

“For Others, in Spite of Myself, from Myself”: A Levinasian-Feminist Reading of Charlotte Mary Matheson’s *The Feather*

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Abstract

When Charlotte Mary Matheson began writing *The Feather* in 1929, numerous movements regarding women's rights were emerging. However, despite various references to contemporary issues, Matheson's book initially did not receive much attention from critics; it was only after a few decades that *The Feather* became one of the best-selling novels, especially in Iran. In this article, a feminist reading of the novel was conducted on the basis of the alterity of the Other and the ethics of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. The common ground between the theories of feminism and Levinasian philosophy is the relationship between the Self and the Other, which according to both theories, needs to change. Traditionally, men were accepted as the dominant power or the Self and women as the second sex or the Other. On the other hand, ethics, according to Levinas, emphasizes a proper relationship between the Self and the Other. Hence, the kind of relationship between the Self and the Other and the alterity of the Other become important; thus, this relationship requires a new definition. This reading of the novel shows how the relationship between the Self and the Other in the story, which begins with carnal desires, eventually ends in a moral one. In addition, the female character rediscovers her independence and identity, which was initially dominated by men.

Keywords

Alterity; Ethics; Feminism; Levinas; Self and Other.

1. Introduction

Charlotte Mary Matheson was born in 1892, England. Not much about her personal life is known since she intended to keep her personal life private and live away from society. However, she could not stay as secluded when her successful novels rendered her the fame she deserved. Her most celebrated works are *The Generation Between* (1915), *Morwenna of the Green Gown* (1923), *Nut in the Husk* (1926), and *The Feather* (1927). *The Feather* was written in 1927 and later adapted into a silent movie since it was greatly appreciated during that time. Although today the novel has received tremendous amounts of popularity in different countries, especially Iran, its

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original transcription in English is not available anymore. Therefore, most of the scholars are dependent on the book's translations, which are available both in Persian and French.

By the time Matheson started composing the novel, various movements concerning the rights of women had developed; besides, famous female authors such as Kate Chopin (1850) and Edith Wharton (1862) were addressing the issues of women and the improper roles society had penned for them. A successful marriage, in many cases, was perceived as the primary purpose in a woman's life since no other positions were recognized for women. The feminist movement inspired female authors, who were struggling to form a subjectivity for themselves, to enter the literature canon. It was in such an era that Matheson composed a novel in which the love relationship between the characters represented itself as the ideal relationship between a man and a woman.

By accepting the alterity and the Otherness of women, as proposed by Emmanuel Levinas, thus keeping and highlighting the women's alterity instead of diminishing it to the Self, Matheson represented an ethical love relationship between the male and female characters in the novel. The novel seems to be moving away from the literary productions that merely criticize the subordination of women by representing a different view in addressing the issues of feminism in which female figures are accepted as the independent Others whose alterities are highly accepted and appreciated instead of being diminished to the Self or male-oriented society. Since the novel seems to be a perfect representation of the ideal relationship between the Self and the Other mentioned by Levinas, in which exists the notion “For others, in spite of myself, from myself”, the authors have decided to provide a new reading of the novel regarding the issues of women based on the ideas of Levinas in which Otherness becomes noticeable and the ethical relationship between the Self and the Other forms the basis of ethics. Ironically, while reading the novel, one will notice how, from time to time, even Matheson, who portrays an independent and powerful woman in her fiction, cannot completely break free from the anti-feminist outlooks that still existed in the twentieth century. Therefore, it is necessary to explain the feminist movement briefly before going to the discussions of Levinas and the analysis of the novel.

Since the original English version of the full novel cannot be found easily, no analysis or article concerning the mentioned novel has been published before. However, the French translator of the book, Lillian Deperemou writes in the book's introduction (1950), that "the elitism and pristine nature of the subject, and especially the simplicity of the characters in the story," are the reasons the book stands out. Hassan Safavi also mentions in the introduction to the Persian translation of the *Morwenna of the Green Gown* (1958) that Matheson “could not attract the cold-

blooded spirit of his countrymen because of the subtlety of her spirit and the clear criticism she made of her society." That might be the reason why Matheson tried to stay anonymous and not much information about her is at hand today. Amir Hoshang Azar, the Persian translator of *The Feather* (2010), states in the introduction to the novel that "in this book, there is a state of passion, a calm and poetic feeling that makes the reader wish for such a story to happen for him/her. When the reader finishes reading the book, s/he will say without exaggeration "I wish I had such a story. I wish I were Dalton."

Although the novel is less renowned in the literary canon, the approach chosen to study this novel is a well-known approach about which several articles have been written. Due to a large number of articles and researches about feminist and Levinasian analysis, the authors will review only a few of the cases closest to the present study. Robert John Sheffler Manning in his article "Thinking the Other without Violence? An Analysis of the Relation Between the Philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas and Feminism" (1991) explains how the first person to condemn Levinas for supporting traditional male tyranny was Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1945) and how Tina Chanter later claimed that Levinas's theory was in line with De Beauvoir's theory and a feminist reading of it was also possible.

Mina Farzinmanesh, in "A Study of Edward Morgan Forster's *A Passage to India* and *Howards End* through Ethical Criticism" (2016), holds that Levinas bases his theory on the ethical encounter between two parties, thus serving the alterity of the Other. Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha, in an article entitled "The Age of Iron, J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Encounter with the Other: A Levinasian Analysis" (2015), mentions that the personal ethics that is defined on the basis of the interactions with the Other can lead to a revision of social ethics as well. Anita Turlington, in her dissertation "Levinas and the New Woman Writers: Narrating the Ethics of Alterity" (2018), examines the work of English woman writers with a Levinasian approach, analysing the moment of writers' face-to-face encounter with the protagonist as a moment of epiphany and moral structure.

2. Theoretical Framework: Levinasian Feministic Views

To comprehend the novel better and to get familiar with the general atmosphere of the time, the novel will be analysed through a feministic lens. In addition, to understand the ethical relationship that Matheson represents in her story, the Levinasian concepts of alterity, the Other, and ethics will also be discussed. Moreover, in this article, unlike the general claims, the authors are going to discuss how Levinas's use of such terms as hidden, object, and mystery for women are not anti-feministic and can be justified by

the acceptance of the woman as the absolute Other though explaining the features of the latter. Accordingly, it will be explained how the female character of the novel represents the absolute Other and how her relationship with the male figure represents an ethical relationship in a time woman were mostly dominated by male authorities.

The subordination of women has origins in history. According to Donovan, women were described as Others in comparison to men. Beauvoir criticizes the Western ideology in which women are defined in relation to men and are looking for equality with men. In this philosophy, the male is “the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (qtd. in Chanter 28). Nonetheless, Beauvoir believes that women should deconstruct the male-orientated society stating that “we need to construct or reconstruct ethics if a genuine female subjectivity is to be established” (*Ibid* 198). She goes on to declare that women should keep their subjectivity, and in order to do so, they should not fall into the traps of defining themselves in a sort of opposition to the man. Thus, one of the major concerns of feminism is that the Voice of women, which has long been silenced and overlooked, needs to be heard. Women's independence has to be acknowledged; their characteristics need to be noticed and appreciated. Hence, feminists' figures try to maintain the differences and peculiarities of women instead of dissolving them into the male-dominating discourses. These notions are pretty much close to the ideas of the French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, regarding the philosophy of the Self and the Other.

Emmanuel Levinas, born on December 30, 1905, was a French philosopher whose ideas have proved to be debatable. While he talks about ethics, ethical frameworks, and phenomenology, his main concern would be the ethical relationship between the Self and the Other. He is known for providing a new version of Western philosophy where he overturns Heidegger's ontology, perceiving the problems such as colonization as its results since in Heidegger's philosophy, rather than Otherness, an emphasis on the sameness and likeness exists. Levinas, unlike other Western philosophers, puts importance on ethics and ethical relationship with the Other, which in his view, is only possible when the alterity of the Other is acknowledged and maintained.

In spite of the fact that he puts ethics at the center of his philosophy, Levinas has been accused of using the term “feminine” in his works to refer to a neutral object who is desired by the subject, or the male power. Although Levinas claims that he is bringing a new version of Western philosophy in which he gives importance to ethics, he has been under the influence of the same old philosophy where women are perceived as objects deprived of subjectivity. Irigaray notes that “Levinas clings to the rock of patriarchy, abandoning the feminine other,” leaving her “without her own

specific face." She goes on to state that, "On this point, his philosophy falls radically short of ethics" (qtd. in Chanter 29). This article takes its shift here. The authors argue that although Levinas uses terms such as object for women, he chose to "make a discussion of what he calls the 'feminine central' or, at least integral, in much of his work from 1940 up to and including *Totality and Infinity* in 1961" (Huxley 139). Besides, Levinas's discussion on the matter of the Self and the Other renders women as superiors whose needs should be prioritized, whose subjectivities should be maintained, and whose peculiarities should be appreciated without any expectations of return.

Women have long been regarded as the Other in society where men were the Self or the main power. As the oppressed Other, women had no dominion, voice, or authority. For a noticeable amount of time, they were the object of gaze and desire of men. However, Levinas introduces a new definition for the Self and the Other as well as providing a new ethical relationship between them. Levinas is known for overturning the philosophy of Heidegger, who introduced ontology as the basis of his ideas. Nonetheless, Levinas declares that having ontology as the core of philosophy will probably lead to egoistic outlooks, in which there is no place for the Other. What he wants instead is to highlight the Other and to place him/ her as the core of ethical human relationships. The Other he introduces has peculiarities allocated to himself/ herself. Accordingly, when discussing the Other, Levinas uses two terms: "the autre" and "the Autrui." The autre refers to the Other as the object of consciousness, and the Autrui refers to Other that, as Levinas claims, is beyond comprehension, hence, ungraspable.

Levinas generally sees the Other as a ground for the realization of the Self. He does not want to dissolve the Other to the Self to reach unity. Rather, he desires to maintain and stress the Otherness of the Other so that both the Self and the Other can have an adequate understanding of their essences. The absolute Other that he mentions cannot be overpowered or controlled; therefore, it is impossible to define the Other in terms of the Self. As Tina Chanter maintains, "Levinas rejects any conception that defines the feminine Other through negation as the lack or absence of the masculine or masculine characteristic" (32). He proposes that women have their own identity and subjectivity, which is absolute and not prone to change and oppression. He recognizes the alterity or the Otherness of the women in a positive sense, as a pure and idealistic one which does not enter any oppositions, instead "permits its terms to remain the absolute Other" (Levinas 85).

In addition, the face to face relationship between the Self and the Other becomes important since, according to Levinas, the alterity and Otherness of the Other brings a

sort of revelation to the Self; the “I” feels responsible for the needs and the desires of the Other and tries to fulfill the Other’s wishes without any expectations in return. The ethical relationship between the Self and the Other is significant since it starts as soon as the alterity of the Other is recognized by the Self, making Self responsible for the Other. Henceforth, it is noteworthy that if the ethical relationship with the Other is maintained, it will end in the transcendence of both parties, not in uniting them. Unity suggests that the unique features and qualities of each party should dissolve and merge into those of the other one. Levinas sees the unity of two parties as a sort of violation of the rights of the Other. What is appreciated in Levinasian philosophy is transcendence and a return to the true essence of the Self for both parties independently. The relation with the Other does demand responsibility, care, selfless love, and prioritizing Other's needs. The ethical relationship with the Other starts with a face to face interaction with the Other.

The interesting fact is that “this face-to-face relationship is located on Eros, that all relations of civilization are said to refer back to the relation of Eros” (Standford 36). Plato used the term ‘Eros’ or the physical love, which is only after the fulfillment of the physical desire, in his book *Symposium* to refer to a sort of love that comes in contradiction to ‘Agape’, which is the heavenly love for God and heavens. Notwithstanding, Levinas uses the term Eros in a different way. He believes that “[I]n Eros, the ego seeks the other but finds that rather than becoming a part of himself, she remains the Other. Her alterity is irreducible and absolute: it cannot be bridged or diminished; it cannot be negated or reduced” (Chanter 32). Levinas points to the importance of erotic love and its transforming quality. He suggests that erotic love can bring pleasure and care for the Other and that it can eventually lead to Agape or love without concupiscence.

Erotic love is not without the concern for the Other or else it would merely be sexual desire. The difference between Eros and Agape, however, lies in the fact that Eros has in itself a fulfillment of pleasure and need while Agape is free of need. Thus, erotic love becomes ambiguous in this regard that it is similar to ethical love, with care and responsibility, and it is at the same time related to bodily desires and pleasure-seeking wishes. In conclusion, Levinas explains that erotic love is not merely the selfish use of the Other for one’s own satisfaction. It is accompanied by care and responsibility, but different from the ethical love that completely denies the carnal needs and pleasures. It is, in a way, a complex and complicated mixture of the two concepts that transcends both the Self and the Other and incorporates both parties at the same time.

Having the general attitude of feminism in mind, besides the ideas of Levinas regarding the Other and ethical relationship with the Other, it is assumed that the

novel, *The Feather*, could be among the representatives of the novels of nineteenth and the twentieth centuries that were written to defy the male-oriented society. The authors try to analyse one of the works that were less remarked in the literary canon of these two conflicting decades to show that even less notified writes were concerned with the issues of women and feminism. Since the novel is not a work listed in the literary canon, it is useful and necessary to bring a brief synopsis of the novel before going to the analysis of the novel itself.

3. Discussion

The Feather is written in the form of frame narrative in which Roger Dolton has turned his own life and love relationship with Mavis Cottrell into a book in order to sell it to an author and earn a living. Much of the story moves around the love relationship between Roger and Mavis. When the novel begins, the readers realize that Roger is being sentenced to three years in prison because of embezzlement about which he has chosen to remain silent. It is with proceeding in the plot that the audience realize the motives behind his action.

Roger is a middle-aged, middle-class man who is married and has a daughter and works in an insurance company. He is said to be fond of music and art in general. However, through the passage of years, he has drowned himself in every day and marital issues to the point that he has forgotten about his passion and the fact that he himself was a gospel singer once. Mavis, on the other hand, is portrayed as an independent young woman with French ancestors, who also has a magical mesmerizing voice. She has recently lost her husband and is struggling to earn a living herself alone. They meet each other on Roger's mission to go and find out the reason behind Mavis's husband's death for the insurance company. However, before knowing Mavis herself, Roger hears her voice and is stricken by her beauty.

Mavis's voice makes Roger realize all he had forgotten, which were his passion for music, passion for another woman, and love. From that time on, Roger goes back to the house several times until he confesses his love for Mavis. The couple seems to love each other and have a happy relationship. However, because of financial issues, Roger forces Mavis to become a professional singer. Consequently, to provide her with singing lessons, Roger has to steal money from his work and goes to prison for three years. During these three years, Mavis finds her voice, and the couple finally separate after being reunited again. It seems that singing departs the partners forever, as a gypsy has procrastinated in the story.

A primary reading of the novel demonstrates how the other female characters of the novel including Roger’s wife and daughter, for instance, are represented as passive characters who are only concerned with the primary needs of sustenance. Roger’s wife seems to be following the conventional role of “good wife” that includes doing house chores, taking care of her husband’s primary needs, and raising a child. The readers hear no comments, thus no objection from her even when Roger spends most of his time out of the home with his beloved. Roger’s daughter is a perfect copy of her mother, in the manner and symbolically in appearance. She is also represented in the novel passively since the audience hear no voice, objections, or comments from her.

Mavis, the only active female figure, does not seem to follow the accepted conventional female models of the time. However, since living in a male-oriented society had also influenced Matheson, it can be claimed that despite the efforts she has, she portrayed Mavis in the story as an Other. Mavis could be regarded as an Other because of her gender, foreign nationality, and her unique features and characteristics. Levinas points to the unique features of the Other that strikes the Self and make him/her aware of his own existence and essence. Similarly, Mavis is portrayed in the novel as a strikingly beautiful woman whose face and voice render her alterity besides her alien non-English nationality. Even when a single line is sung by her, the audience will be mesmerized and attracted. This unexplainable appeal is the most significant feature of the Levinasian Other that Mavis owns. The manifestations of this alluring beauty in her voice, besides her physical characteristics, first attract Roger, then an old-man living nearby, finally her trainer, and a large number of audiences.

Mavis, as the Other, is not only able to preserve her alterity but is also able to annihilate the egoism and authority of two male figures of the novel, Roger and Rizzo. Her needs do not stand in the way of her alterity but provide the grounds to represent her as an independent woman. In addition, she seems to be in control of her destiny since no one can force her to do what she does not desire. After her husband’s death, she is willing to live on her own and work instead of relying on another male figure to provide for her needs. Roger’s contemplation of her characteristics shows how he is also aware of Mavis’s independent outlook. He reflects, “Unlike what I thought she can handle her own life and matters; however, I did not want to leave her on her own. I wanted to be her guardian” (Matheson 33). Therefore, the researchers tend to accept Mavis to be characterized as the Other firstly because she is a woman in a male-oriented society, secondly because of her unique characteristics, and thirdly because of her foreign nationality. However, it can be realized how the Other illustrated in Matheson’s novel is distinguishable from the oppressed and submissive figures that were portrayed in the literary works of the time, and therefore it is close to the Other

Levinas introduces. The Other represented here is a powerful woman that obliges the male characters to follow an ethical relationship.

Having the characterizations of Mavis in mind, one can refer to Levinas's notion that the alterity of the Other should provide both the Self and the Other with the chance of getting rid of egoism and conceiving their true essence competently. Accordingly, it is clear in the novel that Roger realizes his passions and real identity after meeting Mavis. He states, "I heard a voice from behind the doors of room 19. It was so soft and sweet, like a heavenly melody, that changed something in me ... and whatever happened was because of this voice" (Matheson 17). The quote explicitly supports the claim of accepting Mavis as the Other that can bring change for even the Self. Roger long knew something was not right in his relationship with his wife, but it was only after meeting Mavis and hearing her voice that he realized he was not happy, stating that "I was unsatisfied that I had to live like a machine for a long time ... I had no love for anything. Duty had taken the place of love ... My wife was also like a machine. Sometimes we talked, sometimes she laughed. But everything was cold and without any emotions. I hated to live like this for the rest of my life" (Matheson 23). In another place, Roger again declares that "I believed that when I first knew myself, I was an adventurous man after love ... And I was sure that Mavis has awakened this instinct in me again" (Matheson 27).

Another prominent Levinasian concept that was discussed above is the notion of ethics. As explained before, Levinas proposes that the ethical relationship with the Other makes the Self responsible for the needs and demands of the Other, without the expectation that the Other does the same. This study tries to illustrate that the relationship between the couple followed an ethical relationship since prioritizing the Other's needs and desires present itself in the couple relationship. In addition, another Levinasian concept regarding the ethical relationship between Mavis and Roger is the representation of the possibility of a change of physical love to the higher stages of care and responsibility for the Other. At first, it appears that Roger falls in love with Mavis's beautiful face and her physical features. However, the physical desire shifts to care and responsibility in the end. This care and responsibility, or ethics in Levinasian philosophy, leads the female character to complete her independence and the male character to retain his passion for life.

Roger is shown to care for nothing but the development, comfort, and success of Mavis. He feels himself to be responsible for Mavis's success and improvement. At first, he tries to find her a good house and then he tries to make her a famous singer. He knows that Mavis is the reason he has outgrown the machine-like life he once lead. Now he wants to devote himself to her and this devotion is also a representation of an

ethical relationship between the Self and the Other. Accordingly, Roger states “I just wanted to improve her life. All I did was to improve her life ... She was all I had. My heart, life, love. And all I wanted in return was her love” (Matheson 167).

Accordingly, Roger does whatever he can so that Mavis's idiosyncrasies are seen and appreciated by others. Roger's efforts are evidently in line with the ethics of Levinas, in which the Other is represented as ungraspable. The absolute Other can never be truly appreciated and understood because s/he is outside the sphere of understanding. Nonetheless, it is this same Other that provides the chance for the Self to form a better understanding of himself/ herself. Roger's confession to Mavis, "only if you improve and become famous, all my dreams are fulfilled. Then I will be completely happy and fortunate. And I want all these so that I can make you happy" (Matheson 119), indicates how Roger is prioritizing the needs and desires of his beloved, not for his interest, but rather because of the mere passion and desire he bears for Mavis.

As the story moves on, it is revealed that Mavis improves her singing abilities and obtains command of her voice. Thus, being able to sing is accompanied by fame and wealth. Therefore, Mavis's singing ability becomes interpretable in two senses: first, she is trained in singing and becomes a well-known singer, and second, she finds her subjectivity and complete independence. When she becomes a famous singer, she obtains money and power and is finally able to live her life without the help of any male figure. Interestingly, however, Mavis is fully conscious of the mechanisms of the male-dominated society. She remarks many times in the novel that she will lose Roger as soon as she gains her independence, both financially and emotionally. This knowledge is represented in the novel as a gypsy's prophecy to Mavis. Mavis remarks, “she told me I will fall in love for the first time. And it will be because of this love that I will be forced to present my voice. And my performance and the presentation of my voice will lead my lover to misery” (Matheson 81). The Gypsy foretells how Mavis's voice will depart the lovers and bring misery to them to the point that “there will be no way to reunite again” (Matheson 82). And it is here that the signs of being trapped in the domains of male-dominant society show themselves.

The story is a frame narrative, described in two levels by two men, which is noticeable since the novel is written by a female author who does not give readers enough insights of the female's sentiments and thoughts while male characters' motifs and feelings are rather fully explained. The attitude of Matheson towards the main female character of the novel differs from time to time since it is believed that she is under the influence of a male-oriented society and also resistant to it at the same time. She portrays Mavis as an independent character; however, when she becomes

completely independent and free of Roger's help to continue life, the relationship between the two alters radically. Roger does not see himself fit for Mavis any longer. He does not even seem to recognize Mavis as Mrs. Jansie with beautiful expensive clothes. Only when she dresses as before, as a dependent common girl, Roger accepts to continue their relationship. When Roger sees Mavis in her concert for the first time, he ponders how "she was no longer Mavis. She was Madam Jansie, the famous European singer" (Matheson 197).

The fact is that the couple seems to get along well when the male character is providing for them both, although with difficulty. However, when Mavis becomes famous and prosperous and Roger loses his job, possessions, and power (since he stole from his company to pay for Mavis's singing lessons), he does not see himself fit for her any longer. What Matheson might be conveying to the audience, although unconsciously, is that women cannot be the provider, the major authority; they can only be consumers. That might be the reason Roger commits suicide at the end of the story since he is no longer in power and control but in need. It seems as if the male-oriented society of the time was not ready to accept a female figure to be the provider and supporter of a relationship and Matheson, being a product of the same discourse, has followed the same rule without realizing it. The novel does not end in the unity of the couple. However, as Levinas also proposes, the ethical relationship between the two leads to a better recognition of both Mavis and Roger about themselves

4. Conclusion

It is assumed that Charlotte Marry Matheson was both a product of the male-oriented society and a defiant of such a discourse. Although she tries to display a powerful female character in her novel, unconsciously from time to time, she represents her to be dependent on the male power. Moreover, other female characters in the book are depicted as completely submissive and passive. Nonetheless, it is a woman that survives in the end, and the male character, Roger, commits suicide since he cannot be equal with Mavis in wealth and social status. The researchers tend to accept Mavis as a Levinasian Other in the novel that is different from the usual oppressed women that were portrayed in the works of the same era. Mavis's alterity is kept and emphasized instead of being dissolved into the powerful male-oriented discourse of the time. This is reminiscent of the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas who emphasizes that the alterity of the Other should be maintained instead of being dissolved into the Self. Thus, the best examples of the ethical relationship between the Self and the Other desired by Levinas are also present in this novel. Roger seems to be able to sacrifice everything for the well-being of Mavis and her needs while Mavis, as the Other whose face, voice, and

alterity is not to be reduced or dissolved to the Self, changes Roger’s life and helps him move away from the monotonous life. Thus, the primary physical love of Roger towards Mavis finally ends in a better understanding of each individual about himself/herself.



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