

Female Friendship in Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels*

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Abstract

Neapolitan Novels marks the masterpieces of Elena Ferrante, an anonymous Italian writer. The novel traces the sixty-year friendship between Lila and Lenù. The keen bond takes the form of *affidamento*. And by rivalry and support, they confirm each other's existence and acquire self-achievements. The mother-daughter relationships of Lila and Elena reflect Luce Irigaray's theory of female genealogy, while their life trajectories and resistance to patriarchal power continue the tradition of women's writing. The process of their life and the resistance against the patriarchy stand for the passing-down of female writing.

Keywords

Elena Ferrante; *affidamento*; mother-daughter relationship; female writing.

1. Introduction

Elena Ferrante is but the pen name of a contemporary Italian writer. The mysterious she has chosen to remain anonymous, so her true identity has been the talk of the town, arising extensive speculation among literary critics, and remains unknown. Between 2011 and 2014, Ferrante published one novel each year: *My Brilliant Friend*, *The Story of a New Name*, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, and *The Story of the Lost Child*. All of them form what is known as the *Neapolitan Novels*. The writer, Elena, chooses narrating in the first person, tracing the lifelong friendship between two girls, Lenù and Lila, both from a poor neighborhood of Naples, spanning more than half a century from the 1940s to the early twenty-first century, aiming at the exploration of the complexity and depth of women's destinies.

2. Sisterhood

Prior to the publication of the *Neapolitan Novels*, literary condition scarcely sees the work describing the female friendship. While the friendship between Lila and Lenù has just broke this isolation in the literary world. The series have established a relationship of profound mutual recognition. As one critic observes, "Elena is never alone; all her stories are inextricably bound up with her childhood companion." [1] As the narrative center of the tetralogy, the friendship between Lenù and Lila most fully embodies the novel's vision of sisterhood.

In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter defines sisterhood as a powerful emotion of female solidarity. Sisterhood stands for a fundamental principle of feminist theory and criticism. It encourages women to transform their dispersed position as isolated "others" into a mode of "shared" existence. It advocates women should overcome narrow selfhood while preserving subjectivity, and seek solidarity with one another.[2] The sisterhood between Lila and Lenù has attracted widespread attention and resonated deeply with contemporary female group not only because of its longevity and solidarity, but also because of the complex interplay of competition and support within their relationship.

the Italian feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro, influenced by Luce Irigaray's theory of female genealogy, developed the concept of *affidamento*, encouraging women to seek symbolic mother and daughter for the establishment of intimate relationships." [3] Within such a relationship,

the daughter must acknowledge the authority of the symbolic mother; this recognition is the precondition for *affidamento*. And the sixty-year relationship unfolds precisely through such kind of mutual entrustment. Dependence, support, and competition, all are trying to sustain it. Lenù first accepts Lila as her symbolic mother. During their daily life, she absorbs Lila's knowledge, ideas, and wisdom. And Lila's brilliance continually drives her forward. Lenù constantly imitates the thinking, behavior, and even writing way of Lila. Even after becoming a writer, she, Lenù, still continues to write Lila's words. This imitation actually bestows Lenù with courage to move forward and escape the decayed and chaotic neighborhoods of Naples. Fearing that her mother's deformed legs might be inherited by herself, Lenù even imitates Lila's way of walking, believing that in this way "the image of my mother's walk fixed in my mind would no longer threaten me." [4] Lila's entrustment to Lenù lies in projecting her aspirations onto her friend. She tells Lenù, "You are my brilliant friend. You have to become the best of all, better than anyone else, boys and girls." "If you're not brilliant, then who am I?" [4] After suffering the drop-out, early marriage, domestic violence, and the lost of daughter, Lila endures one tragic female fate after another. Whenever she faces extreme hardship or even destruction, Lenù's achievements bring out the ideals that Lila herself has been unable to realize. Through Lenù, her inner aspirations take concrete form, and she, in turn, affirms her own existence.

Ferrante's writing, however, does not stop at an ordinary portrayal of sisterhood. Rather, she "further explores the risks beneath friendship: every intimate relationship inevitably carries fears of injury and mutual dependence." [5] As the symbolic mother-daughter relationship of mutual *affidamento* develops further, it gradually gives rise to competition, possessiveness, and emotional harm. Although exceptionally gifted and eager for knowledge, Lila is denied the opportunity to continue her education.

As she watches Lenù gradually become an educated woman and transcend class boundaries, Lila, unable to move forward herself, cannot help but feel resentment. Lenù succeeds in achieving social mobility, yet always lives in Lila's shadow. After becoming a writer, Lenù realizes that every one of her works originates in her relationship with Lila: "first through what Lila wrote, which Lenù somehow came to read; second, because Lenù always believed that Lila possessed extraordinary literary talent, she constantly tried to imitate Lila's writing, yet was never satisfied with the result." [5] No matter how successful Lenù becomes, she continues to doubt herself. Her achievements prove her excellence, yet they never seem sufficient. Through writing, she can never truly capture Lila.

The competition here sees no contest with winners and losers. It shall never produce a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority. Instead, each woman advances through pursuing the other. Within a society shaped by patriarchal culture, both continually struggle for opportunities to rise. This is a distinctly female path of growth. The significance of sisterhood lies in the fact that each woman clarifies her own identity through the other, defines her own existence, gains a deeper understanding of lived experience, and draws strength to continue climbing upward. As Irigaray argues, women should love and care for one another: "If we no longer wish to remain men's appendages, then it is necessary for women to love women." [6]

3. Mother–Daughter Relationships

Her novels, From *Troubling Love* (1992) to the later *Neapolitan Novels*, Ferrante has created a plethora of distinctive female characters. Among them, the mother–daughter relationship serves as one of the most prominent themes. In the *Neapolitan Novels*, nearly every female character is situated within the family. Either is a daughter or a mother. Among them, the mother–daughter bond is one of the most concentrated expressions of female relationships.

This emphasis closely echoes the ideas of the French feminist theorist and philosopher Luce Irigaray. Irigaray stresses the importance of restoring the mother–daughter bond within a

patriarchal society. She argues that women must rebuild a female genealogy in order to preserve their own identity and history, and that such a genealogy can only be established through the successful reconstruction of the mother–daughter relationship. And Ferrante herself explicitly acknowledged this intellectual connection: “I will find an ingenious way to quote Luce Irigaray and Luisa Muraro and complete my writing.”[7] Her statement confirms the close affinity between her fiction and Irigaray’s feminist thought.

Among the many mother–daughter relationships depicted in the novels, those between Lila and Nunzia, and between Lenù and her mother, receive the richest and most vivid treatment. Nunzia, Lila’s mother, is the wife of Fernando, a shoemaker in the old neighborhood of Naples. At two decisive moments in Lila’s life—her education and her marriage—Nunzia fails to defend her daughter’s wishes and instead submits to her husband’s decisions. These two moments ultimately become the turning points that reshape Lila’s destiny.

Lila shows extraordinary intellectual talent in primary school. Although Nunzia hopes that her daughter can continue the education, Fernando, her husband, refuses to let daughter take the entrance examination because a bias that girls do not need schooling. For being unable to oppose her husband, Nunzia cannot protect Lila and instead urges her to obey her father. From that moment, the lives of Lila and Lenù begin to diverge dramatically. As Lila enters adolescence, she develops an irresistible beauty. Marcello, the local Camorra leader, becomes infatuated with her. As for the substantial benefits that the marriage could ferro, Fernando approves Marcello’s pursuit. And Nunzia supports the arrangement as well. Having long occupied a silenced position within the family, Nunzia gradually internalizes patriarchal authority through years of social conditioning. She comes to regard obedience to her husband as natural and, in turn, expects her daughter to repeat the same pattern of life. She even becomes an accomplice in the patriarchal oppression of her own daughter. As a result, a relationship that should be grounded in understanding, support, and care turns into one of conflict between mother and daughter. Lila can express her disappointment only through anger, and maternal love is gradually erased from their relationship. The relationship between Lila and Nunzia reveals that patriarchal culture not only suppresses mothers but also severs the bond between mothers and daughters. As one scholar argues, “To construct a female culture capable of matching male culture, it is necessary to establish a female genealogy, and therefore to restore the mother and daughter relationship.”[6]

Lenù’s relationship with her mother differs significantly from that of the above-mentioned. In this respect, Lenù appears more fortunate. Her mother never deprives her of the opportunity to continue her education and supports her at every stage of her schooling. The central issue in their relationship is Lenù’s attitude toward her mother’s body. From childhood, Lenù feels a deep aversion to it: “I especially hated her body... She limped when she walked, and her gait deeply disturbed me.”[4] She is constantly haunted by the fear that she has inherited her mother’s physical deformity. “Every morning when I woke up, it was the first thing I thought about. I would immediately get out of bed and examine my legs.”[4] Lenù rejects her mother’s body and eagers to escape the shadow of her limp. She fears becoming like her mother. In her eyes, her mother’s body no longer possesses feminine qualities. She believes that if she were to have such a body herself, she would become unworthy of love. When her mother becomes seriously ill in old age, however, the relationship begins to change. Having spent her entire life trying to conceal her body, she finally decides to stop hiding it. She lifts her skirt to reveal her damaged leg and speaks openly, without shame, about the physical repression she experienced because of her husband’s premature ejaculation.

“Once the mother’s body is no longer concealed and her repressed bodily experiences are finally acknowledged, the estrangement between mother and daughter gradually dissolves. Lenù begins to approach her mother and attempts to understand her.”[5] Her limp has made life far more difficult than that of others and has forced her to endure constant hardship, contributing

to her extraordinary harshness. By sharing with her daughter the physical and psychological suffering she has experienced as a woman, she is no longer confined to silence under patriarchy. She presents herself as a female subject. Speaking both as an independent woman and as a mother, she passes on her own life experience and completes the intergenerational transmission of female subjectivity.

In the end, Lenù's painful hip and limping gait become signs that her mother actually lives within her own body. She achieves reconciliation with her mother and, at the same time, with herself. Through the process of moving from rejection and fear to acceptance and understanding of her mother's body, Lenù completes the search for her own identity. Her inheritance of her mother's limp symbolizes the continuation of the mother's life in the daughter. As Lila tells her, "You think you're strong now. You're no longer a daughter. You've become a real mother." [4]

In Irigaray's argument, any discussion of women social relationships must begin with the relationship between mother and daughter. This requires the creation of a new model of motherhood. A mother must first possess her own subjectivity and then demonstrate it to her daughter. By serving as a model, she shows how women preserve their own identity within the existing social order. In this way, the mother-daughter bond can be restored, women can communicate with one another within a harmonious environment, free themselves from the status of the patriarchal Other, recognize their own subjectivity, and establish a history of their own. When Lenù's mother finally stops concealing her body. And she fully exposes her damaged leg in front of her daughter, and speaks candidly about her sexual relationship with her husband, her subjectivity is finally revealed. Lenù's acceptance—and ultimately inheritance—of her mother's body reconstructs the emotional bond between them.

In this sense, the daughter helps the mother, whose subjectivity has long been suppressed, gradually recover her identity as a subject. At the same time, this recovery becomes the very condition through which the daughter establishes her own subjectivity.

4. The Inheritance of Female Writing

Lenù is not only the protagonist of the *Neapolitan Novels* but also the narrator. Her language reflects Ferrante's feminist ideas indeed. After becoming a writer, Lenù acquires the ability to speak for women group. Through her works, she expresses women's sexual experiences suppressed by society and breaks free from unequal marriage. Her female writing becomes a form of resistance by Neapolitan women against patriarchal culture. Throughout history, male writing has been occupying a dominant position, while women's voices have often been concealed. As Ferrante states: "We should create a tradition of women. We must never abandon the skills left to us by our female predecessors. As women, we need to establish a strong, rich, and expansive literary world, one as rich as that of male writers, or even richer." [1]

Before Lenù, Lila was the firstly introduced to the works of female writers. By her Teacher Oliviero. She recognized her talent and placed great expectations on her. She gave Lila a copy of *Little Women* with the note: "This book is actually for adults, but it is suitable for you." Like Jo, the protagonist of *Little Women*, who constantly challenges the limitations imposed on women's creativity by traditional gender norms and realizes her own value through writing, Lila also practices female writing and creates *The Blue Fairy*. Later, when Lila is unable to continue her education, Lenù gradually advances through school, eventually becoming a writer. Through writing, she begins to articulate women's experiences and gains social recognition as a female author.

Ferrante's novels contain many female characters being good at writing. Their writing is not merely a form of recording, but a process of reorganizing and reinterpreting personal experience. Through language, these women confront long-suppressed bodily experiences, emotional trauma, and social struggles. In the act of narration, they repair psychological

fractures, reconstruct their identities, and create a voice that belongs to women themselves. Lenù's writing about her own life and her lifelong relationship with Lila is both a testimony to female experience and a concrete expression of Ferrante's female writing.

The two female characters created by Elena Ferrante, Lila and Lenù, break certain boundaries within the male-dominated society of Naples. They challenge the binary opposition between male and female, as well as the inequality of power between genders. Lila boldly escapes the constraints imposed on women by marriage. Her disappearance represents her refusal to compromise with a violent world. Through education and writing, Lenù gains the power of discourse. Her female consciousness continues to develop, and her writing gradually moves beyond male-centered narratives to reconstruct a female order of meaning. The relationship between Lila and Lenù grows through mutual dependence, imitation, and competition. Their bond deepens over time, and they continually cross gender boundaries while jointly resisting an unequal patriarchal society.

5. Conclusion

Ferrante herself has also expressed her views on female writing: "What exactly is women's writing? It is not only necessary to confront male writers, but also to confront the women created by male writers, because these images have already entered our minds and become part of us. Today, the relationship between women and men is not the most important issue. What is more complicated is the woman within the male body, or the man within the female body." This idea also echoes her argument that women should create their own tradition and establish a literary world that is richer and more expansive than the world of male literature.

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