' referring to the example of expressing sorrow to a neighbor in grief. 'The Said' partially convey the speaker's feelings; however, 'The Saying' represents the essence of ethical communications. (Critchley, 2002.18) Ethical communication is more than just words; it is "antecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates" (OB 5).

Adams asserts, "Ethical responsibility is the true foundation of the self; the self is epiphenomenal to its responsibility for the other. Thus, maternity and pregnancy are the image of all ethical relations". She further states, "Maternity is invoked by Levinas specifically as a metaphor." Men are not excluded from these relations" (Adams,2014. 81).

Some scholars find 'maternity' as a gender-neutral image. Adams draws on Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* as a detailed consideration of maternal ethics, which regards mothers as "those women or men who meet a child's demands for preservation, growth, and social acceptability." (Adams,2014,19; Ruddick, 1989,25) Using 'women or men' emphasizes the applicability of 'maternity' to both genders. Therefore, regarding Levinasian 'maternity' as an exemplar for every Self in relation to the Other is not far-fetched. As he states:

> …all these allusions to the ontological difference between the masculine and the feminine would appear less archaic if, instead of dividing humanity into two species, they would signify that the participation in the masculine and the feminine were the attribute of every human being (EI 68).

Moreover, Standford in *Masculine Mothers* cites Forthomme's defense of Levinas, arguing that 'maternity' goes beyond just masculine and feminine roles, showing that an ethical viewpoint can exist without being limited by gender differences. Forthomme emphasizes that Levinas, as a man, would not want to exclude himself from understanding responsibility.

Guenther defends Levinas's image of 'maternity' in "'Like a Maternal Body': Emmanuel Levinas and the Motherhood of Moses" and *The Gift of the Other,* arguing that Levinas was not just thinking about 'maternity' in biological terms, and supports this by referencing Moses from the book of Numbers. Like Moses, who feels distant from the people he looks after, Levinas suggests that taking care of others is not just something mothers do, every Self should embrace the Other's needs without totalizing it. Therefore, Moses is a model of responsibility and ethical 'maternity'. (Numbers: 11:10-12)

Weaver-Zercher writes about the influence of a child on a mother, saying,

> Eight years in, I can't always tell the difference between my children's needs and my own. […] The needs of our children and our world, and ourselves merge and divide, and merge again, until sometimes you can't tell one strand from another (Weaver-Zercher, "Afterbirth," 42–44).

This is akin to the influence of the Other on the Self and aligns with Levinasian substitution, which he defines as "To be ethical is to expose oneself, to be vulnerable, to take on the suffering of the Other" (EI 195). Accordingly, the Other's needs will merge with the I's, and the I will suffer from the Other's sufferings. This substitution is closely linked to 'maternity' in *Otherwise than Being*. He discusses that the I is more responsible and has "one degree of responsibility more" (BPW 91). This is asymmetrical; hence, "No one can substitute himself for me, who substitutes myself for all" (OB 136). Accordingly, Bernasconi equates substitution to putting the Self in the Other's place and taking the Other's responsibilities rather than empathizing with him (Bernasconi 240). 'Maternity' is about taking on the responsibility for someone else, even if that someone causes pain or trouble. Furthermore, the mother does not really choose to be completely responsible for her child, even if she decides to get pregnant. Therefore, the maternal body represents substitution as 'pre-original'. (OB 75) Levinas states,

> To be oneself, otherwise than being, to be dis-interested, is to bear the wretchedness and bankruptcy of the Other, and even the responsibility that the Other can have for me.

> To be oneself, the state of being a hostage, is always to have one degree of responsibility more, the responsibility for the responsibility of the Other (OB 117).

Accordingly, the true substitution happens most fully in 'maternity'. Alford also argues that for Levinas the true humanism is to be for the Other and to be the Other's "hostage". Only in this way can one find his/her true subjectivity, otherwise, one is akin to a cow drinking out the milk of the world. (OB 69; Alford 28) Alford's remark aligns with Rosato's definition of Levinasian 'maternity,' which is discussed in the following.

A mother is inherently and prehistorically responsible; however, she can ignore her responsibility, just like a person might ignore his obligation to others. Similarly, the Self is always responsible towards the Other. Thus, I cannot choose whether I want to be responsible for the Other; I just am. Rosato argues that Levinas uses 'maternity' to explain substitution since it clearly shows the passivity in how a person is responsible toward the Other. She thinks that Levinas also used 'maternity' to explain vulnerability, which means that a person is open to being affected by the Other. (Rosato. 2012,348)

Levinas defines 'maternity' as vulnerability, saying, "'maternity' in the complete being "for-the-Other" which characterizes it, which is the very signifyingness of signification, is the ultimate sense of this vulnerability" (OB 108). 'Maternity' represents vulnerability because a mother's body is physically open to the child, however, the Self can never meet all of someone else's needs, just like a mother cannot completely meet her baby's needs before and after birth. Consequently, a mother who does not meet every expectation is not necessarily a bad mother. Even though she might fail, she should keep trying to be as ethical as she can, and this is true for the Self as well. Therefore, 'maternity' is a good metaphor for illustrating the Self's responsibility, substitution, and vulnerability, and is a path to transcendence and exit, as Alford suggests.

THE RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LEVINASIAN READING OF THIS NOVEL

Levinas and Murdoch, contemporary philosophers, depict alignment in their philosophies. Both were engaged with the prevailing social conditions and human behavior. The relationship between human beings and their interpersonal dynamics represent central aspects of their philosophical and literary outputs, which are masterfully depicted in Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea.* The themes of egoism as well as moral hierarchy pervade in her narrative, highlighting the primacy of ethical conduct.

Besides the abundant overlaps between Levinas and Murdoch, Alford finds them comparable, finding both similarities and differences in their philosophies. In order to accomplish this comparison, Alford compares Kierkegaard and Levinas's philosophies regarding the concept of human dread, which, to Kierkegaard, is the dread of nothingness; however, Levinas believes it arises from Somethingness, linking it to the horror of 'il y a'. Alford states, "The fundamental anxiety is mere being, being with no exit, being unto eternity. The Other is my exit, my release, my salvation." He suggests that engagement with the Other leads to an escape from il y a, however, emphasizes the need to acknowledge the alterity of the Other and warns against totalization and attachments. He believes avoiding attachments protects both the Self and the Other in the process of exit (Alford 33) Consequently, Alford finds Levinas and Murdoch compatible since both of them oppose totalization.

Murdoch displays the horrifying experience of il y a, through her numerous egoistic characters, especially through Charles Arrowby, highlighting the detrimental effects of attachment to the Other. Alford advocates for the absence of attachment in Levinas's ethics, saying,

> The absence of attachment in Levinas is no mere reflection of the zeitgeist. The absence of attachment reflects a passionate commitment to exit. One sees this most clearly in Levinas's account of a horrifying experience, the experience of "there is" (*il y a*). (30)

Therefore, 'maternity,' which means taking the Other's responsibility and vulnerability to the Self, is a cure for the 'il y a' as well as an exit for the Self toward transcendence. Since this is an inclusive cure, James and finally Charles reach out to it and exit.

According to Alford, Murdoch and Levinas's shared concern is the problem of the "drive of consciousness to totality". Murdoch finds its solution in the love of others, and Levinas in ethical relationships (Alford 35) Antonaccio also believes that, like Murdoch, Levinas transforms the experience of the sublime into an experience of other people. She further asserts, "the effort to reconstitute the ideas of consciousness and the good beyond the drive to totality is a point of resonance between the two thinkers." (Antonaccio, 2000, 223) Murdoch defines the sublime in "The Sublime and the Good," asserting, "The sublime may be interpreted as an acute recognition of the fact that others are, to an extent we never cease discovering, different from ourselves" (52). It resembles the Levinasian notion of Otherness. In "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited", she further suggests that we can capture it "not of physical nature, but of our surroundings as consisting of other individual men" (268). However, one major difference in Levinas and Murdoch is, according to Alford, their perception of reality. Levinas regards concrete reality as an obstacle in the way of transcendence. Accordingly, for him, the "Other is my exit, my release, my salvation. Here finally is an exit from being." However, Murdoch finds reality necessary; one way to achieve it is through "love: the non-violent apprehension of difference" (Alford 37, "Sublime," 1959. 54). Contrasting Levinas and Murdoch, Alford remarks,

> Like Levinas, Murdoch's goal is to go beyond the limits of the Self. Unlike Levinas, Murdoch is content to remain within a world of beings." She wants us to "climb the ladder of love only high enough to be free of their vanity and egoism, but never so high as to leave the world behind" (Alford 38).

On the other hand, Alford, defining transcendence as a going beyond the limits of something, feels that Murdoch may finally seek transcendence. Bakhurst also believes that Murdoch seeks transcendence through the Good, suggesting that to Murdoch the "Good is transcendent" which is "elusive because we are fallible, infinite, and selfish." (Sovereignty of Good, 75; Bakhurst, 2020, 220) It can be concluded Levinas and Murdoch do seek transcendence, but in different ways. Alford further argues that these two philosophers share a common goal which is to "go beyond the limits of the self", since their problem is the ego. He explains it as follows:

> the narcissism of the pre-doorbell state of "living from" as Levinas calls it, "neurosis," as Murdoch calls it. In fact, much of the misery in life comes from what might be called dependent attachment […].

> Charles Arrowby, protagonist of *The Sea, The Sea,* holds his long-lost girlfriend, Hartley, a prisoner in his country house. One might argue that this represents the power of totalizing egoism, but it seems more a sign of his utter dependence upon her to keep from going insane. (Alford,39)

Charles's narcissistic state of 'living from' is also mentioned by Deborah Johnson, describing him, saying, "the journal with its double tendency towards self-justification and self-congratulation is the right form for the narcissistic Charles Arrowby." (Johnson, 1987, 46)

Naseri-sis's claim also complements Alford's words on attachment, suggesting, "James warns Charles about his obsession with Mary and the fact that his suffering 'is caused by caring and selfish desire… Hartley is the central attachment and therefore the greatest pain-source'" (Nasiri-sis, 2009, 136; Ramanthan, 76)

Alford compares Levinas's vision to the vision of Socrates in the Symposium. He also believes Murdoch has her Symposium in her novels because her characters "climb the ladder of love only high enough to be free of their vanity and egoism, but never so high as to leave the world behind." (Alford 38)

This paper both completes and criticizes Alford's essay. We agree with his remarks on Charles imprisoning Hartley due to his lack of acknowledging the Other's alterity. However, we disagree with Alford in saying that Murdoch's characters do not exit or transcend, since James acknowledges the Other's alterity in his escape from il y a, substitutes, and dies for the Other and leaves the world behind. Even the egoist protagonist eventually overcomes his egoism and exits, becoming like a mother for the Other. He finds the path to exit after being reborn (and delivered by James). Consequently, we respectfully disagree with Alford, confined to this account.

Naseri-sis claims that in *The Sea, The Sea*, "Charles Arrowby and his cousin, James Arrowby, will respectively show a very partial and a full process of unselfing" (Naseri-sis,2009.111). Therefore, these two characters abandon the habit of 'living-from' and reached the state of living-for-the Other through the state of 'maternity'.

The applicability of the Levinasian reading to this novel is the significance of this paper and is done through applying his ethical image of 'maternity' to its characters. However, the fact that the question of gender has become a major concern for the critics of Murdoch and Levinas should not be neglected. The transition of fixed gender roles in Murdoch's narratives can be regarded as a deconstruction. We should notice that Alford regards Levinas's works as a kind of deconstruction as well. In this way, both Murdoch and Levinas are deconstructionists.

Nicol's article, "Anticipating Retrospection: The First-Person Retrospective Novel and Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, the Sea,"* concentrates on Murdoch's use of male narrators. She supports Johnson's remarks, which aligns with Irigaray's opinion, believing that the 'feminine' is marginalized in discourse. As a female writer adopting a male narrative voice, Murdoch deconstructs the misogyny of the external narrative by attacking from within. (190) Johnson states that Murdoch "shows all human beings, men and women alike" (Johnson, 1987.9).

Umit argues, "intellectuals such as Iris Murdoch tried to subvert and alter masculine subjectivity by playing and parodying masculine discourse in her fiction" (Umit, 20). To answer her critics' question of gender, Murdoch asserts, "my own characters are often androgynous because I believe that most people are androgynous" (Dooley,2003. 30; qtd. in Rowe, 2007. 163). However, Murdoch takes up a gender-free and unbiased view (Umit 32). Umit, using a figure clustering traits, asserts that "As a subset of androgyny cluster, traits that are related to femininity should be considered together with male traits in order to discuss a normalized personality under a gender-less scope" (Umit 24).

Correspondingly, Grimshaw argues that Murdoch has no fixed linear or totally binary opinion of gender, asserting, "Murdoch subscribed to the view that gender ceases to exist on a 'higher spiritual level', one has to evolve morally and spiritually before the artificial constructs of gender can be overcome" (Grimshaw,2005. 220). Perhaps, that is why James is a mother-like figure, or better say, a male mother. Similarly, Levinas considers gender classification as an illusion and believes that masculinity and femininity can be attributed to anyone (EI 68). Therefore, Levinas's ethical concept of 'maternity' is a useful interpretative tool for approaching this novel.

Firstly, it will be assigned to the female characters who are: Hartley, Rosina, Titus's biological mother, Lizzie, and Clement. We will inspect female characters and illustrate how they evade responsibility and persecution caused by the Other. Having a child brings about all these responsibilities, and that is why all of these female characters are escaping from it, each in a different way. The abundance of childless characters throughout the novel resembles the ethical infertility in the life of egoistic people of the modern world. Johnson also argues,

> In her fictional versions of the pilgrimage from appearance to reality, Iris Murdoch chooses as protagonist the figure most directly opposed to the simple, inarticulate mother of a large family__ that is, the childless male professional who is indeed articulate to the point of volubility, who has power and, in the full sense of the word, glamour. (Johnson, 1987, 4)

Secondly, 'maternity' will be applied to two of the male characters, James and Charles, since James is a mother-like figure, ethically superior to other characters, and Charles finally turns into a selfless person, representing 'maternity'. His transition is of high significance, showing a pilgrimage, a path to unselfing and to exit. Through these characters, Levinasian 'maternity' can be approved to be a gender-neutral metaphor.

THE CHARACTERS' 'MATERNITY'

The Sea, The Sea, at the first glance, is a memoir written to show an artist's retrospection on his past. However, through a meticulous reading, it is a great ethical narrative.

Mary Hartley is the first female character to be analyzed through Levinasian 'maternity'. She is the protagonist's first beloved who does not wait enough for him and gets married to another man. She is an infertile woman who decides to adopt a child. She adopts Titus without the consent of her husband.

> The adoption society gave me a lot of stuff, they even gave me a letter from his mother, but I didn't read any of it, I destroyed it at once. I didn't want to give any part of my thoughts to his real parents (293).

She destroys every document related to Titus's biological parents, disregarding his need for understanding his identity. This action represents a totalizing ego that prioritizes the Self over the Other, as argued by Alford. He says, "For Levinas, I know others in my world, having intercourse with them, but they remain part of the wallpaper of my life, present but unnoticed." (Alford, 27) Levinas describes it, saying, "in enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other" (TI 134) Thus, the Other is a wallpaper of Hartley's life, since she does not think about, and obviously does not substitute Titus's biological mother, who has desperately written something important in that letter. She obviously finds her enjoyment in destroying the letter. She even ignores her husband's feelings towards this baby. Hartley is an egoist who puts herself prior to every Other. She brings the child to her family, and instead of taking care of him and being a caring mother to him, she lets the poor son be bitten by her husband and takes her husband's side instead. She says,"Ben did go through a phase of knocking Titus about. Some neighbors called the prevention of cruelty people […] I had to sort of take Ben's side" (293). She should take the responsibility of her son, even if she does not love him as a true mother. In the case of Hartley, 'adoption' happens since she adopts the child willingly. However, a child seems to be an intruder to Hartley as well as to Rosina, who will be discussed in subsequent parts. Adams asserts,

> A mother's sense of conflict with her child can begin as early as pregnancy. Many women attest to experiencing the fetus as a monstrous other who threatens her body, eats away at her vitality, upsets her sense of self, invades her home, and ultimately seeks to commandeer her life. In these cases, the child may appear […] as a parasite or other monstrous figure. (Adams 46)

Hartley adopts Titus not for the sake of the Other but to improve her own life. After realizing the persecution that this boy brings about, she regrets it. It is better depicted in her dialogue with Charles: "I wish we'd never adopted a child, it was my fault, Ben was quite right, we were better without. I could have managed then, and Ben would have been- like I wanted" (296). Besides implying egoism, this dialogue represents Levinas's concepts of Otherness versus Sameness, emphasizing that one should not try to change the Other for personal gain. However, Hartley tries to change Ben by adopting Titus. Additionally, she admits her lack of 'maternity', saying, "he could never forgive me for not protecting him when he was small" (295). There is no sign of 'maternity' in Hartley. She wishes her son to be dead or not to show up again, as she says, "Sometimes I almost wish he were dead, and that I could hear that he was dead, so that the anguish of the hope and the fear and the dread could just stop, and we could be at peace." If he came back, it could be-terrible-." (296) She is still seeking her own comfort over the Other's life, whom she considers as a "parasite". (Adams 46)

Levinas posits that the Self must move away from itself and move toward the Other which is a kind of deportation. The Self is a hostage, as Alford suggests, bearing the responsibility of replacing the Other and fulfilling his needs. Employing the term "hostage," Levinas is referring to the notion of substitution. However, Adams indicates that a woman, the "irreplaceable hostage", can get away with her bondage by giving her child for adoption. (Adams 82)

There is an unnamed mother who cannot bear being a hostage to her child, and gives her child up for adoption. Titus's biological mother, like any other human being, denies her responsibility toward the Other. Murdoch depicts different kinds of ethicality through different mothers. She exhibits lack of alterity and 'maternity' in her female characters. The mothers of this narrative are not willing to give up their desires and freedom for their children. Levinas believes that these people cannot see the reality which is beyond the Self. He claims responsibility is itself freedom and defines it, saying;

> To be without a choice can seem to be violence only to an abusive or hasty and imprudent reflection, for it precedes the freedom non-freedom couple, but thereby sets up a vocation that goes beyond the limited and egoist fate of him who is only for-himself, and washes his hands of the faults and misfortunes that do not begin in his own freedom or in his present[…] Responsibility for the Other, this way of answering without prior commitment, is human fraternity itself, and it is prior to freedom. (OB 116)

Similarly, several egoist characters are evading the Other to be free.

Rosina Vamburgh is a female character in whom we see the traditionally celebrated state of pregnancy. However, she decides not to respond to this responsibility and aborts her child. Viewing her under Levinasian ethics, she reflects a lack of responsibility towards her former husband, her unborn child, and Charles, pursuing her desire. This is in accordance with Alford's remarks about attachment. He claims in Levinas's ethics there is no place for need and attachment, saying, "Relatedness and need define self and other in terms of their need for each other, and so risk falling into totalization. The second reason is that a self who needed the other too much could never serve the other." (29) Accordingly, the unethical behavior of the characters stems from their falling into totalization due to their attachment, regarding the Other as a means to serve their interests.

Rosina, despite being in love with Charles, starts hurting him after being rejected. Therefore, it is not love that she feels for Charles, it is attachment. She regrets the abortion not out of ethical considerations, but because she lost the opportunity of taking revenge on Charles. She says, "I did it partly out of hatred of you. Why the hell didn't I keep that child […] I have taught him to hate you – that would have been a consolation too" (417). Actually, the baby would have been a great tool in her hands.

Lizzie Scherer is a single woman living with Gilbert while loving Charles. She does not have a child either. Although she shows some sympathy with the Other (Gilbert) and is not willing to leave him in his misery, she leaves him several times to fulfill her own desire, which is to go back to Charles.

Clement, Charles's old and dead mistress, is another childless female character. The fact that Murdoch designed her female characters childless should not be neglected. There is another female character, a mother who escapes the persecutions after the delivery and gives her child up for adoption. Thus she is childless for the rest of her life.

Not in the female characters, but in a male character can the reader find Levinasian 'maternity'. Murdoch is successful in portraying Levinas's 'maternity' applicable not only to women but also to men, by picturing it through the character of James. James is a male-mother who finds himself responsible towards the Other, just like a mother finds herself responsible towards her child. He is also a Moses-like figure. Like a mother (and like Moses) who loves all her children (all of his people) and is responsible towards each one of them, James loves every Other. He encapsulates all of the Levinasian ethical features, knowing how to be responsible in the face of the Other. When he meets Titus, he sympathizes with him, making him say, "It's funny, I feel as if I'd met him before, and yet I know I haven't." (434) James's asymmetrical ethicality is evident to everyone, as Charles says, "it was a tacit custom of our childhood that James gave me presents, often quite expensive ones, whereas I gave him none." (268) In answer to Charles's question about rescuing Hartley, James said; "You may not think much of her husband, but he may suit her, however impressed she is by meeting you again. Has she wanted to be rescued?" (230)

James even cares about Ben, who is a stranger. This represents Levinasian responsibility as a 'pre-historical' and 'pre-ontological' notion, as James does not for a second hesitate whether to take the responsibility or not (OB 78;117). The fact that everybody loves him bothers Charles, making him say, "My desperate state was caused partly by the presence of James, who seemed to be a center of magnetic attraction to the other three. Each of them separately told me how much he liked James." (434)

For Levinas, the true subjectivity is found only in subjecting oneself to the ethical summons of the Other, willing to be "obsessed" with and "persecuted" by the Other, and to "substitute" oneself and "expiate" for the Other (TI 26; OB 99-129) James gains this proper sense of self, bearing vulnerability as the result of substituting the Other. He substitutes Charles even at the cost of losing his life and leaving this world behind. It is in opposition to Alford's words on the transcendence of Murdoch's characters.

Therefore, James is the best symbol for Murdoch's goodness and unselfing, as well as Levinas's ethical 'maternity'. In other words, these two philosophers' philosophies can literally be summarized in this character. Through James, we can conclude that Levinas and Murdoch's attitudes are related, and the outcome is a good, lovely, Godlike, and transcendent 'I'. Guenther, referring to Levinas's phrase 'like a maternal body', claims that this phrase, using 'like', "may or may not refer to the biological birth of a child" (OB 67; Guenther, 2006. 119), emphasizing the gender-neutrality of Levinasian 'maternity'.

James is nursing the Other, like a mother nursing her child. He tries to dissuade Charles from his misdeeds, like a mother disciplining her child. Eventually, we can see that this mother-like figure saves his baby and substitutes in his death. Doing so, he gives birth to a new, a less egoist and more selfless Charles.

According to Levinas, substitution liberates the subject from ennui. (OB 124) He illustrates it through the trope of 'maternity'. Accordingly, the mother is an exemplar of substitution, personifying the capacity for an "echoing-in-another" (OB 19: Peperzak 232). James is the best exemplar of this substitution, since when Charles was drowning, James substituted him, knowing that he would be sacrificed. "The substitution of the hostage involves my very life in the death or suffering of the Other" (OB 127).

Had it not been for James's substitution, Charles would have been dead, and no new Charles would have been delivered. Moreover, James's vulnerability is also shown in his pregnancy, since he is pregnant with Charles and his responsibilities and eventually dies at the delivery. This is what Charles says after being saved by James:

> I had not questioned James properly because he had become ill immediately afterwards, he had had some sort of collapse and retired to bed. Why was he so exhausted? Because of what he had endured in rescuing me. (627-8)

Whether he gets ill due to his overuse of his power or gets hurt during his saving mission, it was because of substituting the Other in misery that he died. He could have been passive, not doing anything, and let the Other drown.

James is a mother not only to Charles but also to every Other. Titus finds him a consoling character. James is a good company for Lizzie, a good nursing mother for Hartley and Ben, trying to save their marital life. He sacrifices his own well-being for the Other. For instance, on the night when Charles's unwelcome guests had to stay in Shruff End, James acts like a mother showing selflessness, this time by sleeping on a number of chairs. Primo Levi argues, survivors feel guilt after a tragedy, especially when so many have died and they survived. That guilt causes them to feel like they have essentially taken the lives of other people—their basic right to live has been violated. He states about survivors that "each one of us […] has usurped his neighbor's place and lived in his stead" (Levi 82).

Accordingly, James selects the chairs so that the others could enjoy a more comfortable night's sleep and to avoid this sense of guilt. James's feeling ashamed of Titus's death is another example representing Levi's sense of guilt. Even though he tried his best to save him, he feels guilty. This reminds us of Levinas's frequent use of Dostoevsky's quote, "every one of us is guilty before the Other, I more than the Other" (OB 146), as well as to Alford's allusion to Levinas's guilty man, since he believes that man, in Levinasian ethics, is guilty but not tragic, and his guilt is due to his infinite responsibility toward the Other.

James's responsibility is proven to everyone in a way that Charles knows James is always there for him, ready to sacrifice himself. As he says, "I half decided to go to London tomorrow. I half thought of telephoning James, who might, after all, still be around" (620). This aligns with Levinas's definition of responsibility, likening his support to that of a mother, devotedly present for her baby. This is how Charles feels after James's death: "Without James, I was at last alone. How very much I had somehow relied upon his presence in the world" (630).

James, or any person with Levinasian 'maternity,' is representative of the utmost disinterestedness, prioritizing the Other's needs over his. He overcomes his ontological solitude through his asymmetrical relationships and finds the exit from his entrapment. Similar to Moses, a mother to all his people, James feels this endless responsibility towards every Other, no matter how well he knows them.

A mother does not love her children selectively, rather, her love is all-encompassing. So is James's responsibility. Accordingly, Murdoch retells Levinas's words through James's, "To establish relationships, you can't just elect people, it can't be done by thinking and willing." (508) It represents Levinasian notion of freedom versus responsibility.

A mother figure is the best exemplar of Otherness since she rejects the Same, as does James, to empathize with the plight of the baby, the Other. In this way, the Self is elevated in a paradoxical manner, experiencing a sense of intense misery, yet simultaneously a sense of elevation, being able to resist the ramblings of 'il y a.'

Levinas believes that the "uniqueness of the Self is the very fact of bearing the fault of another" (OB 112). James bears the fault of the other, Charles, and feels responsible for Hartley and other characters' suffering.

Surprisingly, Charles, after all, could find the path to exit through the Other. Perhaps that is the reason some critics call this narrative a pilgrimage. Nicol asserts:

> *The Sea, the Sea*, most critics agree, is about this pilgrimage. Famous theatre director Charles […] retires to a lonely house by the sea - "his cave" [4] […]. There he will be able to reject the theatrical world of power and magic and "learn to be good," in other words, learn to distinguish between illusion and reality. […] the lessons he learns from this quest allow him finally to reject solipsism. (Nicol 1996, 6)

Finally, Charles realizes the Other as an Other, without totalizing it with the Same. He overcomes his ontological solitude and seeks transcendence through asymmetrical relationships. He goes out with his friends, talks to them, this time not about his selfish desires, but about the Other's well-being. He notices this great change and says, "A busy week. Had lunch with Miss Kaufman and arranged for her mother to be packed off to a comfortable and expensive 'twilight home.' I am to pay the bills, it appears. Am I becoming saintly after all?" (653) Now he has asymmetrical relationships, even with those whom he used to totalize before. He visits Rosina, Lizzie, and Gilbert, whom used to be his puppets. He says, "I have had lunch with Rosemary, with Miss Kaufman, with poor old Fabian, with a frenetic young actor called Erasmus Blick" (643). He is doing charity as he says, "I have sent a cheque to the Buddhist Society and another to the Arbelow Peace Foundation, and will shortly amaze young Erasmus Blick, who is getting married, by my generosity." (656) Acting like a mother, Charles is getting closer to living-for-the-Other, and seeing the truth as he is not chained to his 'il y a' anymore. Now, he knows his past misdeeds. For instance, he asked Hartley not to go to Australia. Now he says, "I later concluded that it really did not matter whether they had gone to Sydney or to Lytham-St-Anne's" (649). It is a great change through which Murdoch depicts a magnificent exit from egoism, acquired through 'maternity'. Therefore, Alford missed the point, saying Murdoch's characters do not go highly enough to leave the world behind. So ethics as exit is beautifully portrayed in Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea,* and is best shown through the Levinasian 'maternity'. Moreover, the fact that not in the female characters, but in two male characters could we find 'maternity', can be an approval of gender-neutrality of Levinasian 'maternity'.

CONCLUSION

Through this paper, we explored the resurgence of ethics between Levinas and Murdoch's works. Levinas is known as an important figure whose ethics of the face-to-face encounter focuses on ideas of alterity, responsibility, vulnerability, and 'maternity'. This paper examined Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* through the Levinasian 'maternity', in accordance with Alford's essay. We tried to approve Alford's remarks on Murdoch and Levinas's similarities, as well as to criticize what he says about Murdoch's characters' transcendence and exit.

Murdoch's novel depicts characters struggling with moral issues and their tension between egoism and responsibility, resembling Levinasian ethics, especially his notions of alterity, vulnerability, and 'maternity'. We also examined the role of 'maternity' as a metaphor in Levinasian ethics through the character of James and Charles Arrowby.

Murdoch masterfully illustrates that ethical features are not limited to genders, depicting irresponsible, non-mother female characters versus mother-like male characters. Conversely, James exemplifies the ideal ethical being, embodying Levinas's substitution and epitomizing 'maternity' in his acting as a surrogate mother. His actions illustrate Levinas's idea of true ethical subjectivity, involving endless responsibility and the capacity to bear the suffering of others through substitution, which leads to ethical transcendence.

Finally, the paper underscores the profound connection between Levinas's ethics and Murdoch's literary depiction of ethical relationships, which used to be a gap in the history of analysis of this novel. Murdoch's characters serve as moral exemplars, demonstrating that true goodness involves embracing Otherness, relinquishing ego, and fostering genuine human connection rooted in ethical responsibility, as envisioned by Levinas. It can be inferred that, through the ethical examination of this novel, Levinas's 'maternity' is a trope applicable to both sexes. As Bradley argues, the task of caring for the other is about one's ability, not dependent on gender (Bradley 32).

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