

# Unlearning Sacred Motherhood: Ambivalence, Memory, and Female Autonomy in *The Lost Daughter*

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## Abstract

Elena Ferrante's novel *The Lost Daughter* and its 2021 film adaptation directed by Maggie Gyllenhaal offer a disturbing yet deeply honest exploration of motherhood stripped of its idealised aura. Moving away from the culturally sanctified image of the self-sacrificing mother, the narrative foregrounds maternal ambivalence, female desire, and the psychological cost of caregiving. This paper examines how *The Lost Daughter* destabilises dominant narratives of motherhood by presenting motherhood as fragmented, contradictory, and emotionally taxing. Through the character of Leda, the text interrogates memory, guilt, and autonomy, exposing the silences imposed on women who deviate from normative maternal expectations. Using feminist theory and film-literary analysis, this study argues that *The Lost Daughter* functions as a counter-narrative to patriarchal constructions of motherhood and contributes significantly to contemporary discourses on gender, care, and female subjectivity.

**Keywords:** Motherhood, Feminism, Maternal Ambivalence, Memory, Female Autonomy, Film Studies

Motherhood has historically been represented as an instinctive, nurturing, and morally superior role assigned to women. Literature and cinema across cultures have repeatedly reinforced the image of the ideal mother as endlessly patient, self-denying, and emotionally fulfilled through caregiving. Feminist scholarship, however, has increasingly questioned this romanticisation, arguing that such representations erase women's individuality and silence experiences of exhaustion, resentment, and desire for autonomy. Elena Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter* emerges within this critical tradition, presenting motherhood not as a sacred destiny but as a complex, often painful negotiation between selfhood and responsibility.

The narrative centres on Leda, a middle-aged academic spending a solitary holiday by the sea. Her encounter with a young mother, Nina, and her daughter Elena triggers memories of her own past as a mother to two young daughters. These recollections form the emotional core of the text, revealing Leda's confession that she once abandoned her children for three years in pursuit of intellectual freedom and personal fulfilment. This admission radically disrupts the cultural taboo surrounding maternal abandonment, positioning *The Lost Daughter* as a bold interrogation of maternal ideology.

One of the most striking aspects of *The Lost Daughter* is its treatment of maternal ambivalence. Leda does not deny loving her children; rather, she acknowledges the coexistence of love and resentment. Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as institution and motherhood as experience is particularly relevant here. While the institution of motherhood demands self-effacement and moral purity, Leda's lived experience exposes frustration, rage, and a longing for escape. Ferrante refuses to moralise these emotions, instead presenting them as an inevitable consequence of a system that offers women responsibility without adequate support or recognition.

Memory plays a crucial role in shaping Leda's narrative. Her recollections are fragmented, intrusive, and emotionally charged, mirroring the psychological toll of unresolved guilt. The non-linear structure of memory reflects how motherhood continues to inhabit a woman's psyche long after the immediate demands of childcare have ended. In the film adaptation, this is visually represented through close-ups, dissonant sound design, and abrupt temporal shifts that blur the boundary between past and present. Memory thus becomes a site of both trauma and self-understanding, forcing Leda to confront the consequences of her choices.

The stolen doll functions as a powerful symbol within the narrative. When Leda takes Elena's doll, the act is less one of malice than of unconscious identification. The doll represents the burden of motherhood, the projection of maternal anxiety, and the fear of losing control. Leda's obsessive care for the doll reveals her unresolved attachment to her own maternal past, while its gradual deterioration symbolises the decay of idealised motherhood. Through this object, Ferrante externalises the emotional residue of caregiving that continues to haunt women even in the absence of children.

Nina serves as both a mirror and a warning to Leda. As a young mother trapped in an oppressive family structure, Nina embodies the repetition of maternal suffering across generations. Her fascination with Leda stems from an intuitive recognition of an alternative life path, one that prioritises selfhood over sacrifice. However, *The Lost Daughter* resists presenting escape as a simple solution. Leda's professional success and independence are accompanied by loneliness, guilt, and social judgement, suggesting that female autonomy within patriarchal structures is always partial and contested.

The film adaptation intensifies these themes through visual and performative choices. Olivia Colman's portrayal of Leda emphasises emotional restraint punctuated by moments of vulnerability, resisting audience expectations of redemption or remorse. Maggie Gyllenhaal's

direction deliberately avoids sentimental framing, opting instead for discomfort and ambiguity. The beach, traditionally associated with leisure and freedom, becomes a space of surveillance and anxiety, reinforcing the idea that motherhood extends beyond the private sphere into public scrutiny.

From a feminist perspective, *The Lost Daughter* challenges the moral binary that categorises mothers as either good or bad. Leda exists in the uncomfortable space between these extremes, forcing readers and viewers to confront their own internalised expectations of maternal behaviour. The hostility she faces from other characters reflects society's intolerance toward women who prioritise themselves, revealing how deeply entrenched the ideology of maternal sacrifice remains.

Importantly, the text does not advocate the rejection of motherhood but calls for a more honest articulation of its realities. By giving voice to maternal ambivalence, Ferrante creates space for alternative narratives that acknowledge complexity rather than enforce idealisation. This aligns with contemporary feminist calls to reconceptualise care as a shared social responsibility rather than an individual moral obligation imposed on women.

In conclusion, *The Lost Daughter* stands as a significant intervention in literary and cinematic representations of motherhood. Through its unflinching portrayal of maternal ambivalence, memory, and female autonomy, the narrative dismantles the myth of the self-sacrificing mother and exposes the psychological costs of enforced caregiving. Ferrante's work invites readers and viewers to reconsider deeply held assumptions about love, duty, and femininity, making visible the silences that have long surrounded women's maternal experiences. As both a novel and a film, *The Lost Daughter* contributes meaningfully to feminist discourse by insisting that women's truths, however uncomfortable, deserve articulation.

**Conflict of Interests:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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