

# Lapis Lazuli

## An International Literary Journal

ISSN 2249-4529

[www.pintersociety.com](http://www.pintersociety.com)

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GENERAL ISSUE VOL: 8, No.: 1, SPRING 2018

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UGC APPROVED (Sr. No.41623)

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## **Doll, Daughter, (m)other: switching roles in Elena Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter***

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### **Abstract:**

In this paper I will discuss Ferrante's novel 'The Lost Daughter' (2008) which is a saga of a neo-liberated woman, Leda, who struggles with socio-symbolic traditional, accepted roles juxtaposed with modern, 'out of box' appearances. She breaks into fragments each time she is displaced from one role to another- from a daughter to a wife, from a wife to a mother, from a mother to a working woman, and from a working woman to a woman in need of identity, a woman unable to do justice with all the roles simultaneously, a woman in need to overcome her guilt. The symbolism in the novel seems wide ranged. What is lost and what is found creates turmoil. Ferrante uses doll as symbolic means of self. The doll represents the mother and the daughter at the same time. The doll also refers to the loss of identity. Leda, the protagonist, needs to come to terms with the sexual and symbolic difference in the framework of social, cultural and professional realization.

### **Keywords:**

Identity, doll, daughter, Mother, Symbolism, Womanhood.

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Elena Ferrante the contemporary Italian novelist might be called the author of 'realistic feminism.' Her novels, including the Neopolitan quartet, have a burst of feminist energy. Elena uses a pseudonym and believes that the 'personality of a novelist exists utterly in the virtual realm of his/her books.' (Ferrante: 207, 2016) Ferrante addresses the primal issues of being a woman. In view of the fact that Ferrante's identity is unknown, her gender is unknown, it is still clear from her writings that, if I can borrow words from Cixous, Ferrante writes 'as a woman, toward woman' (Cixous, 1976, Signs: 885) because 'flying is woman's gesture' (Cixous, 1976, Signs: 887) and Ferrante has learnt the 'art of flying.' (Cixous, 1976, Signs: 887) And, although Ferrante writes about the experiences of Italian women, her depiction of women crosses all boundaries and transcends into common experiences of women all around the globe. Ferrante narrates stories of real-life experiences of real-life individuals – woman - who have psychological, social and economic issues- because borrowing words from Simone de Beauvoir 'she is still bound up in her female functions.' (*The Second Sex*, 587, 1949)

The 'narrative discourse' (term used by Gerard Genette in 1972) used by Elena Ferrante in 'The Lost Daughter' is 'Analepsis' (flashback) and her point of view or perspective is 'internally focalized' that is, 'recounted by one character from a fixed position, from

variable positions, or from several character view-points.’ (Eagleton 92, 2012) The narrator in Ferrante’s novel is not only ‘homodiegetic’ (inside his/her narrative as in first-person stories) but ‘autodiegetic’ (where the narrator is not only inside the narrative but figures as its principal character). (Eagleton, 92, 2012) Terry Eagleton explains the term in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. He writes ‘Therefore when I tell a story about myself, as in autobiography, the ‘I’ who does the telling seems in one sense identical with the ‘I’ whom I describe and another sense different from it’. Ferrante however uses a pseudonym and her real identity is not even known. Therefore, although as an author, she writes and tells her own story and it is the story of the author we are unable to picture the real author. Ferrante finds this thrilling. She feels that the story is connected to the author. But his/ her personality might not necessarily be known. It seems like Terry Eagleton comes in support of Ferrante and supports the structuralist emphasis on the ‘constructedness’ of human meaning, ‘Meaning was neither a private experience nor a divinely ordained occurrence: it was the product of certain shared systems of signification. The confident bourgeois belief that the isolated individual subject was the fount and origin of all meaning took a sharp knock: language predated the individual, and was much less his or her product than he or she was the product of it. Meaning was not ‘natural’...what meaning you were able to articulate depended on what script or speech you shared in the first place. There were the seeds here of a social and historical theory of meaning, whose implications were to run deep within contemporary thought’. (Eagleton, 93, 2012)

In this paper I will discuss Ferrante’s novel *The Lost Daughter* (2008). *The Lost Daughter* which is a saga of a neo-liberated woman who struggles with socio-symbolic traditional, accepted roles juxtaposed with modern, out of the box appearances. *The Lost Daughter* (2006, translated in English 2008 by Ann Goldstein, from now will be referred as TLD) is the story of Leda, a middle aged ‘almost 48’ years old (TLD: 29) divorcee, who teaches English in a university. Leda lives in Florence and is the mother of two grown up daughters, Bianca and Marta, ‘one is twenty-four and the other twenty two’ (TLD: 29) who moved to Toronto with their father Gianni. Leda decides to take a holiday by the sea, in a small coastal town in southern Italy where she encounters a family whose presence unsettles her whole existence. After meeting Nina, who fits in the perfect mould of a good mother, and while observing Nina and Elena (Nina’s young daughter) enjoying together, she is hit by a guilt pang. Leda is overwhelmed by the difficult and unconventional choices she made as a mother and their consequences for herself and her family. She tries to disturb Nina’s peace by stealing Elena’s doll. After a ferocious confrontation with an unsettled past, Leda, rediscovers herself.

Interestingly the main characters in the *The Lost Daughter* are all females Leda, Nina, Elena, Marta, Bianca and the doll. Leda breaks into pieces/fragments (Frantumaglia) each time she is displaced from one role to another- from a daughter to a wife, from a wife to a mother, from a mother to a working woman, and from a working woman to a woman in need of identity, a woman in need to overcome her guilt. She needs to come to terms with the sexual and symbolic difference in the framework of social, cultural

and professional realization. While writing *The Lost Daughter*, Ferrante agrees that she 'was interested in recounting how an educated women of today, a "new" woman, reacts to the age-old symbolic stratification.' (*Frantumaglia*, 2016: 215) Like Simone de Beauvoir, Ferrante, tries to represent demystification of motherhood. Simone de Beauvoir remarks that women often complicate their own subordinated status. They consent to live as dolls, rather than full human beings. They accept the rewards of submissiveness: love, protection, approval. In this way, they are 'passive, lost, and ruined.' (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949: 21) Ferrante applies Eliot's 'objective correlative' (T.S.Eliot, 1977: 605) and uses doll as a symbolic means of self. The symbolism in this novel seems wide ranged. Does Ferrante see the Doll as the mother who is lost; or does she refer to the doll as the daughter(s) who is/are lost; or is it the mother who is a daughter and is trying to find her way out. But there is no daughter lost. Leda steals a doll, and a doll is actually lost. Elena, Nina's daughter, Elena, treats the doll as her daughter. So, whose daughter/doll/mother is actually lost? Who is the mother who has lost a daughter? Is it Leda or Nina or Elena? Leda feels she has lost her daughters because she had never been a good mother. TLD is a story of 'lost daughters without mothers and mother dolls hidden in the sand ... dealing with the question of maternity'. (Miriam in *Frantumaglia*, 2016: 215). In *The Lost Daughter*, Nina, the young mother, 'no more than twenty' (TLD: 18) looks like a doll, 'the young mother...with her slim body, the tastefully chosen one-piece bathing suit, the slender neck, the shapely head and long wavy, glossy black hair, the Indian face with its high cheekbones, the heavy eyebrows and slanting eyes, seemed to me an anomaly in the group' (TLD: 18) Nina becomes the doll for her daughter when they play games. Leda remembers her own mother who never liked to become a doll, even in their games. 'My mother rarely yielded to the games I tried to play with her body. She immediately got nervous, she didn't like being the doll. She laughed, pulled away, grew angry. It annoyed her when I combed her hair, put ribbons on it, washed her face and ears, undressed her, redressed her'. '(TLD: 47) Leda decides not to follow her mother and so she accepts the offer from her daughter readily. Leda confesses, 'when Bianca was small, I patiently became her doll.' (TLD: 47) In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler claims that gender is entirely learned. It is not "natural," but cultural. Thus, a child learns to become a girl by performing all the activities her culture has decided are feminine, such as cooking, cleaning and nurturing. She "performs" her gender. Then, after she has performed actions appropriate to the gender in the eyes of her culture, she is praised and her behaviour is reinforced: what a sweet little girl! She loves to take care of her doll! This makes the little girl want to take care of her doll all the more, because it pleases the adults in her life. So, she becomes more nurturing. Similarly, mothers are ranked by the society as good mothers and bad mothers. Leda wants to be a good mother, 'Yet I tried to keep my nerves under control, I wanted to be a good mother' (TLD: 47)

In the same story there is a pregnant woman Rosaria whose pregnancy is coarse and uninteresting. Pregnancy represents another aspect of motherhood. Later we find that

the doll is impregnated as well. Leda, as a cultivated and refined elite woman is repelled by pregnancy. It probably reminds her of our basic animal nature. Pregnancy, motherhood, nausea, and other such images linked with motherhood frighten Leda. Milkova (2013: 98) analyses that 'Images of rotting fruit, insects, oozing wounds, dark gaping mouths, vomit, worms, snot, sweat, and slime permeate and enliven the text in key narrative moments which always revolve around the doll. In other words, the doll becomes the locus and catalyst of disgust. As such, it activates a mechanism of associations' psycho-visceral reactions, and physical actions that strip Leda's layers of motherly disguise and eviscerate, as it were her relationship to pregnancy, motherhood and her Neapolitan origins.' But when Leda meets Nina and her daughter Elena she sees a perfect mother. She is jealous of Nina. Or as Leda tries to reason out that she was protective of her (Nina) and steals the doll trying to save Nina from the vicious cycle of mother and daughter, like someone saved her once? But then even Leda gained only guilt for being out (away from her daughters) for three years and comes back.

### **Motherhood and society: The Good mother and the bad Mother**

Nina effortlessly qualifies to be a good mother. She took good care of her daughter. Leda observes her: 'Once I noticed the tenderness with which she rubbed lotion on her. And once I was struck by the leisurely time that mother and daughter spent in the water together, the mother hugging the child to her, the child with her arms tight around the mother's neck. They laughed together, enjoying the feeling of body against body, touching noses, spitting out streams of water, kissing each other.' (TLD: 19) On another such instance Leda notices the mother and daughter 'playing with the doll. They did it with such pleasure, dressing her, undressing her, pretending to put suntan lotion on her; they bathed her in a green pail, they dried her, rubbing her so that she wouldn't catch cold, hugged her to their breast as I to nurse her, or fed her baby food of sand; they kept her in the sun with them, lying on their towel. If the young girl was pretty herself, in her motherhood there was something that distinguished her; she seemed to have no desire for anything but her child.' (TLD: 19) Leda had assigned Nina 'the role of a perfect mother, of successful daughter.' (TLD: 134)

### **The theme of loss: Losing the self, doll, daughter and mother:**

Losing the mother is an innate fear in the children. Ferrante tackles this psychology of the child in all the mother-daughter relationships that appear in the novel. Leda is fond of her own mother but she never wants to be like her mother who continuously threatens to leave. Leda notes that she was 'careful... never to say, I am leaving, you will never see me again, as my mother had when she was desperate. She never left us, despite crying that she would; I, on the other hand, left my daughters almost without announcing it' (TLD, 99) Leda actually leaves, realizing her mother's dream. 'I left. I abandoned them when the older was six and the younger four' (TLD: 69) Later when the doll is lost and Elena clings to her mother crying and throwing tantrums all the time



Leda tries to justify herself: 'The loss of the doll is an excuse, I said to myself. Elena was afraid, above all that her mother would flee from her.' (TLD: 67)

Leda's past experiences as a mother were bitter and she was unable to deal with them. Leda feels trapped with her situation as a young mother and wants to be liberated and work. When she meets Brenda she feels liberated. 'I was captivated by...Brenda. I talked to her all evening, imagined myself in her place, free, traveling with an unknown man whom I desired at every moment and by whom at every moment I was desired. Everything starting from zero. No habit, no sensations, dulled by predictability. I was I; I produced thoughts not distracted by any concern other than the tangled thread of dreams and desires. No one was wrapped around me anymore despite the cutting of the umbilical cord.' (TLD: 82-83) Brenda's 'image persisted. How long did I sit on the guardrail like Brenda, pretending I was her. One or two years, I think, before I actually left. It was a heavy time.' (TLD: 83) 'Lucilla,' with whom Gianni (Leda's husband) had 'an affair' when Leda left him, 'showed up and immediately began to play the sensitive, imaginative, always cheerful, always available mother: the good mother' (TLD: 75) to Leda's daughters. Leda notes, 'She swept away my discipline and then, once the territory that belonged to me was devastated, retreated into hers, devoting herself to her husband, hurrying off to her work, to her successes, of which, among other things, she did nothing but boast in a tone of apparent modesty. In the end I was alone, in permanent service, the bad mother.' (TLD 76) Further Leda says about Lucilla that, 'She led me to believe that I had done everything wrong, that I was too full of myself, that I wasn't made to be a mother.' (TLD: 77) Leda's confession: 'I left. I abandoned them when the older was six and younger four,' (TLD: 69) makes her angry with herself. She accepts that 'Years earlier, I had been a girl who felt lost, this was true. All the hopes of youth seemed to have been destroyed; I seemed to be falling backward toward my mother, my grandmother, the chain of mute or angry women I came from. Missed opportunities.' (TLD: 69) 'People...would not understand my reasons.' (TLD: 70) Leda also thinks about her two daughters whom she has now lost 'to the future.' (TLD: 90) She wants to go back to the past to correct her mistakes. Leda repents and cries 'I wanted to be a good mother, but my body refused.' (TLD: 110) She wants to be like Nina. She wants to be Nina. Ironically Nina tells Leda 'As soon as I saw you, I said to myself: I would like to be like that lady.' (TLD: 115)

### **Motherhood and guilt: Missed opportunities**

When the little girl Elena is with her mother on the beach and the mother-daughter duo talk to the girl in various tones- adult-child, child-adult and perform various chores with the doll which instead of giving pleasure in the child's game Leda gets irritated. Leda is so disgusted that she steals the doll. Leda is guilt ridden after stealing Elena's doll, 'Then suddenly it seemed to me I had done something mean, unintentional but mean' (TLD: 45) She explains 'I was planning to flee as if I had stolen a child and not a doll.' (TLD: 112) Leda likes the explanation she gave to herself that stealing the doll 'had been a spontaneous impulse to help...Nena, Nani, Nennella, or whatever her name was.

I saw her abandoned in the sand limbs askew, her face half buried, as if she was about to suffocate, and I picked her up. An infantile reaction, nothing special, we never really grow up. I decided that I would give her back the next day. I will go to the beach early, I will stick her in the sand ...will play with the child a little and then say, look, she's here, let's dig.'(TLD: 45) Leda recalls her past when as a young girl she became a mother and was forced to dedicate her life to her children. She herself was a little girl and had to bear children. The doll represents the daughters whom Leda could not nourish and nurture properly. Thinking about her past she says, 'I decided to take care of Nani, for company, to calm myself.' (TLD: 85) She buys dresses for the doll. She wants to take care of the doll, like Nina takes care of her daughter and the doll. But still after stealing the doll Leda 'felt very unhappy' (TLD 84) Leda remains guilt ridden all the while she carries the doll. She thinks that the doll is important for a young girl. Leda thinks about her own childhood that as a young girl she 'would have liked to dress her... What is a doll to a child. I had one with beautiful curly hair, I had taken great care of her, had never lost her. Her name was Mina. '(TLD: 47) She decides that 'I would go straight to Nina, I would say to her: look I found her in the pinewood yesterday evening, and this morning I bought her a dress so you can play with her, you and your daughter.' (TLD: 85, 87) Yet she is reluctant to return it making petty excuses. According to Ferrante 'the erotic vapor of the maternal body gives off for us alone will be at the same time a cause for regret and goal. Leda has the impression that she sees in the relationship between the child Elena and her doll a kind of happy miniature of the mother-daughter relationship. But a miniature is still always a simplification. And simplifications are blinding' (2016: 221) When she left the doll on the sofa and was about to get up, she realizes that the doll is impregnated with a worm and 'more dark liquid had come out of the doll's mouth and stained my skirt...I could hear the water in her belly, and imagined a stomach filth, a stale stagnant liquid mixed with sand. This is yours, mother and daughter, I thought, why did I interfere.' (TLD: 85)

### **Narrative logic of disgust**

Milkova (2013: 100) hints the narrative logic of disgust here and observes, 'Fecundity becomes the site of disgust in Ferrante's novel as it relates to Leda's experience of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood. The repressed memories and sentiments from Leda's past rise to the surface when she begins to recollect-and relieve- herself as a mother in the present. She thinks, 'I myself was playing (with the doll) now, a mother is only a daughter who plays, it was helping me think.' (TLD: 124) The doll helps Leda to introspect. Leda now acts both as a foster mother who takes care of the daughter/doll and a daughter who plays with the doll. Her past experiences as a daughter who plays with dolls and present experience of mothering a doll merge the past with the present, reshuffling her experiences. Milkova sums it up nicely and writes: 'As the borders between mothers, daughters and doll fall apart, so does the boundary between past and present.' (2013: 101) Leda confesses towards the closing stages of the novel that she returned back because she loved her daughters 'too much and it seemed to me that love would keep me from becoming myself...' and when she 'didn't see them for

three years...’ felt ‘as if I had a stomach ache. And my heart missed a beat whenever I heard a child call Mama’ (TLD: 117) She finally returns after ‘three years and thirty-six days’ (TLD: 118) ‘Because I realized that I wasn’t capable of creating anything of my own that could truly equal them.’ (TLD: 117) She returns for ‘love of’ herself because she ‘felt more useless and desperate without them (her daughters) than with them’ (TLD: 118) At the end she comes to terms with her own sense of guilt and when Nina finds Elena’s doll in her house and ‘runs off with the doll’ (TLD: 140) Leda stands still after confessing that she was ‘an unnatural mother’. (TLD: 139) Stiliana Milkova (2013) mentions that ‘In Ferrante’s world, these women (bad or unnatural mother-daughter genealogies) seek to escape their prescribed feminine roles but inevitably, succumb to the injunctions of a male-dominated order. Paradoxically, their only escape is through the disgust evoked by motherhood, by the pregnant female body, and by the Neapolitan dialect of their mothers’ (Milkova, Stiliana: 2013: 91)

### **Conclusion:**

The slippage between past and present hence structures the text through the narrative logic of disgust. It is a narrative logic that approximates the lacking chronology implied in the experience of *Frantumaglia* and, notably, in still life as well.’ Leda has recorded in her notebook all names given to the doll by Elena- ‘Neni, Nile, Nilotta, Nanicchia, Nanuccia, Nannella and Nani’ (TLD: 100). ‘You keep liquid darkness in your stomach...I, too, was hiding many dark things in silence.’ (TLD: 100) With her tweezers Leda removes the stuffing inside the dolls mouth. She also removes a worm that was inside the doll. Eventually the doll is organized and Leda is sorted out. Leda recollects: ‘The doll was still naked, head down in the bathroom sink, and I dressed her. The water was no longer gurgling in her stomach; I imagined her womb as a dry ditch. Organize, understand. I thought how one opaque action generates others of increasingly pronounced activity, and so the problem is to break the chain.’ (TLD: 128) Stiliana Milkova analyses ‘breaking the chain’ (TLD: 128) and explains, ‘Leda’s attempt to liberate the young Neapolitan mother from the ‘mostruosa catena’ that links mothers and daughters in a vicious cycle of sacrifice’. (2013: 104) Leda cleans the impregnated doll and helps in the delivery of the slimy worm. As the story unfolds, we find that keeping the doll helps her overcome her own guilt as a mother that she has been carrying on her shoulders for a long time Leda tries to take care of the doll that is herself impregnated and delivers a slimy ‘worm’ for a baby. The mother, daughter and doll keep changing their positions. Doll at one point of time represents daughter and at other times represents the mother as in her stomach there is ‘a putrid liquid, a worm’ which according to Ferrante ‘describe(s) the dark side of the pregnant body’ (*Frantumaglia*, 2016: 221) Leda comes to terms with her past; she is able to deal with the void that has not been addressed for years. The doll that Leda steals seems to be the custodian of motherhood.



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