The Relationship between History and Ethics in Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*

Maryam Sedaghat (Corresponding author)

English Department, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Isfahan University

Hezar Jarib Street,Isfahan, Iran

E-mail: mary_white203@yahoo.com

Abstract

The relationship between history and ethics may seem irrelevant at first; however, these two have been related during the long history of war, violence and mass killing. The need of history to ethics is for saving itself from all the violence and terror. Emmanuel Levinas as a philosopher has tried to define ethics in a way that suits the terrible historical condition of humanity in the twentieth century. In his view, ethics is the infinite responsibility towards other human beings. He defines 'being' in relation to the 'other' who may be a complete stranger. In this definition a person bears complete responsibility toward the other and should answer the other's call for help. In Ian McEwan's novel *Black Dogs* the protagonist is exposed to historical legacies of violence, and develops an ethical consciousness until the end of the novel. Responsibility seems to be a good answer to historical mass killing and violence that is dominant in the world.

Keywords: Ethics, History, Violence, Emmanuel Levinas, *Black Dogs*

1. Introduction

Although Plato as one of the first critics of literature had focused on morality and ethics, many recent art movements and approaches neglected ethics or have counted it as irrelevant. Since late eighteenth century the aesthetics and ethics separated, because formalism did not need ethics to analyze the literary works. However, the inescapability of ethical concerns, no matter how 20th-century critics tried to push it away from criticism, became more popular in the contemporary literature. Return to ethics and ethical criticism which began in 1980s and 1990s has been continued to the contemporary time. Although many poststructuralist critics tried to distance themselves from any ethical or moral perspective, there is a new desire for ethical criticism. The importance of ethics reveals itself when the theme of the novel becomes a reality in which we live, an insight that helps us understand the moral world and moral decisions we have to take in our daily lives. Literature and especially novel gives the reader the opportunity of understanding the characters' motivations and thoughts and thus instigate the sympathetic feelings toward them, besides novel is a good genre which helps the reader to explore the humanitarian tenets and ethical issues.

Modernism was the age of the death ethics by aesthetics. As Marshal W. Gregory suggests, by the end of 19th century, ethical criticism was about to be pushed by many intellectual and societal forces and it continued to the 20th century in which the new ideas across Europe and America swept ethical criticism away. In academic and professional level, ethical criticism was denunciated and rejected. In the 20th century New Criticism, modernism and postmodernism showed a lack of concern with ethical criticism. Postmodernism has not rejected ethical criticism as only a literary approach, but rejects ethics as an irrelevant issue in a complicated technological world. However, in the 21st century ethical criticism seems to have revived. Marshal W. Gregory has suggested that, the reason for this revival might be skepticism towards postmodernist tenets and the political and social events which made us aware of the need to ethics both as a social discourse and a literary approach.

The discussion about ethics goes back to the fact that there are two different poles in human nature, which act exactly the opposite of each other. The first one is man's restless desire for power after power that ceaseth onley in Death (Leviathan 161) and can never reach a complete satisfaction and wants more and more. The novel depicts this notion in the metaphor of black dogs which bring terror upon June. However, the other side of human nature is a loving, caring and responsible side which makes human being care for each other and enjoy living with each other. The first side creates violence, bloodshed and war and the second one creates altruism, sacrifice and love among human beings. In *Black Dogs* both of these sides are introduced. It depicts the violence and bloodshed in the twentieth century and seeks a remedy for it, which turns out to be Levinas's infinite responsibility.

Ian McEwan is a contemporary British writer whose works have been criticized widely for their unique style and versatile themes. He writes both novel and short stories and his works differ in form and subject. His first novels are about the workings of the inner self, later; he took interest in the world of politics and social action. kiernan Ryan summarizes "the received wisdom" about McEwan's work as it was in 1994. As he states,

McEwan started out the seventies as a writer obsessed with the perverse, the grotesque, the macabre. The secret of his appeal lay in his stylish morbidity, in the elegant detachment with which he chronicled acts of sexual abuse, sadistic torment and pure insanity. But towards the close of the decade his writing underwent a marked evolution as a result of his increasing involvement with feminism and the peace movement […] the claustrophobic menace of the stories and his first two novels gave way in the eighties to a more mature engagement with the wider world of history and society. The clammy feel of impending evil which fouled the atmosphere of his early fiction was dispelled by an emerging apprehension of the power of love and the possibility of redemption. (qtd. in Malcolm 4)

2. The New Concept of Ethics

Since his "ethical turn" in the 1980s (as it is suggested by Marshal W. Gregory), McEwan's fiction has been most acute in its examination of elemental ethics in its depictions of face-to-face encounters. There are moments in his novel that his individual characters stand against one another at crucial points of decision during which they must choose between their own comfortable situation and selfish desires, and benevolent action towards the other. He lets his characters encounter the other and take moral decisions.

Head singles McEwan out as "the most significant of a number of writers […] who have resuscitated the link between morality and the novel for a whole generation, in ways that befit the historical pressures of their time" (qtd. in Klausnitzer 62). McEwan has often asserted that writing is "showing the possibility of what it is like to be someone else".

Ethics is mainly about the principles that help human beings live in a peaceful society and respect each other's rights. However, Levinas's philosophy defines ethics differently. Levinas is a Jewish philosopher who defines ethics differently from some abstract principles. As Desmond Manderson states:

> Emmanuel Levinas was a survivor of Holocaust, to whose victims his work was dedicated. He began to think in the context and the wake of great trauma and violence. And his purpose is this: to explain it, and explain above all why the suffering of others matters to us. Only in a world of infinite responsibility would future oppression prove inconceivable. And it was to this end that Levinas dedicated his own fortuitous survival. Levinas is therefore not arguing that we ought to think more about ethics, or that we ought to care more about others. (4)

The core issue of Levinas's philosophy is about the situation of the human being in everyday life. As Simon Critchley maintains, "Levinas claims that Dasein's understanding of Being presupposes an ethical relation with the other human being, that being to whom I speak and to whom I am obliged before being comprehended. Fundamental ontology is fundamentally ethical" (10).

So Levinas's work is a response to the horror, violence and unethical deeds that human being did to each other in this century. Levinas's definition of morality is understood primarily as the relationship of one's being with alterity. His philosophy is about how the self meets the Other. He does not define ethics as a personal matter or abstract principles; rather ethics is defined in our relationship with the other human beings. As Manderson suggests Levinas's central meditation is that ethics is a personal responsibility to another, and this responsibility is both involuntary and singular. Morality is our response to Other, and because of this definition of ethics makes it a unique response to Other cannot be reduced to some standard instances and norms applicable to the whole society. " A responsibility for my neighbor, for the other man, for the stranger or sojourner, to which nothing in the rigorously ontological order binds me, nothing in the order of the thing, of the something, of number or causality"(qtd. in Altez 64).

Also Levinas introduces the word 'Exteriority' to refer to the region beyond the horizon of self. The other subject exists in the exterior. "The "I" to which these things happen is therefore not captain of its own identity. The other is already in me, making me responsible with his vulnerability, dragging me out of myself" (Manderson 6). Levinas maintains that the appearance of the otherness of the other is revealed in a 'face to face' relationship; the face to face situation has ethical dimension because responsibility is born in this situation. The other comes from the other side of existence, from out of nowhere and he/she intrudes upon our being, it interrupts our sense of possessing the world. The mere act of looking the other in face brings responsibility and difficult task. However, his idea of responsibility is different from other similar ideas in that in his view. Responsibility in this sense is not a rational predictable act, which has been learned and internalized beforehand, but on the contrary is unpredictable and happens to us without our conscious will, because it is involuntary and spontaneous; it exceeds our expectation and our decision. It is involuntary and spontaneous, something that happens and thus it comes from the other to me. Manderson elaborates more,

> Responsibility is not a matter of a meeting of minds, then, not a question of social contract; rather, it emerges precisely as something which comes from the other to me, as a way of putting me in question; as a shock. It is felt directly and without any social learned principles. One is not a free and spontaneous being. Our being is called to account, prior to our freedom of choice, so one cannot choose to accept or reject this call for help. It comes to us asymmetrically and involuntarily. (5)

The immediacy of the call can break all laws, rules, codes, rituals, conventions and social roles and all kinds of civil order, because it goes beyond our conscious will. The otherness of the other manifests itself as something extraordinary. The question is: what happens in this crucial moment?

It is the surprise and inequality we experience at that moment – our capacity and their incapacity. When one sees 'the face' of the other and sees the calling for help, from this encounter of faces a sense of responsibility emerges. The idea of face is very important in this calling. So, as it is obvious Levinas does not regard language or actual calling for help as a criterion. The relationship of self and the other is based on our perception of the face. Language, logic and rules are dismissed as elements important in our sense of responsibility.

> Only that before we speak about the face, 'the face speaks' (TI 66). This simple truth changes the whole situation. Platonists may evoke the conversion (periagoogoe) of the soul's eyes, mentioned in Plato's Republic, and Heideggerians may be tempted to speak of a turning (Kehre). But what is decisive for Levinas is neither a change of our own attitude, nor a shift in the history of Being, but my being interpellated by the other. We start far off, subdued by the forces of gravity fields whose centre lies outside us (TI 183). (Waldenfels 67)

According to Waldenfels, the process of the encounter is like this: "Totalization is rejected by the individual. First the 'self' separates itself from totality by retiring to interiority which is a self-sphere where everyone is at home. Then the self receives the other from an exteriority. In this process the idea of face is very important here. In the encounter with other (other's face) one's "totality breaks in pieces" (66). Self is initially enclosed in its world. Subsequently this self relates to the world just for the purpose of answering the self's needs. The relationship of the self and the other is not symmetrical and reciprocal. The other is always greater than I, and my responsibility cannot be transferred to anyone else.

As Costas Douzinas elaborates:

> The other comes first. He or she is the condition of existence of language, of self, and of the law. In the philosophy of alterity, the other can never be reduced to the self or the different to the same. The demand of the other that obliges me is the "essence" of the ethics of alterity. But this "essence" is based on the nonessence of the other, who cannot be turned into the instance of a concept, the application of a law, or the particularization of the universal ego. As the face of the other turns on me, he or she becomes my neighbor, but not the neighbor of the neighbor principle in law. As absolute difference and otherness, my neighbor is also the most strange and foreign. The appeal of the other is direct, concrete, and personal. (212)

This responsibility extends to and includes responsibility for the evil perpetrated against me. In fact, the idea of infinite describes a relation with the other based on height, inequality, and asymmetry; in other words, the other's presence comes from the height, transcendent to the I that dominates it and calls it to his/her obligation and responsibility. The self is called to response infinitely by the other. As Paul Simmons explains, "Just like desire, the more I respond to the other, the more I'm responsible. Responsibility is so extreme that the ego is responsible for the others' responsibility" (4). The face to face transactions cannot be separated from politics and history. The line between morality and politics, because it is relative, is constantly and necessarily crossed. As Levinas maintains,

> Relationship with the future, the presence of the future in the present, seems all the same accomplished in the face-to-face with the Other. The situation of the face-to-face would be the very accomplishment of time; the encroachment of the present on the future is not the feat of the subject alone, but the intersubjective relationship. The condition of time lies in the relationship between humans or in history (qtd. in Head 45)

3. *Black Dogs* and the New Concept of Ethics

In McEwan's view, the presence of ethics in daily actions is what makes ethics in history, that is, ethics can change the course of history by preventing violence and connecting human beings through the means of the responsibility they bear for each other. *Black Dogs* is about encounters and it explores the deep transformation and influence that encounters can bring. The historical setting of the novel brings the past encounters and focus on the issue of the relationship between self with other.

It seems that McEwan's intention has been to relate history to ethics in his unique way because in this novel, one's participation in history is done by daily ethical reactions and decisions that the individuals make in the encounter with each other. So, one's participation in history is not based on the grand political and social actions one does; rather history is on the right track if taking responsibility in encounter with 'the other' becomes a priority for the citizens. The twentieth century history has proved that rationality could not solve the problems of humanity. Fascism was a child of rationality. The savagery and violence done to human beings in this century were because of the lack of responsibility and affection for fellow human beings. This century's events proved that man can do anything to the other if he denies

his role in saving and helping her/him. What man needed was a system of logical ideas to justify these violent actions. Rationality leads to justification of violence. As Levinas says, "For an ethical sensibility – confirming itself, in the inhumanity of our time, against this inhumanity – the justification of the neighbor's pain is certainly the source of all immorality" (Davis 171). What can stop violence, terrorism and genocide then? The answer is Levinas's infinite responsibility towards the other. This would stop history from becoming bloody and violent.

Black Dogs is a novel by Ian McEwan which has collected different themes and ideas in the form of a family struggle. The book has been praised for its formal and thematic subtleties. The story is about Jeremy, a young man who attempts to write a family memoir of his parents in law, June and Bernard, who have been separated since a strange event that has happened to June. There is a back and forth in time and narration of different events in this novel and there are many allusions to historical events. From the beginning of the novel violence has been focused both in domestic and historical sense. Jeremy, the protagonist of *Black Dogs*, is constantly exposed to historical events of the past and the present. The context of the novel is filled with domestic, social and historical violence. The idea of violence has been depicted in the novel very neatly. In this novel everything, work, play, travel and even falling in love are all played out against a background of repression and violence. Muller-Wood maintains "that the violence symbolized by the dogs is not a foreign presence, but some inherent human trait; our potentially bestial nature is signaled in this climactic scene by the use of a phrase commonly used to silence an enraged pet" (10): "Perhaps June would have said that what I really had to confront was within me, since at the very end I was restrained, brought to heel, by words usually spoken to dogs: Ça suffi t!" (*Black Dogs* 124).

In a larger context history is shown as extremely violent. The violence which is depicted in the metaphor of black dogs is the violence and animosity hidden in human nature which caused all those brutal historical events like World War II and its horrors created by man in the form of concentration camps which is alluded to in the novel. In fact, innate violence and aggression cause external destruction and seems war, brutality and murder is external manifestation of man's innate evil. The root of evil and aggression is in man's nature, according to Hobbsian opinion about the nature of human life as nasty, brutish and short because of his primal thirst for blood and his selfish nature. The novel depicts the conflicts and wars between states, nations and in general human beings. As Altez suggests, Levinas describes war as a form of annihilation that destroys not just the Other but also sameness. This theme is elaborated when the protagonist, Jeremy is exposed to different manifestations of violence. In his childhood he witnesses the violent actions exerted over his sister. Violence is there in both individual and state level: in individual level it is depicted in the form of domestic violence. Jeremy's brother in law is an extremely violent man who disturbs their domestic peace from time to time 'Harper had a gift for violence. there were times when I looked at my sister's red cheek or swollen lip and thought of obscure manly codes which required me to challenge my brother- in-law and defend her honor" (*Black Dogs* 16).

Later in his adulthood he observes historical violence during his visits of Majdanek. In this trip, he becomes able to observe the violence and its manifestation in the form of war, concentration camps and oppression. Jeremy reflects on historical catastrophes and the victims of these catastrophes , "I saw a hobnail boot beside a baby shoe whose nursery lamb still showed through the dust. Life turned to tat. The extravagant numerical scale, the easy-to-say numbers – tens and hundreds of thousands, millions –denied the imagination its proper sympathies" (*Black Dogs* 110). With regarding the evil actions done in the twentieth century we condemn the perpetrators and pity the victims. We usually do not condemn the bystanders- those who allowed such actions to happen and kept silent and indifferent for what happened. However, the novel condemns the silence and the indifference which made a violent and horrendous historical era in which the concentration camps are legacies and counts this indifference exactly like perpetration of the crime itself. Jeremy's attempt to find the truth leads him to search the historical events and facts. He visits Majdanak and observes past suffering of the victims of history. When Jeremy is visiting the concentration camps as a bystander or visitor, he feels like a perpetrator. His inaction is compared to the violent actions done by the Nazis.

> As we walked on, my emotions died. There was nothing we could do or help. There was no one to feed or free. We were strolling like tourists. Either you came here and despaired, or you put hands deeper into your pockets and gripped your warm loose change and found you had taken one step closer to the dreamers of the nightmare. This was our inevitable shame, our share in the misery. We were on the other side, we walked here freely like the commandant once did, or his political master, poking into this or that, knowing the way out, in the full certainty of our next meal. (*Black Dogs* 111)

The idea is that we must have a sense of responsibility not only for the alive but also for those who have been suppressed, subjected, exploited and destroyed in history. Remembrance is a call for justice for those who could not defend themselves. The scene implies that being a mere bystander equals being the murderer who caused all these miserable deaths, torture and violence. Witnessing the past historical violence which once happened without our participation awakens a sense of responsibility and enables the development of a personal moral stance. Responsibility is not only for a single Other but for every Other that exists. It is a kind of communal responsibility which makes us help and care for other human beings instead of a community. Lack of communal responsibility causes deaths of millions and before we know we are in a middle of a world war, in which the Others who we bear responsibility for become our enemy.

There is a development of Jeremy's moral stance in the novel. In his presence in Berlin in the encounter with Berlin skinheads with the flag waver he refuses to take action against their violent attitude towards this flag waver. He simply

justifies his inaction by degrading the flag waver. "To be out here doing this on the day of communism's final disgrace showed either a martyr's zeal or an unfathomable masochistic urge to be beaten up in public" (*Black Dogs* 96). So he uses his rationality to keeps himself and Bernard away from trouble or getting hurt. He refuses personal involvement in defending a victim of the violence which is done by new Nazis. But as he develops through the novel, by engaging himself in personal history of his in-laws and visiting the evidences of violent actions done by men in history, and by trying to understand the causes and mechanisms of violence from different multiple perspectives, gradually he becomes sympathetic with the oppressed.

He gains a moral perspective which he lacked in Berlin. Ethics as feeling responsible and taking action for defending the sufferer and victim is awaken in him at the end of the novel. The climax of the novel is in his reaction to a man's violence towards his son. This transformation of indifference to responsibility is what McEwan suggests as a remedy for historical violence. If history is the encounter of the oppressors and sufferers, then our reaction to the Other's call for help is determining in shaping history. The sufferer in history is the "other" whose call for help has been unanswered by the other men. If we take action when we are called to help historical brutalities of which the holocaust and concentration camps are good examples will not happen again. 'Moral disengagement' is as dangerous as perpetration of violence. At the end of the novel when he is sitting in a restaurant, a couple and their little boy arrive at the restaurant. The little boy is punished, hit and oppressed by his parents in the most humiliating way. Jeremy cannot stand this oppression against a lonely, defenseless child. This scene is described as thus

> My own hand shook as I poured Mme Auriac's thin sharp wine. I emptied my glass in gulps. I felt a constriction about my throat. That the boy was not even permitted to cry seemed to me even more terrible than the blow that had knocked him to floor. It was his loneliness that gripped me. I remembered my own after my parents died how incommunicable the despair was. (*Black Dogs* 128)

Here is the first scene in the novel that misery and suffering of somebody else, an 'other' instigates the sympathy of Jeremy. For the first time in the novel, he can identify himself with the other and feel the depth of someone's loneliness and despair. The boy's crying seems a kind of call for help: "for the boy's misery was simply the condition of the world. Who could possibly help him? I looked around" (*Black Dogs* 128).

As Levinas maintains, when someone is called for help he would know it without exchanging words. Jeremy knows that he is singled out for helping the helpless child. He compares the situation of this little boy to the condition of the world in which the oppressors abuse their helpless victims and the people are indifferent to this oppression. Although there are other people in the scene, no one really wants to take action and help the little child. The only person who sympathizes with the child is Jeremy. When Levinas argues about the situation of sympathizing with the other he refers to it as unconscious and involuntary, and as it was mentioned before, responsibility exceeds our expectations and our decisions. In other words, enigmatic Other has the power to shake the protagonist's indifferent subjectivity. It is 'the experience of shock' that makes the protagonist stands up before he knows, so is Jeremy's reaction towards the scene: "I had made no decision to stand, but I was on my feet. For an instant I met the gaze of the woman from Paris" (*Black Dogs* 130). So Jeremy does not decide to react to the brutality of a man towards a helpless other; he acts involuntarily. He acts against the social rules which regard the situation as a private issue of a family and suggest that he should not involve himself in this personal matter. However, his will and rationality do not interfere in his reaction, because his response to the call for help is beyond his will and decision. Jeremy is called to help the helpless and he responds to it. The moment seems as grand as a historical moment in a way that he compares his reaction to the participation in a historical moment, "Standing there, I had a brief ennobling sense of myself as one of those obscure French citizens who blossom from nowhere at a transforming moment in their nation's history to improvise the words that history will engrave in stone" (*Black Dogs*130). So our responsibility towards the helpless others can be as important as a monumental history-making decision we make. History is not ended it is present and our responsibility towards the helpless others in the world may compensate for the horrors and violence that were done in the twentieth century. The way for saving history from violence and brutality is feeling responsible for the other. Love and care towards the other redeems the situation. All the rational ways for redeeming history have failed and the only way is to love and care. This is also what Levinas believed in, love for the other human being apart from their sex, ethnicity, race and status is what saves our civilization.

> He demands for an increase of "sociality in love" – to find human peace and proximity more than the simple unity of the diverse. Levinas had always believed that a synthesis is possible in relationships such that the Self wages with Other[s] and at the same time recognize the uniqueness of each. As he elaborates 'It is the moment of justice. The love of one's fellowman, and his original right, as unique and incomparable, for which I am answerable, tend of their own accord to make appeal to Reason capable of comparing incomparables, a wisdom of love.'(qtd. in Altez 68)

And as Jeremy says "I am uncertain whether our civilization at the turn of millennium is cursed by too much or too little belief, whether people like Bernard and June cause the trouble, or people like me. But I would be false to my own experience if I did not declare my belief in the possibility of love transforming and redeeming a life" (*Black Dogs* 20).

4. Conclusion

The whole novel can be read as a depiction of the idea about saving humanity in the course of history. According to June's idea, the root of evil is in human nature which causes him/her to destroy people to gain power (as Fascism did) and the solution for salvage of human beings from these monstrous and bloody fate is love and responsibility towards other human beings, apart from their race, status and nationality. Rational means of communication seem to be powerless in confrontation with the growing violence and inhumanity. The bloody era in which ethnicity, race and nationalism, three ways of celebrating 'self' and humiliating 'other' which led to indescribable violent events and deprived humanity of the peaceful social and brotherhood. The peace wished for by everyone is not achieved unless one accepts the existence of the Other as a transcendent being for whom he/ she bears unlimited responsibility. Only with this view brotherhood will dominate.

References

McEwan, Ian. *Black Dogs*. London: Vintage, 1998.

Secondary Sources

Altez.R, Fleurdeliz. "Banal and Implied Forms of Violence in Levinas' Phenomenological Ethics". Kritike,1.1.(June 2007): 52-70

Critchley, Simon. *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, Ed. Simon Critchley et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Douzinas, Costas. "Law and Justice in Postmodernity", The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism. Ed. Steven Connor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2004):196-223

Gregory, Marshall. "Redefining Ethical Criticism: The Old VS. The New".Gregory Journal of Literary Theory. 2.4.

(2010)

Hobbes, Thomas, and C. B. Macpherson. *Leviathan*. London: Penguin, 1988. Print.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *The Levinas Reader*, Ed. Sean Hand. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

Malcolm, David. *Understanding McEwan*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina's Press, 2002.

Manderson, Desmond. *Proximity , Levinas and the Soul of Law*. McGill-Queens: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006.

Muller-Wood , Anja. "Bring The Past To Heel: History, Identity and Violence in Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*". Literature and History.16.2 (September 2007): 43-56

Waldenfels, Bernhard. "Levinas and the Face of the Other*". The Cambridge Companion to Levinas.* ed. Simon Critchley et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.