

On the Mother-Daughter Relationship and Its Symbolic Significance in The Neapolitan Novels

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Abstract

Italian anonymous female writer Elena Ferrante's novel "The Naples Tetralogy" is a work that has attracted much attention in the history of foreign literature, and the theme of "women's self-awakening and growth" in the book has been much talked about by scholars. Mother-daughter relationship plays an important role in the growth of female characters, and the different types of mother-daughter relationship make the characterization of the book more three-dimensional. There are three main types of mother-daughter relationships depicted in the book: the severance of mother-daughter bonds, the reconstruction of mother-daughter bonds and mother-daughter symbols. This paper will take the mother-daughter relationship in "The Neapolitan Tetralogy" as the starting point for different aspects of interpretation, so as to explore the role of different types of mother-daughter relationship in the novel in the molding of specific characters as well as revealing the main idea of the novel.

Keywords

The Neapolitan Tetralogy; mother-daughter relationship; mother-daughter symbol; female writing.

1. Introduction

"The writing of male-centered patrilineal genealogy has expelled matrilineal genealogy from the writing of history, making it a 'blank page' in the history of human civilization."¹ There are numerous characters depicted in the novel The Neapolitan Tetralogy, and the character relationships between them are intricate and complex, and the mother-daughter relationship among them is extremely rich in meaning, including Nunzia and Lila, Ima and Lenon in the early period - the severing of the mother-daughter bond, Ima and Lenon in the later period, Lenon and her daughters -renewal of the mother-daughter bond, and Leila and Lennon - mother-daughter symbolism. Although the theme of mother-daughter relationship is not the most emphasized part of the author's writing, through the portrayal of several pairs of mother-daughter relationships in the book, we can get a glimpse of the hidden emotional transformations behind them, and thus gain a deeper understanding of the psychology of the characters as well as the main theme of the work.

2. The severing of the mother-daughter bond

2.1. Dedication to the Repression of Male Power: Nunzia and Leila

The Neapolitan Tetralogy portrays a number of mother figures, among which Lilla's mother, Nunzia, is always presented as "subordinate to the husband's power". "Mothers are supposed to act as protectors of their daughters and provide her with a safe haven, but the complete loss of voice of the suppressed women in the patriarchal space leads to the inability of the daughters

¹ Liu Chuanxia. The Constructed Feminine A Study of Gender in Modern Chinese Literature [M], Jinan: Qilu Books, 2007. Page 244.

to turn to their mothers when they are trapped in a difficult situation.”² In the book, Nunzia is absolutely obedient to Fernando, the shoemaker, who is Lila's father, and will never say “no” to his decisions, and she loses her voice in the family.

The conflict between mother and daughter is a reflection of the conflict between “human character” and “environment”, which is reflected in the Neapolitan Tetralogy by the pair of Lilla and Nunzia. Human beings have a double ethical identity, one is the ethical identity built on the basis of blood relationship at birth, and the other is the identity built up in society later in life. In the novel, the young Lilla shows a very amazing talent for learning and has a strong will to learn herself, however, Nunzia always adheres to her husband's opinion - refusing to allow Lilla to get the opportunity to continue her studies. Even after a firm talk with Oliviero, the schoolteacher, Nunzia does not change her mind, insisting that Leila stay at home to help her husband and become his accomplice, killing Leila's chances of going to school.

Nunzia never fulfills her responsibilities as a mother at every stage of Leila's development, and instead of protecting her daughter, she becomes a hindrance to Leila's pursuit of something better time and time again. She gives herself completely to male power and loses her voice in the family, and her behavior is what fuels the tragic events in Leila's life thereafter.

2.2. Entanglement and Contradiction of the Self: Irma and Lennon

In The Neapolitan Tetralogy, the relationship between Lennon, another protagonist of the novel, and her mother has been in a state of extreme antagonism in the early part of the novel. Lennon's mother has been squeezing Lennon's study time, forcing her to share the heavy chores for herself, scolding Lennon at the beginning of the new semester because of the need to bear the heavy cost of books, and ridiculing Lennon's out-of-shape figure in her daily life. Through the author's sharp description, we can see the image of a mother who is difficult to communicate with, selfish and irritable, and does not think about her children.

Lennon's mother is very controlling and wants Lennon to live and grow up according to her own ideas, and she scolds Lennon in her daily life. She is also oppressive towards Lennon when it comes to furthering his education, and at first she does not agree with Lennon continuing his education. Lennon also has mixed feelings about her mother; she longs to escape Naples, the city that has bound her since childhood, and even more so, to escape from her mother and her controlling nature.

In the first two books of the tetralogy, the author never reveals Lennon's mother's real name to us readers, but only appears as “Lennon's mother”. Other mothers in the novel, such as Nunzia, Lilla's mother, Maria, Stefano's mother, and Giuseppina, Pasquale's mother, are mentioned at the beginning of the novel and even in the character sheet that introduces it. However Lennon's mother's name, Ima, is not mentioned until Lennon's second child is about to be born in the third book of the tetralogy, *Those Who Leave, Those Who Stay*. In Naples in the 1950s and 1960s, it was customary to name one's children after one's parents, whereas Lennon had always refused to name her children after her own mother, in a variety of ways that illustrate the mother-daughter dichotomy between them.

Lennon's mother has an antagonistic feeling towards Lennon because of her own physical defects as well as her disappointments in life. She is unable to balance her daughter's excellence with her own defects, and she is jealous of Lennon's opportunity to slowly realize her own value. She is extremely torn and conflicted, which leads to her inability to be a competent mother in the beginning of the novel.

² Zhu Shixia. *Fear, Body, Redemption: a Feminist Geographic Reading of Ferrante's Neapolitan Tetralogy* [D]. Wuhan University, 2020.

3. Renewing the Mother-Daughter Bond

Irigaray states, "Women must love one another, both as mothers with maternal love and as daughters with the love of children."³ Although the mother-daughter relationship in the novel gives readers the first impression of mother-daughter antagonism, it is not difficult to find out that the relationship between several pairs of mothers and daughters is in fact tightly linked behind the antagonism after reading the text in depth. Lennon is the protagonist under the renewal of the mother-daughter bond, and she eventually reconciles with her past and her grown-up self, accepting her dual identity as a daughter and a mother.

3.1. Reconciliation with the Past: Lennon's Changing Relationship with His Mother

3.1.1. Lennon's mother's hidden love

In the early part of the novel, Lennon and her mother have been in a kind of antagonistic relationship, but as the novel develops, we can feel in the author's narration that Lennon's mother's sincere love for Lennon is hidden behind the mask of violence and rudeness.

When Lennon graduates from elementary school, she faces the same situation as Lila - her family strongly urges her to drop out of school to help share the family's affairs. Lennon was fortunate, however, that after a few strong words from Ms. Oliviero and her parents, Lennon was able to pass the exams and enter middle school to continue her education. Although Lennon's mother is very rude and unpleasant during the conversations, and has a lot of complaints about Mr. Oliviero, she finally agrees to let Lennon continue her schooling. At the same time, on the other hand, it is this forcefulness of Lennon's mother that promotes Lennon's struggle with himself and motivates him to excel even more academically.

When Lennon left Naples alone to attend college in the unfamiliar city of Pisa, one Christmas Eve Lennon suddenly developed a fever, and her mother, a crippled woman who had never traveled anywhere but Naples, suddenly pushed open the door of Lennon's dormitory and came to visit and care for her. "After she had gone, the room fell silent, and I breathed a sigh of relief, still touched by the fever. I imagined her alone, asking people for directions, how to get to the train station, dragging a faulty leg, walking alone in this strange city. She wouldn't pay to take the bus; she was always careful never to waste a penny. But she could do it all the same: she would buy the right ticket, get on the right train, and spend the whole night sitting in a very uncomfortable seat, or standing all the way to Naples, and when she got there she had a long walk ahead of her." [[Italian] Elena Ferrante. *The Story of a New Name* [M], translated by Chen Ying. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House. 2017. Page 148.] This detailed description in the novel highlights the image of a strong, domineering mother, which is very much in line with the past image of Lennon's mother, yet the deep motherly love that fills it has to make people moved.

Lennon's mother, despite her violent personality and rude language, always loved her eldest daughter Lennon deep in her heart, and always accompanied Lennon in her own unique and domineering way. This deep maternal love is gradually revealed in the latter part of the novel. Lennon's mother's hidden love also creates a buffer between her and Lennon's strained relationship, laying the foundation for them to open up and accept each other later on.

3.1.2. The True Reconciliation of Lennon's Mother and Daughter

The real point of transformation in Lennon's relationship with her mother comes after the birth of Lennon's third child, whom she names Ima - the very name of Lennon's mother, representing

3 Iyaki. Mother-Daughter Bond - The Reconstruction of Women's Genealogy in an Irigaray-Style Reading of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* [J]. *Western Journal*, 2023(10):173-176.

the real reconciliation between Lennon and her own mother after a long period of forty years, after each of them has experienced a broken life.

After her illness, Lennon's mother becomes less strong and often shows Lennon her vulnerable and helpless side, a stark change from her once strong and cold mother. She explains to Lennon the reason for her limp, and for the first time the mother and daughter open up for a friendly conversation. "You see, I still won't dick it this time; I know how to suffer, I learned it when I was ten years old, and I haven't stopped since then. If you know how to suffer, death will honor you, and after a while it goes away by itself."⁴

Lennon realizes that her mother has become quietly old, and after her mother's illness and death, she wears her mother's bracelet on her own hand, making it part of her body. At the same time, she accepted her body's leg pains from childbearing because, in her mind, that was her mother's legacy to her. When Lennon was young, she always feared that she would become as limping as her mother, yet at this point, her mother had become a part of herself. The understanding of identity, both physical and mental, eventually led to a true reconciliation between Lennon and her mother.

3.2. Reconciliation with the Self: Lennon's Own Growth as a Mother

3.2.1. Acceptance of motherhood

The dual identity of mother and self inevitably creates conflict, and Lennon was clearly unprepared to be a mother when she first became one. "I heard her crying and felt uneasy; she conveyed to me a feeling of unhappiness."⁵ Lennon's relationship with her own husband, Petro, is increasingly strained because of her children, and she herself feels frustrated. Lennon often has dark thoughts, disgust for the child, doubts about motherhood, and her own delirious state of mind, all of which are shown in detail through the narrator, Lennon, in a very slow, torturous period of bonding. Lennon wants to get back into her writing career, which means that she can't possibly spend all of her time caring for her daughter. And Lennon's career is so strong that for the first few moments of becoming a mother, Lennon is inconsolable about her change in identity.

Lennon's reunion with her first love, Nino, makes her give up the opportunity to be with her daughters and pursue her own life and career. This act of leaving her children behind for her own freedom does not make Lennon a competent mother, to say the least, no matter which way you look at it.

Lennon really manages to come to terms with her motherhood after her own mother passes away, and after the Solara brothers break the bracelet that Lennon's mother left for Lennon, Lennon agrees to give them the bracelet to take for repair, and this quote from Leila says it all: "You feel so strong, you're no longer a daughter, you've become a real mother."⁶ This passage from Leila points out the truth of Lennon's upbringing. After Lennon got married and had children, she often felt pain in her body and numbness in her legs, but at this time, Lennon no longer ran away from her body that resembled her mother's, but took the initiative to accept this deformation of her body, which meant that Lennon accepted her identity as a mother. Because Lennon's love for her mother no longer needs to be sent in the bracelet, losing her mother is actually losing the barrier to face the whole world, and this also shows that Lennon needs to accept the identity change from daughter to mother, and it is also at this moment that Lennon really faces the world alone as a mother.

4 [Italian] Elena Ferrante. *The Disappearing Child* [M], translated by Chen Ying. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House. 2017. Page 89.

5 [Italian] Elena Ferrante. *What Leaves, What Remains* [M], translated by Chen Ying. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House. 2017. Page 236.

6 [Italian] Elena Ferrante. *The Disappearing Child* [M], translated by Chen Ying. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House. 2017. Page 101.

3.2.2. Nurturing her daughter's growth

After giving birth to her first daughter, Dédé, Lenon is tired of the family atmosphere in which she has lost her own subjectivity, and she gives her daughter to a nanny to raise. When she meets Nino, a symbol of liberationism, in her stagnant life, Lenon goes to a faraway place with her lover Nino without any hesitation. Although her act of abandoning her daughter shows that she has failed to fulfill her duty as a mother, Lenon's pursuit of her own subjectivity can also be seen in this choice.

After divorcing her husband, who does not approve of her, Lennon is free from the restrictions of her family and begins to pursue a life of her own, and she realizes her subjective freedom. At the same time, Lennon tries her best to maintain a balance between her duty to take care of her daughters and her own work as a writer, she raises her three daughters to adulthood by herself, and has always been successful in her career, "Women should not give up their own subjectivity when they become mothers, and Lennon, as a modern Medea-type mother, maintains her female subjectivity and femininity, which provides a new possibility for the relationship between mothers and daughters."⁷ The continuation of the mother-daughter relationship should not be at the expense of the woman giving up her subjectivity once she becomes a mother, but should be a mutual growth of both mother and daughter, which is the most important point.

After Lennon finally recognizes Nino's true nature, she is also brave enough to take on the burden of raising her daughter alone. At this point, she is truly strong and sober and independent, becoming the image of the woman she aspired to be since she was a child herself. When we revisit several female protagonists in the book, we will find that Nadia, who has a better background, commits herself to violence and doctrine, and Lennon's childhood playmate, Giyola, dies a miserable and lonely death on the street in her later years. When everything falls silent, only Lennon, through her continuous self-improvement, holds on to the throat of fate, insists on her own self, and avoids sinking.

4. Symbol of Mother and Daughter

Leila and Lennon are the main characters of the novel, and the author shows the sincere feelings between them through her delicate strokes, and this feeling is far beyond friendship and love. The author prefers to consider the mutual attachment between Lilla and Lennon as a new type of mother-daughter symbol. They are different from the traditional meaning of a pair of mother and daughter, always competing with each other, secretly competing, but never absent at the most important moment of each other's lives, and eventually writing a great female epic together in the long river of life.

4.1. Unconventional Friendship: Each Other's Genius Girlfriends

In the whole book, the relationship between Leila and Lennon is extremely complicated. One of them is an open and resolute rebel, while the other one is a rebel with a gentle exterior. Since she was a child, Leila has seen through the backwardness and darkness of the city she lives in, but in the end she chooses to "delete herself", choosing to erase all traces of herself in the world. Lennon, on the other hand, after making up his mind to escape from Naples, climbs to the top and becomes a better version of himself.

Throughout the book, Lennon's admiration and imitation of Leila is present from the beginning. The flashes of otherworldly genius that Leila displays from a young age have always attracted Lennon and urged Lennon to always move forward. This is different from the motivation that

⁷ Gao Lu. Interpretation of the Neapolitan Tetralogy in the Field of Lacanian Subject Theory [D]. Northern Nationalities University, 2021.

Lennon's mother brings to Lennon; it is a spontaneously generated sense of pursuit that comes from within Lennon.

"The friendship between Leila and Elena, their relationship is longer than friendship, deeper than kinship, an unconventional friendship that seems too narrowly defined in terms of 'friendship', a soulful, passionate relationship mixed with love and adoration."⁸ Not only Lilla's existence has been inspiring Lennon to get out of the dark town and go to college in Pisa to make more friends and go to a wider world, Lennon is likewise the only harbor for Lilla in her gloomy world. Whether it's Nino's betrayal and abandonment, or her confusion and suffering while raising her children, it's only in Lennon's presence that Lilla sheds her protective colors of pretense and strength, and opens up to Lennon's vulnerable side.

"For most of them, the hope of pursuing radical avenues of liberation seemed too remote to even think about, and would remain so until their sense of liberation awakened."⁹ Leila and Lennon shine with the light of a loving mother, looking out for each other and searching for their idealized selves. Just as the title of the first part of the novel, *My Genius Girlfriend*, this is a mutual name between Leila and Lennon, both of them are each other's genius girlfriends, and they work hand in hand to tide over a life full of crises.

4.2. In Pursuit of the Mirror Self: A New Mother-Daughter Relationship

"Ferrante portrays a complex female friendship in the novel: both noble emotions and negative emotions such as denigration and jealousy."¹⁰ Lennon and Leila deeply intervene in each other's life: Leila always thinks that she is out of place in Naples, and she needs Lennon's existence to dissolve her own nihilism; and Lennon as a writer can't do without the stimulation and inspiration brought to her by Leila. It can be said that they drew on each other's energy, fought against the boundaries of the patriarchal society together, and supported each other through their long lives, establishing a stable and solid relationship of friendship between them and strengthening their identity. Lennon and Leila, mirror reflections of each other, are intertwined with feelings of jealousy and attachment.

"In the midst of each other, we never feel deprived" The female friendship between Leila and Lennon combines both jealousy and attachment. In the social environment of inequality between men and women, Leila seems to be outside of the mundane world, and there is a clear boundary between her spiritual world and her surroundings, and she has been bravely resisting the authoritative forces that are regarded as the standard, trying to change her situation. In contrast, Lennon is a gentle but determined rebel, who, under Leila's influence, steps out of Naples, out of the dark city in which she grew up, and ultimately achieves a new life that is very different from that of the other traditional women of the city. They are like mothers to each other, always there for each other, leaving their mark on each other's lives.

5. Conclusion

In the current study of *The Naples Tetralogy*, the theme of "women's awakening and struggle" accounts for the majority of the author Ferrante's writing of the novel, placed in the context of unequal relations between men and women in post-World War II Naples, laying the groundwork for women's awakening and struggle. But it is precisely because of the unrelenting oppression of women that the mother-daughter relationship and mother-daughter symbolism in this book are written in such a way that the women in the book are portrayed in a fuller light.

8 Tina Lee. A Study of Female Writing in the "Neapolitan Tetralogy" [D]. Changchun University of Science and Technology, 2023.

9 [US] Kate Millett. *Theory of Sexual Politics* [M], translated by Song Wenwei. Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2000. Page 34.

10 Ark Diaio. On the "Boundaries" of Elena Ferrante's "Neapolitan Tetralogy" [D]. Jinan University, 2022.

The mother-daughter pair of Leila and Nunzia is a typical embodiment of the severed mother-daughter bond, where the mother dedicates herself completely to male power, losing her self-subjectivity while at the same time oppressing and destroying her own daughter in an attempt to make her a second self. The complex mother-daughter relationship between Lennon and Ima is a renewal of the mother-daughter bond, with the relationship between them gradually evolving from a tense one to one of mutual reconciliation. At the same time, Lennon's own journey of growth as a mother shows that Lennon has found herself in a patriarchal society. The deep relationship between Lilla and Lennon is the most exciting part of the book, and it is impossible to define what that relationship is in one word. They are jealous of each other, but also trust each other and support each other, which is a new type of mother-daughter symbol. Several pairs of mothers and daughters in the book, whether it is Lila and Nunzia, who have always been on the opposite side, or Lenon and Ima, who hide their sincere love under the surface of incompatibility, or Lenon herself, who becomes a mother to her own child from the surface of the attitude to the inner change in thought, the feelings between these pairs of mothers and daughters and the transformation of mother-daughter relationship behind them, play an important role in the perfecting and fullness of their character image. play an important role in the perfection and enrichment of their characterization, which is worth exploring and thinking about. The lack of mother's love in Leila's childhood affects the direction of her growth to a certain extent, while Lennon's mother's heavy and somewhat "aberrant" mother's love prompts Lennon to escape from Naples and go to a bigger world. Meanwhile, the symbolic mother-daughter relationship between Lennon and Leila, the main characters of the novel, not only implies that they are the only salvation for each other in the dark atmosphere of the Neapolitan city, but also reflects the light of women's self-improvement through the collision of the two souls.

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