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## Women's Identity and Motherhood in Elena Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter*

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Elena Ferrante is an Italian pseudonymous writer. She is the most prominent Italian novelist of this generation. Ferrante is well known for her four-volume work which is popular as *Neapolitan Novels* consisting of *My Brilliant Friend* (2011), *The Story of a New Name* (2012), *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2013), and *The Story of the Lost Child* (2014). The dark background of the mother-daughter relationship has been one of her major themes. In her very first novel *Troubling Love* (1992), she explained through the female protagonist Delia. In *The Lost Daughter* (2006), Ferrante has expressed the need of the bond which a mother must develop with her daughter in order to make her daughter face the world with a strong and sound mind. About her novel *The Days of Abandonment*, Ferrante said in an interview to *The Paris Review*, "Then, quite naturally, everything settled around an experience of mine that had seemed to me unspeakable—the humiliation of abandonment" (Ferrante).

Ferrante avoided publicity and she does not often give any interviews. She said that any of her work could project into the world on its own: "Once I knew that the completed book would make its way in the world without me, once I knew that nothing of the concrete, physical me would ever appear beside the volume—as if the book were a little dog and I were its master—it made me see something new about writing. I felt as though I had released the words from myself" (Ferrante). Her statement is very close to the Postmodernists' attitude which says that the moment an author completes writing his book, the book projects on its own to the readers who would view it in multiple perspectives.

The story of *The Lost Daughter* (2006) is all about womanhood and motherhood. The protagonist Signora Leda, who is in her mid forties, narrates her lonesome experiences. She has two daughters Bianca and Marta who are living with her ex-husband in Canada. Leda lives in Florence and she takes a vacation to Ionian Coast during a summer. She explains her emotional imbalance as she evaluates her own past experiences by comparing them with the situations in another having fun in the seashore during her vacation. Nina and her daughter Elena; her sister-in-law Rosaria; and Corrado (Rosaria's husband) are the members in the family whose names she learns by watching them having fun. Giovanni is the other man who often has a good conversation with her and giving her company. Elena has a doll which she calls Nani. Throughout the story Leda feels bad about the way she was treated by her mother during her childhood and the lacking emotional bond between her and her daughters. During Leda's childhood, her mother constantly threatened her by telling that she would leave their house. She takes the doll Nani and she gets reminded about the connection she once had with her doll Mina during her childhood. She treats the doll as the way a child treats it. Even when she learns that the little girl Elena is crying and creating a mess with her mother after losing her doll, Leda does not give back the doll. Only in end she hands over the doll to Nina who accepts it with total contempt.

Signora Leda tries to find her identity as a woman and a mother throughout the story. Leda says "the hardest thing to talk about is the one which we ourselves don't understand" (Ferrante 4). Leda finds it difficult to understand the roles that she must play in her daughters' lives as well as in the lives of the people she moves with everyday. She could not perceive what her family and the society expect from her. Her daughters

who are living with their father in Canada, gave her comfort by speaking in phone in such a manner that their father does not exist. Leda is always suspicious about the way they speak as she considers them reacting very fake to her. She is at the same time very scared of getting accused of caring about herself alone.

Leda gets solace from the natural setting which she finds in the Ionian Coast where she takes her vacation. Each and everything she experiences, reminds her of her childhood, including the scent of resins that she smells while walking through the woods. She explains it as the 'scent of childhood'. It proves her to be a good observer right from her young carefree days. Her female consciousness plays a vital role when she tries to do anything on her own. As she is in the summer vacation, she confirms her secured feeling "It was enough to feel myself protected, without deadlines to keep in mind, nothing urgent to confront. No one depended anymore on my care and, finally, even I was no longer a burden to myself" (Ferrante 9).

Leda watches Nina's family enjoying at the seashore. Leda observes Nina, a happy mother as she seems to be. The entire family takes utmost care of her and her child Elena. The atmosphere is very hale and happy around them which gives Leda a kind of longingness as well as jealousy. She carefully notices the longing face of the child; the doll in the child's hand; and the way the mother and the child hug and kiss each other. This is the atmosphere she wished to have and unfortunately she could not experience it in her childhood days with her mother and also as a mother of Bianca and Marta.

Ferrante highlights the significance of the doll as it better explains Leda's character. During her childhood, Leda had developed an intense attachment to Mina, her doll. In order to avoid painful loneliness children usually have a specific 'attachment object' which could be their favourite toy or a pillow even. The adults who have the feeling of insecurity would also develop this habit. Leda had grown up in helpless situations and she does not trust that members in her family do consider her. This is evident when she often intends to say that she is not a good mother. Leda says "Poor creatures who came out of my belly, all alone now on the other side of the world. I placed the doll on my knees as if for company. Why had I taken her" (Ferrante 45).

Becoming a mother is a unique experience for every woman which is inexplicable. The children mean the world to her and they give her an identity of being a significant figure in a family. She is confined to the little world, the home, and does not pay much attention to what is happening outside. Nina seems to be such a character. But if anything goes wrong, the mother is affected by the fear of feeling judged by her own children and her family members. The anxiety grows up when a mother takes her inner conflicts seriously. Leda could not establish her identity as a mother in her family as the situations around her did not permit. However she tries to give good moments for her children Bianca and Marta: "As an adult I tried to keep in mind the misery of not being able to handle the hair, the face, the body of my mother. So when Bianca was a small child I patiently became her doll" (Ferrante 33). When Bianca was a little girl, she hit Leda on her face just to play with her. As Leda was busy with her work, she warned her several times but finally she dragged her away and closed the door with a force in such a way that the glass shattered, telling "I don't want to see you anymore" (Ferrante 53). Her sudden expression of anger in front of Bianca affects only her and she often gets reminded of that worst moments.

She had the idealistic view of motherhood as she had expected some kindness from her mother. And when she becomes a mother, she is not able to be a very perfect mother due to her mental stress. When Leda sees Elena after taking the doll, she says "Elena was afraid, above all, that her mother would flee from her" (Ferrante 47). It shows the way Leda, as a child, was deeply affected by her mother who often told her she would leave her home. Leda guesses that Elena would have the same kind of fear when Nina gets irritated. "I suspected that she begun to flee the moment she had me in her womb, even though as I grew up everyone said that I resembled her" (Ferrante 42). Leda felt alienated even while living with her own mother. She explains the harsh treatment that her mother usually gives her: "When she saw that my teeth were chattering she became even more furious, yanked me, covered me from head to toe with a towel, rubbed me with such an energy, such violence that I didn't know if it was really worry for my health or a long-fostered rage, a ferocity, that chafed my skin" (Ferrante 26). She has also treated her daughters in such a harsh manner and so she even thinks that her daughters would never like her: "Maybe that was what she had always secretly desired, not to be my daughter" (Ferrante 22); "I was always, in some way, the origin of their sufferings, and the outlet"

(Ferrante 43). Once when she learns that Elena is missing, she gets reminded of the moment she lost Bianca in a crowd long ago. She shows her extreme anger to Bianca later after finding her: "A child, yes, is a vortex of anxieties" (Ferrante 28). Leda further explains, "I was also screaming like my mother, because of the crushing weight of responsibility, the bond that strangles, and with my free arm I dragged my firstborn, yelling, you'll pay for this Bianca, you'll see when we get home, you must never go off again-never" (Ferrante 29). She had all the responsibilities to take care of the child as her husband was abroad during that time. The responsibility feels heavy for Leda and she also says that the bond between her and the daughters is strangling her. She could not lose her good relationship with her daughter and at the same time, she could not have it peacefully.

Leda's mother and grandmother have been mute or angry women as she describes and she feels like a lost daughter: "Years earlier I had been a girl who felt lost, this was true" (Ferrante 52). In the same way she also feels that her daughters are lost i.e. they are not in perfect bond with her. In the end, Leda answers Marta's call and says "I'm dead but I'm fine" (Ferrante 101). It signifies the idea that the situations may turn very worse and it is every individual's duty to adapt to all the situations. A woman's identity in her family and the society does not depend on opinions of the people around her, but her own views about herself. Thus Leda has a hope to persevere in her way and to be a good mother.

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