

Two Sides of the Same Coin

Class, Violence, and Trauma in Elena Ferrante's The Story of the Lost Child

Jauza Maryam Mumtazah
Universitas Padjadjaran, Sumedang, Indonesia
jauza20001@mail.unpad.ac.id

Abstract

The two female protagonists of Elena Ferrante's The Story of the Lost Child (2015), Elena and Lila, share similar past traumas, but their diverging social status affect the way they react to the same catastrophic events. Concurrently, the 1980 Irpinia Earthquake was marked as one of the worst catastrophes in Italy and around it all, political terrorisms known as the "Years of Lead" and the crime syndicate, the Camorra, continued to fuel violence and unrest. In a patriarchal society rich in organized crimes and political turmoils, the life-long traumas of the most vulnerable groups, such as women, is a key aspect in examining how power and violence of a larger scale affects the individuals within it. Thus, this paper offers an analysis on how specific traumas experienced by women of different social status emerges and reemerges around specific catastrophes. I found that while both Elena and Lila grew up as best friends in the same crime-filled neighborhood in Naples and have experienced both domestic and sexual violence, Elena's opportunity of higher education and Lila's inability to have the same is connected to their ability and inability to break away from the confinements of their neighborhood. The climax of their differences is apparent in two scenes: the Irpinia Earthquake in 1980 and the disappearance of Lila's daughter, Tina, in 1984. In the first, Lila experiences momentary shock and sees what she calls the "dissolving boundaries", while Elena is the one who remains calm and tries to guide her to safety. In the latter, Tina's disappearance causes Lila's worsened mental and physical health years onwards, while Elena continues to become a published author and writes a novel based on the disappearance.

Keywords: *Female protagonists, Class differences, Violence, Catastrophe, 1980s Naples*

Introduction

The Story of the Lost Child (2015) is the last novel of the Neapolitan Quartet by the Italian author Elena Ferrante. It has been translated to English by Ann Goldstein and succeeds My Brilliant Friend (2012), The Story of a New Name (2013), and Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay (2014). Consisting of three parts: "Maturity", "Old Age: The Story of Bad Blood", and "Epilogue: Restitution", the novel concludes the story of two best friends, Elena and Lila, in their run-down and crime-filled neighborhood in Naples. Elena, now in her thirties and has left her husband with her lover, is a successfully published author who travels around the world for conferences and book talks. In the meantime, Lila, who has also left her husband, has built a growing computer programming company called Basic Sight in Naples, living with her companion and her son.

The novel continues the story of their rocky but unbreakable relationship, in which Elena resettles in Naples with her daughters to write her third novel, living above Lila's apartment, while Lila manages her company in the midst of the neighborhood's widespread use of illegal drugs. These drugs were a common aspect of the spreading of the illegal economy by the Camorra, the well-known crime syndicate in Naples. The Neapolitan Camorra, according to Allum (2006) originated in prisons and poor population, and unlike the Sicilian Mafia, their structures are highly disorganized, with clans fighting each other to take over territories. In the novel, the Solara brothers, who have taken hold of their neighborhood's businesses through drug dealers and loan sharks, are an example of how entrenched the illegal economy is, especially when natural disasters strike and the chances to exploit such conditions are open. Furthermore, the escalating tensions between communists, fascists, and capitalists also lead to thousands of terrorists attacks. Although neither Elena nor Lila ever took parts in them directly, Elena's political participation as an author and Lila's loss of her daughter due to the possibility of that participation (Lila theorized that because of Elena's book's call-out on the mafia caused anger from the mafia's side and they intended to take Elena's daughter, mistaking Lila's daughter for her due to a mix-up in an accidental photograph), is one such example of how the larger political catastrophes at work affects the individuals within it, and one other major scene that I will discuss to further present the effects of the Earthquake. Thus, I will discuss how the Irpinia Earthquake and the disappearance of Lila's daughter, which happens to be two major scenes within the story, show Lila's explicitly mentioned fragility and how the contrast with her other, her best friend, and also her storyteller, Elena, is presented.

Literature Review

A handful of literature has been done to discuss the significance of Elena and Lila's relationship, as well as the Neapolitan environment that characterizes the story. Caffè (2021) analyzes the representation of trauma of sexual violence towards the two female protagonists through their social environment and classes, and explores how traumatic events can be manifested in everyday lives and how the most vulnerable, such as Lila, becomes the one who is most likely to disintegrate and disappear. In addition, Niazi (2020) analyzes how Elena sees Lila, that is, not as the subaltern or only either good or bad, but as a human with various dimensions. He also explains how the ambiguity of their power dynamics rejects any dualism that they have against one another. However, Nguon (2021) claims that rather than a relationship that solely relies on hostility and a mirroring of each other's identity, the many instances of their dependency is based on an acceptance of their differences. Furthermore, in the context of its setting, Bullaro (2016) points out the economic miracle of post-WWII in Italy as a border between the old and the new or more specifically used in the novel, "the before and after". In many instances, destitution within the neighborhood is connected to the violence that culminates in households. All of these findings point into the direction that Elena and Lila are integrated and at the same time, in opposition, with one another and growing up together within a hostile environment took part in their fates. Thus, this paper will discuss two specific examples that clarifies these previous findings further, using the opposing sides of the two protagonists and how each reacts and unfolds in especially catastrophic events.

Methodology

The method that will be used in this paper is by reading and taking notes of the differences of reactions between the two protagonists throughout the story in two specific events, the Earthquake and the disappearance of Lila's daughter. Furthermore, I will also analyze their similar childhood and

how entrenched their traumas become as they reach the prime of their adult years.

Findings and Discussion

Naples, the city where Elena and Lila grew up in, represents the disparity they are affected by as they grow up, even as adults with seemingly successful careers. Elena is the narrator and the novel is seen through her lens, and like Lila, she sees the ugliness of Naples each time she comes back, even when the place gave her the inspiration for her novels. When she comes back from the long trip away with her lover, she says, “I noticed the ugliness of the periphery, with the small gray apartment buildings beyond the tracks; the pylons, the lights of the signals, the stone parapets” (Ferrante, 2015, p. 37). In contrast to Elena, Lila’s disgust towards Naples is accompanied by her determination to use revenge against the corrupted Solara brothers, as a solution to their disparity. She says that “Naples... is disgusting, exactly as it was before... Lila’s was taking revenge on all the predators, it didn’t give a damn about Communists and socialists, it was starting over from zero” (p. 46).

Furthermore, the disgust they feel towards their neighborhood has cultivated since their childhood, in which violence and corruption becomes a norm of their everyday lives and everyone they know is affected by it one way or another. Domestic violence, for example, occurs throughout families in their neighborhood that even when Elena becomes angry at Nino, she feels the violence from her childhood culminating in her. She says:

[I] wanted to beat him, spit in his face as I had seen people do as a child in the neighborhood quarrels, call him a shit, scratch him, tear out his eyes. I was surprised, frightened. Am I always this furious other I? I, here in Naples, in this filthy house, I, who if I could would kill this man, plunge a knife into his heart with all my strength? (p. 95)

Even the modernization of Naples, to Elena, is only a facade. To her, it is “only cosmetic, a powder of modernity applied randomly and boastfully, to the corrupt face of the city” (p. 335). The spread of illegal drugs particularly, is a symbol of their disproportion even as a modernized city. Elena hears about the drug dealings in the neighborhood that have involved her own brothers, and Lila’s brother and son, and says that “they all slip inside the veins of Signora Palmieri’s son [Marcello Solara], a boy I don’t even know and who now causes me pain... what actually repressed them was a kind of thunder under the building, under the stradone...” (pp. 169-170). According to Bullaro (2016), “The images of dark cellars and hidden spaces evoke an underworld where all is mysterious and frightening: Italy’s dark past of fixed social classes, poverty, lack of opportunity, and abuse of power.” Thus, I would argue that the corrupted environment dominated by the Solara brothers, in which Elena and Lila have grown up in, not only becomes a mere memory of their childhood, but an entrenched reality that lives within them even as the city modernizes and they go on to have successful careers.

The gap between Elena and Lila starts far back in their childhood, in which Lila, who was said to be even brighter than Elena, was never given permission by her father to continue her education after primary school. On the other hand, Elena excelled in her high school years and even landed a scholarship to continue to university, which would eventually lead her to write and become a successful author who is able to travel beyond her margins. When she describes the world outside her neighborhood, she often uses Lila as a contrast. Lila, whom she says “was afraid even of San Giovanni a Teduccio—if in the past I had judged it an arguable choice that she was nevertheless able, as usual, to turn into an advantage—now seemed to me simply a sign of mental limitation” (Ferrante,

2015, p. 26). Thus, to Elena, Lila's physical limitation set by her patriarchal environment in the beginning, has now turned into a mental limitation that Lila herself has set for herself. Furthermore, I would argue that the climax of Lila's fear that Elena has previously described is shown through the 1980 Irpinia earthquake scene. The moment they both felt the Earthquake, Elena focused on their survival by leading Lila outside to find a safe spot for them to shelter in, but Lila was too stunned to react. Elena describes her as:

to have erased every feeling: her ears didn't hear, her throat didn't inhale air, her mouth was locked, her eyelids canceled her gaze. She was a motionless organism, rigid, alive only in the hands that, fingers spread, gripped her stomach. (p. 171)

Lila, herself, in shock and panicked as Elena leads her, "cried out that the car's boundaries were dissolving, the boundaries of Marcello, too, at the wheel were dissolving, the thing and the person were gushing out of themselves, mixing liquid metal and flesh" (p. 175). Unlike Elena, she sees everything breaking, as if losing control of her own vision. In this contrast, Elena and Lila are put in the same catastrophic situation, in which one's reaction accounts for who they truly are. Thus, I would argue that the gap between their exposure to education and walking outside of their marginalized environment causes one to have greater control over the other.

"I will never forget. It was September 16, 1984. Lila and I had just turned forty, Tina and Imma were almost four" (p. 325). This is the day that Lila's daughter, and second child, Tina, disappears and is never seen again, and Elena, having been present with her on the same occasion with no one else but Lila and the neighborhood to depend on in her stories, can never escape from its never-ending catastrophic effects. In the meantime, Lila suffers through years of depression and increasing bitterness. Before Tina's disappearance, she was seen as the "savior" of the neighborhood. Despite the domination of the corrupt Solara brothers and her well-known tough temperament, she uses her computer programming company, Basic Sight, and gives jobs to those who are desperately in need of income. For example, one of their closest childhood friends, Carmen, talks about her as someone who "knew everything, even the most terrible acts, but she never condemned you, she understood that anyone can make a mistake, herself first of all, and so she helped you" (p. 152). However, after Tina's sudden disappearance, Lila, as explained by her companion, Enzo, "slid into the void left by her daughter" (p. 411). She becomes bitter and rude to everyone, even to Lila, Enzo, and her own son. Even more so, it has snuffed out her desires and wills, even to simply live, whether or not she meant to tell this to Elena as a tease or a metaphor. Even when she seemed to be content again, the void forces her back again. In a scene where Enzo tells Elena of what happens when Lila is alone at home, he says that "you [Elena] don't know how many times she [Lila] has fainted just when she seemed tranquil, washing the dishes or staring out the window at the stradone" (p. 411).

On the other hand, Elena, with her already successful career as an author, uses this disappearance as an inspiration for her next work of fiction. To Elena, her love for Lila is her conviction to write for her, or in other words, to speak for her. She says: "I loved Lila. I wanted her to last. But I wanted it to be I who made her last. I thought it was my task. I was convinced that she herself, as a girl, had assigned it to me" (p. 463). Even Lila herself, despite her natural intelligence, does not believe she has the ability to write as well as Elena, and encourages her to write about everything in the neighborhood, sometimes even crossing the line on "mixing the truth with fiction". Thus, I would argue that this second catastrophic event that has occurred to Lila keeps her in the same void that has swallowed her when she was stunned by the Earthquake, but unlike it, swallowed her longer and deeper, changing her nature all together. In the meantime, Elena, with her high prolific

status, receives even more success from her upcoming novels that have been based on their neighborhood, the disappearance, and even their friendship.

Concluding Remarks

As dependable as Lila and Elena are to one another, their opposing opportunities, paradoxically, falters them into different reactions, especially in the most vulnerable situations. They have lived in a cycle of violence, or what Lila calls “a big Fosso Carbonario” (p. 466), since childhood. Elena, who is often beaten by her mother, feels the same tendency when she becomes angry with her partner, and Lila, who has been thrown out the window by her father and beaten multiple times by her former husband, punishes her own son by either beating him herself or by telling her companion to do it for her. Even Elena, who has managed to “escape” the shackles of the neighborhood by receiving higher education and becoming a world-renowned author, comes back to the neighborhood, whether that be physically by coming back to live there and be near to her lover or mentally, in which she uses the traumatic experiences for her writing. Within this vicious cycle, however, their marginalized voices are spoken through the power Elena has with her writing. To Lila, “Books are written so their authors can be heard, not so that they remain silent” (p. 289), and Elena herself claims that when writing, “I [she] felt strong, no longer a victim of my [her] origins but capable of dominating them, of giving them a shape, of taking revenge on them for myself [herself], for Lila, for whomever” (p. 260). Even after experiencing the literal “breaking of the Earth”, watching the world “dissolve” around her, and losing almost an entirety of herself after she loses her daughter, Lila uses her thirst of knowledge in books and learns the entirety of Naples’ history, reciting what she’s read to Elena’s daughter, Imma.

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