

# An Analysis of the Female Characters in *The Nightingale* From the Perspective of Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics: From the Self to Other

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Other is important in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics concerning language understanding. Self is always on the way to other, which is path of self-understanding or self-knowledge. From self to other is fundamental in any understanding. The female characters of *The Nightingale* undergo a process of ethical encounters and come to understanding eventually against the background of war.

*Keywords:* female characters, Gadamer, philosophical hermeneutics, self, other

## Introduction

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is taken as the theoretical framework for analyzing female characters in Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale*. Other is important in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics concerning language understanding. Self is always on the way to other, which is path of self-understanding or self-knowledge (Gadamer & Dutt, 2018). Gadamer's concepts of prejudice, fusion of horizons and alterity are also used in this analysis to analyze the female characters in the novel, i.e., the two sisters, Isabelle and Vianne, and their conflicts with their father. There are two conflicts in this novel in particular: One is between Isabelle and Vianne, and another one is the conflict between Isabelle and her father. The wartime journey ultimately cured the three family members, and at the end of the novel, the heroine, Isabelle came to understand her father and from self to other come to a kind of understanding with her father and her sister, Vianne in spite of prejudice, horizon collision, and existential synthesis. Prejudice acts as the foundation of understanding (Gadamer, 2013, p. 284). Prejudice makes the two sisters' initial cognitive confinement. Isabelle's rebellious individualism and Vianne's domestic self-pride are "the givenness of our hermeneutic situation", where inherited cultural identity and beliefs predetermine cognitive boundaries (Gadamer, 2013, p. 286). The Nazi occupation triggers hermeneutic transformations through intersubjective encounters, i.e., Isabelle's engagement with Allied pilots and Vianne's forced cohabitation with German officer Beck (Hannah, 2015, p. 39). These dialogic confrontations make "understanding occurs through horizon fusion" possible, dismantling monological

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interpretations of selfhood (Gadamer, 2013, p. 289). The study's tripartite structure showcases the protagonists' hermeneutic maturation. First, prejudice is presented through basement confrontations and kitchen rituals. Second, horizon collisions are shown. Third, through Gadamer's lens, the novel emerges as a hermeneutic phenomenology of wartime consciousness; feminist awakenings came to reveal war's catalytic role in ethical transcendence.

### **Prejudice and the Initial Self**

Gadamer's concept of prejudice is different from the common sense the most people have. In Gadamer's view, prejudice is something that everybody lives with and it is part of human existence. Nobody could live without prejudice. And prejudice should not be prejudiced, since what is commonly accepted is that prejudice is something bad or negative and should be avoided when acting towards a thing or a person. And "If we want to do justice to man's finite, historical mode of being, it is necessary to fundamentally rehabilitate the concept of prejudice and acknowledge the fact that there are legitimate prejudices" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 311). According to Gadamer, prejudice is something we need to know this world and exist in this world. However, prejudice does exist in people's daily life and arouse conflicts among people readily. This is what happens in the novel of *The Nightingale*. The initial self of the characters in the novel naturally brings about different kinds of conflicts in their life.

Vianne, the elder sister, is a married schoolteacher who carefully raises her eight-year-old daughter, Sophie, at home in Carriveau. Before the onslaught of invaders, Vianne was a rather traditional housewife who revolved around kitchen, kids, and husband. She was restricted by the social norm of women being dignified and obedient which laid the foundation of her basic values and understanding of the world. In her prejudice, the pole of her world was only the small family.

By striking contrast, Isabelle, on the other hand, is young, rebellious, and full of passion. Before the breakout of the war, Isabelle was a rebellious girl who dropped out school several times and vagabonded in Paris. In her prejudice, after the death of her mother, her sister's home was too small to accommodate her and her father indulged in alcohol, leaving her only a back view and indifference. She thought she was loved and needed by nobody. The surroundings' indifference shaped her bravery and rebellion. The big difference in characters, individual prejudice, and lack of dialogues apparently led to a giant gap between the two sisters and Isabelle and their father. The love between each other disguised as conflicts and the collisions of prejudice.

"In love, we find who we want to be; in war, we find who we are" (Hannah, 2015, p. 569). The war served as a catalyst for the thick ice between the two sisters and Isabelle and their father to melt. They both mirrored each other in the shadow of their own, showcasing identity and alterity by dialogic encounters in wartime.

### **Through Alterity From Self to Other: Dialogic Encounters in Wartime**

"Through dialogic encounters, we became ourselves; through the openness to alterity" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 318), we reach broader truth. Gadamer views dialogue as a fundamental human activity that enables individuals to transcend their limited perspectives and engage with the other. In Gadamer's opinion, all understanding is shaped by prejudices, which are preconceptions and assumptions we bring to encounter. However, for genuine dialogic encounters to occur, individuals must be willing to challenge and revise their fixed prejudices through engagement with the other. Dialogic encounters expose us to perspectives that question our preconceptions. Both participants in the dialogue are transformed by the encounter, as each brings their own horizon of understanding

to the conversation. The concept of fusion of horizons is central to Gadamer's idea of dialogic encounters. In dialogue, different horizons and alterity come into contact, leading to a fusion that creates a new, broader understanding.

After the war breaks out, Vianne's husband, Antoine, is conscripted and unfortunately becomes a prisoner of war. Vianne faces the hardships of life under German occupation alone, with food rationing shortages, job losses, and dwindling savings. To survive, she is forced to accommodate German Wehrmacht and officers in her home. The first officer to stay, Wolfgang Beck. At first, Vianne was rather unwilling to stay with the German guy who represented the control and force of invaders. With their relationship developing closer, Vienne noticed the usual homesickness and humanity of the young officer. The soft side and politeness of Beck became the leverage to pry open Vianne's ingrained perception. "All reading involves application. He belongs to the text" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 318). The intersubjective engagement initiated the erosion of monological interpretations, predicting her subsequent resistance activities. Vianne gradually came to realize the complexity of humanity and enemy as well as the sacrifice and patriotism of front-line or underground fighters. Her previous stereotype of women revolving around family, kids, and husband began to shake and collapse. Unluckily, the later officer, Von Richter, is cruel and tyrannical, subjecting Vianne to physical and sexual abuse. The cruelty and abuse of the tyrant deepened Vienne's determination to step out of the original indifference to collective benefits and shoulder the obligation to save her country. Vianne began to help hide Jews and deliver important information secretly. The high-wall of self-protection she built over past years began to crack. She came to realize the universal love as a French citizen even as a human pursuing love and peace.

After being expelled from a finishing school, Isabelle walks from Paris to Carriveau, where she meets the young resistance fighter Gaëtan Dubois along the way. Subsequently, Isabelle resolutely joins the French Resistance, initially responsible for distributing anti-Nazi propaganda materials. Later, she devises a plan to help downed Allied pilots escape to the British Embassy in neutral Spain, and with the support of other resistance members, this becomes her main task during the war, earning her the codename "Nightingale". Having witnessed the sacrifice and bravery of front-line fighters, Isabelle realized her duty to protect, to rebel, and to fight. She transformed her crude rebellion into intense patriotism for her motherland and the hatred of invaders. Her actions are hotly pursued by the Nazis, and she is eventually captured. The Nazis were catching "Nightingale", but they were not convinced that a girl like Isabelle could finish such tasks Nightingale did. At the same time, Isabelle's father was captured as well who Isabelle once thought did not love her. After the death of Isabelle's mother, her father indulged in alcohol and showed nothing but seemingly indifference to Isabelle. However, much to Isabelle's surprise, her father is an underground fighter as well who disguised himself as a traitor. To protect Isabelle as well as the great cause, her father pretended to be Nightingale and was sentenced to death by the evil Nazis. Up to now, Isabelle had come to realize her father's voiceless love and protection as well as his passion and sacrifice. Although Nightingale was protected, Isabelle did not dodge the cruel punishment. She was sent to the concentration camp. There, she endures inhumane torture but tenaciously survives until the end of the war. She reunites with Vianne and has a brief reunion with Gaëtan before dying of typhus and pneumonia contracted in the concentration camp. At the end of her life, after going through so many hardships and obstacles, she finally came to understand what love is and the mighty power of genuine love.

The upheaval shook the original model of life, tore apart the disguising masks wore by two sisters and their father, and opened the door to genuine dialogic encounters. They gradually slowly began to walk towards each other, understand each other, and finally realize their mutual love as well as the universal love of human beings, that is,

ethical encounters and understanding could be achieved among the three family members. The power of love was strong enough to reshape a person's souls and alter the fixed stereotype and prejudices. After witnessing and experiencing alterity, they transformed from a simple self to a more sophisticated people infused with morality, humanity, responsibility, resilience, maturity, and love and in the end managed to reach hermeneutic maturation.

### **Hermeneutic Maturation Through Alterity**

Hermeneutic maturation, as conceptualized by Gadamer, is a dynamic and transformative process that deepens our understanding through dialogue, critical reflection, and the fusion of horizons. It involves moving beyond our initial prejudices, engaging with the perspectives of others, and continually expanding our horizon of understanding. Ultimately, hermeneutic maturation fosters empathy, ethical growth, and a richer, more nuanced understanding of human experience.

Isabelle's transformation reached the apex in resistance transcending personal liberation. Isabelle devoted herself wholeheartedly to the rescue operations. She no longer pursued freedom in isolation but integrated it with saving the lives of others and defending the dignity of her country. During the process of escorting the pilots and delivering intelligence, she fought side by side with people from different backgrounds, understanding the helplessness and perseverance behind the individual battles of her comrades. Coordinating escape routes with Resistance networks, she combined individual agency with collective struggle. The aphorism "Tante Isabelle says it's better to be bold than meek" (Hannah, 2015, p. 569) metaphorizes her internalization of dialogic wisdom—transforming impulsive rebellion into strategic insurgency. Her sacrifice ultimately signifies Gadamer's fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) (Gadamer, 2013, p. 239), where personal and national liberation horizons coalesce.

Vianne's hermeneutic journey progressed from domestic confinement to ethical universalism. Sheltering Jewish children and resistance operatives, she reconfigured maternal care as political practice: "Mothers don't have the luxury of falling apart" (Hannah, 2015, p. 349) evolves from familial responsibility to collective obligation. Her reconciliation with Beck's human complexity embodies Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 350), transcending wartime simple confrontation through ethical engagement.

At the end of the story, it is revealed that the elderly narrator is Vianne. She receives an invitation to attend an event in Paris commemorating her sister, the "Nightingale", and her son, Julien, accompanies her. Julien has previously been ignorant of his family's experiences during the war and the identity of his biological father. After the event, Vianne reunites with Ari and finally reconciles with the memories of the war. Through the stories of the two sisters, Kristin Hannah vividly depicts the cruelty of war and also extols the tenacity, courage, and sacrifice of women in difficult situations, exploring profound themes, such as family, love, morality, and courage, allowing readers to feel the radiance of humanity shining through the haze of war.

Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, two sisters were reborn and reshaped a new self that was inclusive and brave on the ruins of war, showing the radiance of human nature. Through dialogic encounters driven by the upheaval and most importantly their potential mutual love, they experienced alterity, finally transcended previous prejudices, and reached hermeneutic maturation.

### **Conclusion**

Through Gadamerian lens, *The Nightingale* articulates a hermeneutic phenomenology of wartime consciousness. The protagonists' odyssey from prejudice-bound selves to ethically engaged historical agents

illuminates humanity's capacity for epistemic transcendence through dialogic encounter. This narrative constitutes a profound meditation on war's paradoxical role in fostering intersubjective understanding and ethical becoming. It presents a brilliant chapter for the world, interwoven with the complex bonds of human nature, war, and society.

When our historical consciousness transposes itself into historical horizons, this does not entail passing into alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own; instead, they together constitute the one great horizon that moves from within and that, beyond the frontiers of the present, embraces the historical horizon. (Gadamer, 2013, p. 355)

The two sisters' dialectical growth mirrors Gadamer's historical consciousness paradigm. Isabelle's revolutionary passion and intense patriotism and Vianne's maternal resilience constitute complementary epistemic modes, their interactive development proving hermeneutic intersubjectivity. Societally, collective resistance against Nazi alterity transformed isolated selves into national solidarity from bourgeois domesticity to cross-class resistance networks, individual Dasein merged with historical Mitsein.

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