

## A LEVINASIAN CALL FOR ASSERTING THE FEMININE

Jis Joseph Pettayil\*

### 1. Introduction

A village school teacher once asked a class of girls and boys to punctuate the following sentence: "Woman without her man is a savage." The boys in the class punctuated the sentence as follows: "Woman, without her man, is a savage." When the girls, in their turn, punctuated it, the sentence read: "Woman! Without her, man is a savage." The honest truth is that both man and woman are each a savage without the other. Both are only halves of an integrated human personality. It is neither ethically desirable nor possible to determine which of the two sexes is superior. It is a historical fact that women have been suppressed and subjected to indignities for generations. Both in the family and in the society their status has been secondary; many a time they have been treated at best as secondary human beings if not as pieces of movable property. She is the most depressed of all depressed classes. Even among the untouchables or the Negroes the wives are not treated equal.

Man condescendingly worships her as mother, loves her tenderly as his sister, adores her as affectionately as a daughter and dearly cherishes her as his wife. He may even be henpecked, although her status is nevertheless secondary when it comes to societal relations. Man and woman are made for each other as no two other beings in nature were ever created. Yet, from the time immemorial they seem to have been a mismatch. Moreover, their relationship in social life has remained more or less a vexed problem. George Elliot once remarked: "I don't deny that the women are fools, but then, they were made to match the men." It seems that even on that level they have been a mismatch. This has initiated an

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\*Jis Joseph Pettayil cmf, a research scholar specialising in the phenomenological existentialism of Levinas, holds a master's degree in philosophy from Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, and is currently on the teaching staff of Claretian Ashram, Wardha.

unending controversy, which gradually developed into what is now known as feminism.

Feminism is grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged in comparison with men, and that their oppression is in many ways illegitimate or unjustified. Aristotle's claim that women are mutilated males, together with the biblical account of the sin of Eve, gave rise to an authoritative tradition in which the weakness, irrationality and ineducability of women, the inconstancy, inability to control their emotions and lack of moral virtue, were all regularly assumed and cited as grounds for controlling them and excluding them from the public sphere. The very reason why we speak so much about feminism confirms the reality that the suppression of woman is more than a theoretical concept. Just as there are diverse images of liberation, so there are a number of feminist philosophies. One of the most prominent of them would be Emmanuel Levinas, who painstakingly worked out a philosophy of other, safeguarding the position of not only men but also women since his concern was fully and entirely the suffering Other.

The entire philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas can be summarized in a statement: "There is something more important than my life ... and that is the life of the other."<sup>1</sup> He claims that the Western philosophy is unable to offer an adequate account of the human existence because it consistently fails to recognize transcendence – the transcendence of the other person, the fact that he<sup>2</sup> is radically different from me, wholly other. The thought of Levinas is preoccupied with the brutal and almost inevitable reality of violence, and with the possibility of ethics, justice and peace.

## 2. Women: "Il y a" and "Conatus Essendi"

The thought of Levinas is built upon certain experiences. Levinas calls it the "il y a"<sup>3</sup> experience. "Il y a" is a French word, which literally means,

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<sup>1</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality" (An Interview with E. Levinas by Ainley A., Tarma Wright and P. Hughes), in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, eds., 160-180, New York: Routledge, 1988, 172.

<sup>2</sup>Levinas uses masculine pronoun to refer to the other, except when he is explicitly concerned with the feminine.

<sup>3</sup>Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans.

"there is." It is an experience of emptiness, vacuum, being just there, or lack of focus. In other words, it is an experience where you exist but not as a subject.<sup>4</sup> The impersonal, anonymous, but inextinguishable 'consummation' of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself, is "there is." The "there is," in as much as it resists a personal form, is "being in general."<sup>5</sup> Today the existence of women is typical of this horrifying experience that Levinas speaks of; in fact, she is treated as a being without being. It is from this denial of existence that the ethical subject attempts its first liberation.

In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas describes the ego in a synthetic fashion as "*conatus essendi*" and "effort of being."<sup>6</sup> Levinas observes that every being does everything it can to persist in its existence. The "there is" is only a causal or temporary fact as an evil, and it needs to be overcome, in order to be liberated. It is in this search that Levinas discovers the self-establishment of the 'I'. The amount of philosophical literature on feminism witnesses to the fact that women have a desire to "persist in existence." It is the absence of this desire that postponed, if not prevented, the entry of feminism in philosophical reflections until very recently.

### 3. Epiphany of the Face and the Epiphany of the Feminine

"The epiphany of the face *qua* face opens up humanity... The presence of the face, the infinity of the Other, is a destituteness, a presence of the third that is, of the whole of humanity which looks at us."<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the

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Richard A. Cohen, Pittsburgh: Northwestern University Press, 1998, 47-48; Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. A. Lingis, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978, 17-18, 57-64.

<sup>4</sup>Attempts to identify it more closely are necessarily paradoxical. It is the presence within absence, the sound you hear when everything is silent, Being without beings, and the fullness of what is empty. See, Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 10-11.

<sup>5</sup>Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989, 30.

<sup>6</sup>Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essences*, trans. A. Lingis, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981, 127.

<sup>7</sup>Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969, 213.

face is at once near and far, the present Other and the absent Other.<sup>8</sup> Levinas argues:

All the allusions to the ontological differences between the masculine and the feminine would appear less archaic if, instead of dividing humanity into two species [or into two genders], they would signify that the participation in the masculine and in the feminine were the attribute of every human being.<sup>9</sup>

Women have to be affirmed as subjects in their own right. The traditional identification of women with all things carnal and their consequent debasement has to be challenged. A woman is not to be considered as a property for pleasure and enjoyment. "Love has to be acknowledged as the meeting of two responsible beings where both are animated by desire. Neither is the passive recipient of the others attentions."<sup>10</sup>

In Levinas' view, the human face is not simply what it seems to be. Levinas uses the term 'face' with a very special connotation, which is often misunderstood by many. It is the expression of a separated being, of sheer transcendence. As he said, "the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of Other in me, we name here face."<sup>11</sup> "The true essence of [wo]man is presented in his [or her] face."<sup>12</sup> The face is that part of the body of other people which is most readily or often visible; it is also the most expressive part of the body. The notion of the face as expression plays an important component in Levinas' thinking. However,

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<sup>8</sup>It is for this reason that Levinas never uses Buber's category of the "I-Thou" relation but designates the I-Other relation as the "social relation" (see, Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 109), or simply as "sociality" (see, Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 26). The otherness of the Other has an essentially social extension: his alterity contains an immediate reference to all Others. It seems, then, that our "universal kinship" is neither biological nor "generic." It is not derived from some common quality or qualities, but of an ethical metaphysical structure of character. See, Burggraave, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love: Emmanuel Levinas on Justice, Peace and Human Rights*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002, 127.

<sup>9</sup>Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 60.

<sup>10</sup>Morny Joy, "Levinas: Alterity, the Feminine and Women – A Meditation," *Studies in Religion* 22, 4 (1993), 476.

<sup>11</sup>Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50.

<sup>12</sup>Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 290.

the face is not *simply* seen: "to see the face would be to make of it an intentional object of the perceiving consciousness, so reducing its absolute otherness."<sup>13</sup> The face is not the object of "experience in the sensible sense of the term, relative and egoist."<sup>14</sup>

The separatedness and otherness of the face manifests itself not only as inexorable and irreducible, but equally as "strangeness – destitution" and exceptional vulnerability.<sup>15</sup> "The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence."<sup>16</sup> Whereas the *Other* is weak, the poor, the widow, the destitute, I am rich and powerful. In short, it refers to those who are defenceless, unprotected and in need of help. When the other faces, with a glance, with a word, with a gesture, he or she comes in the poverty and nakedness of his or her face, unmasked and disarmed and empty-handed. "The face of a neighbour signifies for me an unexceptional responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract."<sup>17</sup> In facing me, the other questions me, contests me and makes demands on me. Even if his or her glance is light, the voice hardly stirs the air and the gesture refrains from touching me, his or her word is imperative. In responding to another who faces me I have already recognized the other's right to question me, have already recognized authority and sovereignty. His or her face contests my perspective, puts my interpretation into question and makes demands on me. The face is described as a summons and a judge, a commandment and an authority, a putting into question of the 'I' that is concerned with itself.

In facing, the other makes an appeal to me. I always have something to show, to answer, or to give.<sup>18</sup> In the face of the *Other* I find my imperialistic self that does violence to the Other, who questions, appeals and recalls me to my ethical responsibility. In presenting himself or herself to me with his or her glance, the other addresses me in his or her vulnerability, susceptibility and mortality. The summoning forth of the

<sup>13</sup>Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity, 46.

<sup>14</sup>Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 193.

<sup>15</sup>Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 75, 299.

<sup>16</sup>Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 86.

<sup>17</sup>Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 88.

<sup>18</sup>Alphonso Lingis, "Face to Face: A Phenomenological Meditation," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 19, 2 (June 1979), 156.

force of responsibility is coextensive with the invocation of the 'I'. For the glance of the other appeals to me in my singularity; moreover, the one who faces me singles me out, singularises my existence, and calls up an 'I'. The one who faces me requires something of me, and requires first that I answer him in the first person singular. To answer to the appeal of another is to rise up in the singularity of an existence.

In his phenomenological description of the face-to-face encounter between self and other, Levinas is careful to bring out the connections between response – or, responsiveness to the address of the other – and responsibility. The face of the suffering other reveals a delay and an "extreme urgency"<sup>19</sup> of justice. Moreover, "being called to responsibility is a disturbance, for the face disturbs us otherwise from our present situation."<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. The Other: Man or Woman?

In Levinas, the other is always vulnerable and stands in need of my exclusive attention, even to the extent of substituting myself in place of him or her. That is to say, we are invested with a kind of creaturely responsibility that we have not asked for. It remains, however, to be specified as to whether the other stands for the masculine or feminine or for both. The term other is to be understood above all as a noun. In French, this noun is usually read as designating both man and woman. In our day-to-day experiences, *the existence of the other*, *the love of the other*, *concern for the other*, etc., are evoked without the question of who or what this *other* represents being asked.

Though the analysis of the feminine<sup>21</sup> is evident in most of Levinas' major works, it is outstanding in *Time and Other*, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Levinas' failure to conceive both the woman and the child in terms of their otherness reveals how the masculine predominantly determines his notion of the Other. Its primacy

<sup>19</sup>Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 89.

<sup>20</sup>Glen J. Morrison, "Emmanuel Levinas and Christian Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 68, 1 (Spring 2003), 9.

<sup>21</sup>What Levinas is attempting to convey by using the word *feminine* is a composite of certain physical and emotional qualities that has been considered appropriate for women since time immemorial.

can be detected in two of the metaphorical figures he chooses to describe the Other: the widow and the orphan. The other, to use one of Levinas' favourite formulations, is "the stranger, the widow, the orphan to whom I am obliged."<sup>22</sup> Who is the widow? In Levinas' view the widow is the one who needs protection. Her want originates not from the frailty of a separate being; rather from the loss of her husband, who thus defines her being. "The widow is the feminine who receives her identity from the loss of the masculine, which after death as well as in life, defines who the woman is: not an absolutely other, but an other conditioned by the same, by the masculine."<sup>23</sup> It illustrates what the analysis of the role of the feminine other has already revealed: the woman is not an other; her otherness is constituted not in relation to herself, but to that possible other the masculine is. Therefore, if neither the woman nor the child can be Other in his philosophy, what can it mean when Levinas chooses to write that the Other takes the face of the widow and the orphan? There cannot be any greater contradiction in the philosophy of Levinas than one like this.

##### **5. Justice and the affirmation of the Feminine**

Again, from the perspective of justice, the question to be settled is this: "Can we prove quite generally that it is always unfair to choose a man rather than a woman for something they would both like to do, when the woman could do it better than the man?"<sup>24</sup> The idea of justice lies at the heart of moral and political philosophy. It is a necessary virtue of individuals in their interactions with others, and the principal virtue of social institutions, although not the only one. Traditionally defined by the Latin expression, "*suum cuique tribuere*" – to allocate to each his own, justice has always been closely connected to the ideas of desert and equality. Rewards and punishments are justly distributed if they go to those who deserve them. In the absence of different desert claims, however, justice demands equal treatment.

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<sup>22</sup>Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 215.

<sup>23</sup>Silvia Benso, *The Face of Things: A Different Side of Ethics*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2000, 40.

<sup>24</sup>Janet Radcliffe Richards, "Discrimination and Sexual Justice," in *Philosophy: Basic Readings*, Nigel Warburton ed., 202-214, London: Routledge, 1999, 202.

Justice is part of "face to face" and sociality, although Levinas' definition and analysis of justice is not altogether clear. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes: "Justice consists in again making possible expression, in which in non-reciprocity the person presents himself as unique. Justice is a right to speak."<sup>25</sup> In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas implies that justice arises out of the exposure to the Other in which there is a surplus of duties over rights. That is, one has a "commitment to the Other-as-other that is non-reciprocal, so one always has duties to and for the Other as Other even when one's rights are not reciprocally recognized or honoured."<sup>26</sup>

I cannot on my own behalf claim equality with my brothers [and sisters], for I am immeasurably more culpable than any of them, each of them makes an equal claim as naked face, as uninvested *Autrui*, that is to say as Other destitute of particular properties and relations, as *absolutely* naked, orphaned or widowed.<sup>27</sup>

Not only is there no incompatibility between the equality of others and my inequality with the Other who faces me. The inequality actually requires the equality. In *Otherwise than Being*, this demand is variously expressed. According to him, "responsibility calls for justice."<sup>28</sup> "If both the other and the other other, the third party, calls for responsibility, my responsibility calls for third personal justice, the institutionalised system within which competing claims are to be judged..."<sup>29</sup>

Levinas saw the foundation of justice in the fact that a third person exists who must see not only my other but also myself as person worthy of receiving what is due to us. The concept of justice, according to Levinas, is to be explained from the perspective of the Other. The only fundamental dimension for a truly ethical right<sup>30</sup> is the unconditional

<sup>25</sup>Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 298.

<sup>26</sup>Werhane, "Levinas' Ethics," 65.

<sup>27</sup>Llewelyn, *The Genealogy of Ethics*, 140.

<sup>28</sup>Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 45.

<sup>29</sup>Llewelyn, *The Genealogy of Ethics*, 140.

<sup>30</sup>As early as 1673, Poulain de la Barre argued that women and men possess an equal right to knowledge, conferred on them by nature. All humans pursue happiness; no one can achieve happiness without knowledge; so everyone needs knowledge. To ensure that people are able to pursue their proper end, nature has supplied the necessary means in the form of a right. God has endowed all humans with reason so



responsibility, which the face imposes upon the Other. Justice is the situation where the responsibility for the Other is accepted. Levinas does not define it, but he just describes it. The authentic human society is the society where a sense of justice becomes an answer to the appeal of the face. It has its basic principle in the recognition of the other as the Other. The face of the suffering other reveals a delay and an "extreme urgency"<sup>31</sup> of justice. When the dignity of the woman is questioned and she is presented as victim of discriminations of every sort, she is the suffering one looking for someone coming for her rescue. For Levinas, everything begins with the right of the other and one's infinite responsibility for the Other. The Other becomes my *confre*, fellow member of a collectivity – the one "with whom" (not "to whom," Levinas insists) one "renders justice."<sup>32</sup> "[Justice] remains justice only in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest."<sup>33</sup> Justice reminds us of our non-reciprocal responsibilities to and for others, but "justice also recognizes me as one of those to be counted. Because of justice"<sup>34</sup> I am thought of as an Other, I am allowed to speak."<sup>35</sup> In short, justice is nothing but the fulfilment of one's responsibility; it does not matter whether it concerns a male or a female.

If our present society is unfair to women, it is obviously fair that it should be changed. The need of the hour is, therefore, a cultural hygiene. We also need to take into account the uniqueness of both the sexes. It is

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that they can use it to govern their passions and attain knowledge and virtue. To deprive women of the opportunity to perfect their nature and increase their capacity for happiness is to treat them as less than human and render them "gentle, domestic brutes." It is to trample on their rights and keep them in a state of subjection which damages both them and their male captors.

<sup>31</sup>Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 89.

<sup>32</sup>Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 43.

<sup>33</sup>Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 158.

<sup>34</sup>Justice, then, does not arise from an ego, from a de-centring ideal speech situation, from a disinterested perspective behind a hypothetical veil, or merely out of community. Rather, it is the normative aspect of exposure to the Other who is neither merely an ego nor a radically situated self. Justice is not the first virtue of social institutions but the ground and normative side of sociality that is neither egocentric nor merely communitarian. See, Werhane, "Levinas' Ethics," 65.

<sup>35</sup>Werhane, "Levinas' Ethics," 65.

not possible to strictly demarcate the boundaries of man and woman. You may need a man to haul in the wood, but you do not need necessarily a man to log on to Internet. There are matters of exclusive concerns for both the sexes but a realistic suggestion would be to respect the differences and to develop a reverence for what they are. It is this sanctity of the human frame that both men and women, young and old, should imbibe. Thus alone can we attain a social order in which men and women will work together and live together as equals, who will mutually make their lives happier, better and more beautiful.

## 6. Conclusion

It is a contradiction that woman seeks protection from man and in the same breath she strives for freedom from man's dominion. It is, therefore, evident that this problem ought to be tackled by both the sexes together in a spirit of mutual fellowship. It is easy to theoretically find solutions to a problem, but it is not as easy to find a workable solution. As with any problem, the issue of gender justice too needs to be addressed, as we live in a civilization that is so advanced in all other aspects. What appears to be a possible solution is to undertake a spiritual pilgrimage of the human spirit in a spirit of dedication by men and women who believe in the necessity of the liberation and the equal treatment of woman. This pilgrimage implies the advance of man towards woman and the advance of woman towards man. It is a pilgrimage not for domination or gratification, but a pilgrimage in a spirit of reciprocal fraternal affection which will be followed by a new era of human evolution as certainly as dawn follows dusk. What is evident from the analysis is the fact that Levinas is not arguing for either justice or injustice based on gender, but for responsibility. "We are all responsible for all for all men before all and I more than all the others."<sup>36</sup> If one, therefore, is responsible, there is no possibility of the question of injustice arising, be it on the basis of one's gender or genesis.

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<sup>36</sup>Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 101.