

Writing as Maternal Agency in Elena Ferrante's the Lost Daughter

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Abstract:

This paper examines the mother-daughter relationship in Elena Ferrante's novella *The Lost Daughter*. Ferrante reframes motherhood from the perspective of maternal subjectivity. Her work enables a critical examination of motherhood, generational trauma, and the complexity of female agency through the lead character Leda's unconventional approach to motherhood. The paper argues that the ambivalence towards the experience and role of motherhood in the work is reconciled, but only tentatively, in the act of writing, and scrutinized through the critical eye of a scholar of literature.

Keywords: mother- daughter relationship, frantumaglia, female agency, motherhood.

Italian author Elena Ferrante, whose identity remains shrouded in mystery, burst into the literary scene with the publication of her first novel *Troubling Love* (1992). This was followed by the publication of *Days of my Abandonment* (2005) and *The Lost Daughter* (2006) that established her as a writer who dissected the female psyche, especially the mother-daughter relationship, with searing honesty. Her Neapolitan quartet- *My Brilliant Friend*, *The Story of a New Name*, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, and *The Story of the Lost Child* are considered to be classics of contemporary literature. Ferrante's treatment of female friendships, motherhood, and female subjectivities in the working- class context of Naples presents a veritable challenge to prescribed and abiding gender roles. Her writing is singularly focussed on the feminine experience of the world and relationships as her characters navigate the violent structures of patriarchy. Ferrante's fiction probes the deeply troubling aspects of female experience ranging from abandonment, childhood trauma, motherhood, guilt, disgust, emotional entrapments, marriage, and the unbearable burden of gender expectations. Her treatment of these themes is unsettling, un sentimental, and narrated with clinical detachment. The central women characters in her novels, who are also often the narrators, are imbued with a disquieting awareness of their vulnerabilities, are haunted by past memories that interrupt their present, and are emotionally pitched on the verge of collapse.

In this paper, I will examine Ferrante's exploration of the mother-daughter relationship in her novella *The Lost Daughter*. I will argue that the ambivalence towards the experience and role of motherhood in the work is reconciled, but only tentatively, in the act of writing, and scrutinized through the critical eye of a scholar of literature.

The Lost Daughter begins in a hospital room as Leda, the central character, recollects the hazy series of sensations that precede her accident. While driving Leda is suddenly consumed by a sense that she could no longer hold on to the steering wheel while driving. She describes the surreal impression of being at the sea- the beach was calm and she sees a red flag waving. The imagined sight of the red flag brings back the memory of her mother's words from her childhood warning her about never going swimming if she sees

a red flag because the flag means the sea is turbulent. This is followed by the vision of her mother who appears on the dunes when Leda sees herself testing the water with the tip of her toe. This surreal opening with fragmentary images, expressions of internalized anxiety and trauma, and the looming figure of the mother sets the tone of the novella and alludes to the dominant theme in the work- motherhood.

Leda tells her daughters, Bianca and Marta, who fly in from Toronto to check on her, that it was drowsiness that sent her off the road. But she confesses to the reader that it was not really the drowsiness that was to blame but decided not to talk to anyone. She says, “The hardest things to talk about are the ones we ourselves can’t understand. (Ferrante, 2008, 10). The novella subsequently is an attempt to understand and then to talk about the experience of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship. In her earlier novel, *Troubling Love*, Ferrante approached the relationship from the perspective of an adult daughter, through her complex and furious love for her mother. *The Lost Daughter* is narrated from the perspective of a mother, Leda, in her late 40s, a professor of Literature, who decides to take a vacation for a few weeks in the Ionian coast. Leda is estranged from her husband and her two grown-up daughters are now living with their father in Canada. After years of juggling her academic career and motherhood, Leda gradually disentangles herself from the demanding pressures of being a mother. She describes her disentanglement with impassive relief, savouring her solitude and autonomy as a writer and person. From a detached distance, Leda examines her feelings of relief and recalls the anxieties she experienced while taking care of her two daughters. The feeling of freedom from parenting made her feel – “ I felt miraculously unfettered, as if a difficult job, finally brought to completion, no longer weighed me down” (11).

As a professor she could now schedule her work and personal life without pressure and finds herself less distracted and more generous. She reclaims control of her body, and says: “I regained the slender body of my youth and felt a sensation of gentle strength” (11). According to L. Elwell, “Leda’s story depicts the psychological, emotional, and somatic sense of obliteration that comes with being a mother” (Elwell, 2016, 248). Leda decides to take this vacation as part of the recuperation of her personal autonomy from the obliteration that motherhood had demanded of her. As a mother, vacations had meant putting her daughters’ needs ahead of her own, and later as the girls grew up and began travelling with their friends, Leda would wait for their safe return home. And upon their return, she would have to ready herself for the emotional caregiving of her daughters. Her availability was coupled with apprehension and guilt lest she be accused of being too self- absorbed or distracted. Katrin Wehling argues that appraisals of Ferrante focus on “her unforgiving portrayals of maternity, which routinely challenge the socially and religiously constructed stereotype of the nurturing, self-abnegating, and asexual mother, as one of the most unsettling and thought-provoking aspect of her work” (Katrin, 2017, 1).

As Leda gradually settles into a solitary and productive schedule during her vacation, which includes spending the day at the beach with her books and notebooks, she notices a large Neapolitan family holidaying on the beach. Leda’s attention is fixated on a young mother Nina, her little daughter who perpetually carries a doll with her. Leda becomes obsessively interested in Nina who evokes suppressed memories of Leda’s childhood, her relationship with her mother, and her own complex and contradictory attitudes towards motherhood. Leda moves from a detached and critical perspective of a professor of literature and begins to be increasingly obsessed with Nina. Ostensibly her life as an independent, middle-aged, professional woman, well past her mothering years is in stark contrast with Nina who is a young, beautiful mother, living a constricted life within a large working class, provincial Neapolitan family. As the narrative unfolds, the intersections between their lives are slowly revealed. Leda’s incisive observations of Nina’s body and her relationship with her daughter, throw up memories of Leda’s past

and her traumatic relationship with her mother. Also, she is forced to face her own guilt as a mother. Leda's poise and quiet gradually begin to disintegrate as her obsession with Nina and her daughter grows. The crisis in the narrative begins when Nina's daughter's doll goes missing and the child is inconsolably distraught. The whole family begins to search for the missing doll which is actually stolen by Leda. Ferrante uses the trope of horror narratives to reveal the slow fragmentation and disintegration of Leda's held together assurance. Ferrante's term for this form of disintegration is "frantumaglia" which is a kind of existential crisis in mothers and daughters. According to Ferrante, in the creative process of writing, fragmentary episodes of memory can become a story. The writing process is complex and mysterious and often difficult to define. She says, "putting into words the truth of a gesture, a feeling, a flow of events, without domesticating it, is also an operation that's not as simple as you might think" (Hill, 2020). Frantumaglia, however, is not necessarily a negative state but a process that alludes to the possibility of newer forms of feminine agency. The disintegration is precipitated by a resistance to structural patriarchy that congeal women's role as mothers and their capacities. In the novella, while Leda is relieved to have moved on from her role as a mother, her encounter with Nina and her young daughter triggers the suppressed guilt and memories of her difficult relationship with her mother. The doll becomes the object and metaphor for reliving and relieving her internalized crisis.

All along, Leda, because of her training as a scholar of literature, is not unaware of her emotions. She records her actions and reactions with unsparing clarity. As Leda watches Nina tire under the pressure of her daughter's ceaseless crying and meltdown because of the missing doll, she thinks, "soon she will hit her, trying to break the bond. Instead, the bond will become more twisted, will strengthen in remorse, in the humiliation of having shown herself in public as an unaffectionate mother" (Ferrante, 2008, 67). Leda, with a touch of cruelty feels a strong urge to throw Nina off balance when she is asked about her daughters. Initially, Leda is quiet but then admits to Rosario that she had abandoned her daughters when they were six and four. She had left her daughters in the care of their father and took them back after three years. When told how terrible that was and asked the reason for her actions, Leda says, "I was very tired", and adds, "Sometimes you have to escape in order not to die" (69). Leda had kept this deep-seated feeling of guilt of having abandoned her daughters and had never before that instant shared it with anyone. Leda after that confession to Rosario recollects with tense anxiety the time when she had felt lost, and had tried to lean on her mother and grandmother, who were, as Leda remembers, "mute or angry women" (71). Burning with ambition and the youthful desires of a young body, she felt that her life was paralysed after motherhood. On one occasion, she recollects, her daughter was persistently demanding attention while she was pressed for time to complete an academic paper. In reaction to her mother's indifference to her demands, Bianca, Leda's younger daughter, had slapped Leda's ear. An enraged Leda then hit Bianca. This act of violence and the harsh punishment of her daughter frightened her. This episode exposes the frustration, the latent violence that is produced by the burden of motherhood. In one stroke, Ferrante demystifies that vaulted monumentalization of motherhood constructed by patriarchal discourses and structures. The novella lays bare the challenges of motherhood and its uncomfortable aspects. This section reframes motherhood from the perspective of maternal subjectivity.

Leda's encounter with and observations of Nina and her daughter evokes memories of Leda's childhood, her relationship with her daughters, and her physical experience of motherhood, not as distinct but as continuous. Leda's reactions include feelings of disgust, anger, guilt, and cruelty. Leda watches the complete absorption of Nina in her role as a mother. This is accompanied by the little girl's obsession with her doll. This associative mothering animates the doll which serves both as a metaphor and a literal

embodiment of a daughter. When the doll is “lost”, the umbilical connection between Nina and her daughter goes through a crisis. Stiliana Milkova argues, “Leda sees the doll as undermining the mother’s and daughter’s stable positions as they both inhabit the doll’s body and speak with the doll’s voice” (Milkova, 2013, 101). While Nina appears to be a perfect mother to the distanced eye of Leda, later when Leda orchestrates her interactions with Nina, she notices Nina’s imperfections- both physical and that of as a mother. The stress of managing a child who going through a prolonged meltdown, Nina begins an affair with a lifeguard. Watching Nina, Leda begins to discover resonances with her own past and her romantic dalliances.

The narrative discusses Leda’s interest in her work, her abilities and ambitions, and the difficulties of managing her responsibilities as a mother and an academic. In a gendered world, guilt about and trials of parenting are challenges that only women have to confront. Ferrante’s writing consistently expose with unrelenting gaze the constricted structures that gird women’s lives. In *The Lost Daughter*, maternal guilt and its expiation is embodied in the figure of the stolen doll. The dissonance created between the character of Leda, who is a middle-aged woman, a successful scholar and academic, and her act of stealing the doll enables a critical examination of motherhood, generational trauma, and the complexity of female agency. Through the “perverse” act of stealing the doll and voyeuristically watch Nina’s disintegration as a mother, Leda is able to confront her suppressed guilt and trauma not only through critical objectivity but also through mirroring. The stolen doll takes Leda back to her childhood and to her daughter’s childhoods too. When Leda picks up the doll from the beach it is oozing with dirty water. It is through the embodied symbol of the dirty doll that Ferrante reveals the uncomfortable truths about motherhood. The conventional glorification of motherhood disallows discussions on the challenges and the unsettling parts of being a mother. Leda by stealing the doll and then tending to it in private, attempts to compensate for what she saw as her shortcomings as a mother when she had abandoned her daughters. Her associative identification with Nina both through observation and triggering crisis in her life is a projection of Leda’s own past on Nina. Elena’s tantrums remind Leda of her daughters’ ceaseless demands. Nina’s frustration mirrors Leda’s exasperations as a young mother trying to cope with multiple roles.

Leda’s critical abilities as a scholar of literature enable her to ultimately to read the metaphoric function of the doll and the feelings it activates in her. The work emphasises her skills as an accomplished scholar. Ferrante juxtaposes the literary and elite sensibilities of Leda with the provincialities of the large Neapolitan family to which Nina belongs. This linguistic and cultural juxtaposition has a deeper function both at the level of plot and the play of the conscious and the unconscious. Leda recalls her own working class childhood and her gradual distance from it through education. At the psychological level the presence of the provincial family conjures the suppressed emotions of guilt and trauma, all that Leda had thought she had left behind. The work thematizes and establishes a close link between the maternal experience, body and language. As a literary exercise the novella invites a close exploration of the nature of language, metaphor, and its relationship with gender politics. The act and subject of writing in the work is the painful and necessary process of examining and reconfiguring the discourse of maternal agency and authorship.

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