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Jasmine Bajada

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Mothers, Daughters, and Damaged Legs: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* and Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk*

Jasmine Bajada

University of Malta

'Stabat mater dolorosa…'

The suffering mother, in Christian hymn and iconography, stands at the foot of the Cross, distraught at her son's crucifixion and death. While Christ experiences physical suffering and the *jouissance* of the Crucifixion, which is part of what is crucially referred to as "the *Passion* of Christ", the Virgin Mary's maternal body is just a spectator of Christ's somatic suffering. The *Stabat Mater Dolorosa* suffers, yet her body is untouched by physical pain; she sheds tears, yet she stands. Julia Kristeva, in her essay 'Stabat Mater', discusses this Christian representation of the mother in agony and wonders whether the Virgin Mary 'long[s] to experience the wholly masculine pain of a man who expires at every moment on account of *jouissance* due to obsession with his own death'.[1] Kristeva concludes that the Stabat Mater is a 'brilliant illustration of the wrenching between desire for the masculine corpse and negation of death', a paradox that is also encapsulated within the mother's painful act of giving birth, as Kristeva observes in the semiotic gloss of the essay, which recounts her personal experience of motherhood and daughterhood.[2] Kristeva's choice to foreground the Christian icon of the Stabat Mater in order to reflect on the representation of motherhood is judicious, especially in relation to one of this essay's aims: to highlight the lack of a critical inquiry into the notion of motherhood but also, more specifically, the maternal body.

In the attempt to reclaim the maternal feminine, the daughter's filial relationship with the mother can also be recovered. Indeed, Kristeva's 'Stabat Mater' was published just a year after Adrienne Rich's seminal work on motherhood, entitled *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, in which Rich points out that 'in theological doctrine or art or sociology or psychoanalytic theory, it is the mother and son who appear as the eternal, determinative dyad' while, on the other hand, 'there is no presently enduring recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture'.[3] Although, in Greek mythology, mother-daughter relationships like that of Demeter and Persephone are present, as Rich suggests, the mother-daughter dyad has a less powerful hold on the Western imaginary than the relationship between mother and son, particularly in the context of psychoanalysis. Consequently, motherhood has long been constructed in relation to the son, where she who creates him becomes subject to him and is ultimately rejected by him. Meanwhile, in the Western imaginary, the matrilineal bond remains, in Rich's words, 'the great unwritten story'.[4] This can be intimated in Sophocles's *Electra*, a tragedy which positions Electra as the protagonist due to her identity as a daughter. Electra represents the strength of filiation, but the filial bond that the play seeks to champion comes at the price of another: Electra grieves profoundly for her father King Agamemnon while she cuts all ties with her mother Clytemnestra: 'I don't think of you as mother at all'.[5] The sense of the complex in Electra, both play and character, surely lies in the *matrilineal relationship*. In her inability to come to terms with the actions of a mother that does not serve the paternal law, Electra seeks vengeance for her father's death. Electra is the embodiment of a masculinist fantasy that projects the female genealogy as a troubling inheritance in order to show allegiance to the patriarchal.

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[1] Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', trans. by León S. Roudiez, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 160–86 (p. 175).
[2] Ibid.
[3] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976), pp. 185, 196.

The awareness in Western thought of the need to engage with diverse formations of femininities has also had repercussions in twenty-first century literature by female writers, who are increasingly seeking to depict the figure of the mother as well as the complex relationship the mother has with the daughter. These writers have understood that mothers and daughters are like Russian dolls: the mother is also a daughter, while the daughter holds within her the potential of becoming a mother. Writing about mothers and sons is therefore perhaps not as rich and complex as writing about mother-daughter dyads, which foreground questions regarding matrilineality and female inheritance. The novels discussed here – Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* and Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk* – adopt the point of view of the daughter and depict the powerful influence of the mother on the daughter's psyche, although as Ferrante's quartet progresses, the daughter also becomes a mother, thereby allowing a fascinating convergence of familial roles to come into play.

Crucially, in the process of turning the maternal flesh into word, the repressed physical suffering of the mother emerges. In the *Neapolitan Novels* as well as *Hot Milk*, the construction of the maternal feminine relies on the depiction of the othered body of the mother and its somatic suffering. The mother in these texts does not stand, like the *Stabat Mater*, without difficulty as a mere observer of physical pain. At the heart of these narratives lies maternal flesh inflicted by illness, specifically the mother's legs. In the *Neapolitan Novels*, the mother of the narrator Elena Greco, Immacolata, has a limp—'Nor did her right leg work properly—she called it the damaged leg'—which is hauntingly present throughout the quartet.[6] Meanwhile, in *Hot Milk*, a young woman, Sofia Papastergiadis, travels to Spain with her 65-year-old mother Rose in search of a diagnosis for Rose's mysterious inability to walk. When Sofia and Rose enter the Gómez Clinic, Rose claims, 'We are here because I have a bone disease and can't walk'.[7] The spectators of physical pain in these narratives are the daughters, but significantly, they differ from the Virgin Mary in how they are not detached from the sufferer's physical pain. In fact, both Elena and Sofia feel that they have inherited their mothers' pains, which they experience as a kind of phantom illness. Increasingly, however, what seems as merely the fear or the spectre of their mother's illness becomes a *physical* threat, as if the daughter's body were made of maternal flesh. It is challenging, as Elena and Sofia show, to be the inheritor of the female genealogy, especially when the daughter is at a stage in her life when she feels the need to disassociate from the powerful influence of the mother in order to gain her independence. Crucially, both mother-daughter relationships dramatise a change between generations in relation to women's social roles and expectations, particularly with regard to sexual freedom and family life.

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[4] Rich, p. 185.

[5] Sophocles, *Electra*, trans. by Anne Carson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), I.802.

[6] Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2015), p. 45. Henceforth cited in text and footnotes as (*MBF*, page number/s).

[7] Deborah Levy, *Hot Milk* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), p. 12. Henceforth cited in text and footnotes as (*HM*, page number/s).

What these narratives hinge on is the idea that the generation of mothers that gave birth to contemporary daughters and future mothers are victims of the patriarchal society, constrained to adhere to a masculinist conception of womanhood and often made to suffer through violence, like Immacolata, or abandonment, like Rose. Their bodies bear signs of suffering that serve as a testament to their otherness within the patriarchal world. The writers' choice of body part—the mother's legs—is particularly interesting because it brings to the fore notions of movement, or rather, paralysis. Indeed, Luce Irigaray highlights the movement/paralysis binary in her essay 'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other' to describe her bodily bond with her mother: 'I walk with even more difficulty than you do, and I move even less. You flowed into me, and that hot liquid became poison, paralyzing me'.[8] Irigaray significantly contrasts maternal paralysis with paternal movement.

It is not surprising, then, that Elena and Sofia, who represent daughterhood and the sexually liberated woman, are not just hesitant, but afraid, even, to accept the female inheritance transmitted to them by the previous generation embodied in their mother, whom they seek to distance in their attempt to gain selfhood. This paper attempts to diagnose the othered body of the mother that is debilitated by physical suffering, and explores the way the female genealogy shapes the daughter's body, whose flesh remembers and reiterates maternal illness, thereby questioning bodily borders in the mother-daughter dyad. It draws on Kristeva's notion of the abject and Irigaray's reflections on the transmission of bodily paralysis from the mother to the daughter to discuss the othering of the mother and her body in the process of self-formation, as well as the anxiety that the daughter's connection with the mother induces in the former.

In the novels that this paper focuses on, Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* and Levy's *Hot Milk*, the daughter is not only haunted by her mother's damaged leg/s but she also physically experiences her mother's suffering. Through these narratives, a possible reconciliation between mother and daughter is glimpsed through the daughter's acceptance of the mother's suffering as also her own.

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[8] Luce Irigaray, 'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other', trans. by Hélène Vivienne Wenzel, *Signs*, 7 (1981), 60–67 (p. 60).

The (m)other's body

The deeply embedded dualities in Western society and philosophical thought align womanhood with the disempowered Other as opposed to the male subject who is constructed as the 'Self'. From this fundamental hierarchy stem a multitude of other binaries, where culture, mind, and reason are attributed to man while nature, body, and passion are attributed to woman. Crucially, in patriarchal thinking, what is attributed to woman is also often coded as negative. Since, as Marianne Hirsch claims, 'the figure of the mother is determined by her body more intensely than the figure of woman', while the female body is constructed as other, the *maternal* body is that which most intensely and physically embodies otherness.[9] In fact, it is the maternal body, as Kristeva argues, which the child seeks to reject in order to become an autonomous subject and enter the paternal realm.

Kristeva expands on this rejection of the mother and her body in her seminal text *Powers of Horror,* in which she theorises the concept of abjection. Abjection is the process that enables the construction of the self's borders through the rejection of what the subject-in-process perceives as other to oneself, what is 'opposed to I'.[10] Kristeva explains that the abject refers to that which poses as a threat to one's clean and proper self. This is often manifested in one's repulsion to certain food items, excrement, and the human corpse, which is the ultimate abject. According to Kristeva, however, what triggers abjection is not 'lack of cleanliness or health' as such, 'but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules'.[11] There is already an indication, here, that the feminine and the abject are related in how both embody otherness.

Significantly, Kristeva outlines a vivid connection between the process of abjection and the maternal body when she proposes an earlier event to Lacan's mirror stage, which enables the self's formation: the primal rejection of the mother, particularly the mother's womb and the mother's milk. 'Abjection', Kelly Oliver writes, 'is a way of denying the primal narcissistic identification with the mother'.[12] Before abjection, the child is in a harmonious unity with the mother and her semiotic, heterogeneous drives. For the ever-growing child, however, the mother becomes a hindrance to the child's development into an independent self. The mother thus becomes a challenge to be overcome in order to establish one's borders of the self and join the father's symbolic realm governed by laws that keep the abject at bay. A further dichotomy subtly emerges: the paternal self in contrast with the maternal other. The paternal self is formed through the construction of solid borders, which are constantly threatened by the semiotic drives of maternal otherness. The mother is also directly connected to two abject fluids: menstrual blood and maternal milk, both of which connote fertility. The mother's milk is particularly seen as abject because in Kristeva's words, it 'sets up an abnormal bond between mother and child'; the milk that nurtures is also a dangerous fluid because it is both 'nourishing and murderous'.[13] As Kristeva suggests, from this point of view, the maternal body is seen in monstrous terms. The Medusa, in fact, is interpreted by Freud as the horror the male child experiences upon gazing at his mother's genitals. Thus, the maternal body that must be renounced by the subject-in-process is an *othered body*, a body that is abject ironically because it fulfils one of its biological functions—mothering—only *too* well.

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[9] Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother-Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 12.

[10] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. by León S. Roudiez (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 1.

[11] Ibid., p. 4.

[12] Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 60.

This primal process of abjection is much more complex when the child is a daughter. 'The female's gender identity', Karen Elias-Button argues, 'does not require rejection of the primary identification with the mother' since the daughter sees in her mother a likeness forged through biology.[14] Rich draws on this bodily bond when she writes about the matrilineal transmission of semiotic knowledge:

> Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other—beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival—a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other.[15]

This biological connection, however, is not easily accepted by the daughter. The relationship between mother and daughter gradually becomes ambivalent as the daughter grows and seeks to distance herself from the mother, especially when she learns that her female body's maternal functions of reproduction and nurture are not just biological but also social functions projected onto her body by patriarchal society. In the *Neapolitan Novels*, Elena feels this need to dissociate herself from her mother Immacolata, particularly her maternal body. Early on in the first novel, Elena introduces her mother in terms of the abject by claiming that '[h]er body repulsed me' (*MBF*, p. 44). The young Elena feels humiliated by her mother, especially when she contrasts her with her teacher, who has an education and is not tied by marriage or children. In Elena's eyes, the contrast is registered as one based on physical appearance: unlike the teacher, her mother has a 'misshapen figure', an almost monstrous shape that haunts Elena and that she does not come to terms with until she is an adult (*MBF*, p. 93). As Elias-Button observes, the daughter finds the process of developing her identity challenging precisely because 'the mother's body comes to represent to her two mutually exclusive things: the childhood she must move away from, as well as the adulthood she must journey toward and eventually accept'.[16] In other words, mother-daughter relationships are ambiguous because they are shaped by two forces: the attraction based on mutual femininity and the repulsion experienced from the daughter's end in order to assert her independent self. Ferrante, whose oeuvre is rife with mother-daughter relationships, writes in *Frantumaglia* that 'the primitive bond with the mother' is so significant to the daughter that it is very difficult to 'expel from a woman's life the troubling love for the maternal image, the *only* love-conflict that in every case lasts forever'.[17] It is this 'love-conflict' which writers like Levy and Ferrante seek to depict. Often, however, the mother is more than an image: she has an overbearing, *physical* presence. Nonetheless, the concept of the maternal *image*, rather than body, is significant, especially in relation to the mirror trope that is often adopted while discussing mother-daughter relationships.

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[13] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 105, 54.
[14] Karen Elias-Button, 'The Muse as Medusa', in *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, ed. by Cathy N. Davidson and E.M. Broner (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.), pp. 193–206 (p. 197).
[15] Rich, p. 180.
[16] Elias-Button, p. 198.

The mother-daughter mirror

The mirror plays an important role in the psychoanalytic understanding of the way the self is formed. In Lacan's theory, the 'mirror stage' refers to the child's realisation that their reflection in the mirror is themselves; the child identifies the reflection in the mirror as "I" as opposed to the other. This self-identification marks the entrance of the child in the symbolic realm, which occurs when the child must reject its bond with the mother, the primal Other. In mother-daughter narratives, as well as theoretical reflections on this dyad, the mirror assumes a different function: it serves to decrease, rather than strengthen, the difference between the self and the other, the daughter and the mother. Rather than reflecting the unique self of the daughter, the mirror allows the projection of the maternal image onto the daughter's because the daughter sees her mother in her image rather than herself. In other words, the mirror collapses the distinction between the mother and the daughter. In a column for *The Guardian* entitled 'Mothers', Ferrante writes about this unsettling experience: 'One morning I looked at myself in the mirror and I recognised her: she was there, in my body'.[18] The borders between the maternal body and the daughter's seem to be fluid, reflecting the porousness of woman's identity roles as both daughter and mother. This is also evident in the way Irigaray makes use of the mirror in 'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other': 'I would like us to play together at being the same and different: You/I exchanging selves endlessly and each staying herself. Living mirrors'.[19] Thus, the surface of the mirror creates the optical impression of repetition with difference that is so constructive of the mother-daughter bond.

Contrary to the psychoanalytic mirror, the mother-daughter mirror crucially reflects the anxiety the daughter experiences of not identifying herself as "I" that is separate from her mother. Looking too much like her mother instils fear in her that just as the mother's image projects itself on the image of the daughter, in a similar way, the mother's life will consume the life of her daughter. Drawing on the Medusa myth as it features in mother-daughter literature, Cathy N. Davidson and E.M. Broner claim that the mother is perceived as a 'monster' since 'the daughter too much sees herself reflected in her mother's image, in her mother's life. The fear of all the daughters is that in looking at the mother they will also see themselves and turn to stone'.[20] The sense of stone-like paralysis caused through mirror reflection is central to

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[17] Elena Ferrante, 'La Frantumaglia', in *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2016), pp. 98–169 (p. 140).

[18] Elena Ferrante, 'Mothers', in *Incidental Inventions*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (London: Europa Editions, 2019), pp. 73–74 (p. 74).

[19] Irigaray, p. 61.

[20] Cathy N. Davidson and E.M. Broner, *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.), p. 190.

Irigaray's essay. In the original French, Irigaray adopts the word 'glace' to refer to the mirror, which also translates to 'ice'. Through the use of the mirror trope, Irigaray also conveys a sense of frozen rigidity, of paralysis, that is passed on from mother to daughter. Confined to the domestic space by her husband and by patriarchal society, the mother is an immobile figure, in Irigaray's view, which drives the mother to turn her daughter into 'a statue, an image of [the mother's] mobility'.[21] Since the mother sees herself in her daughter—'I came out of you, and here, in front of your very eyes, I am another living you'—the daughter fears that the mother will transfer the immobility caused by the constraints of maternity from mother to daughter through the former's Gorgon power, thereby denying the daughter her independence.[22] Sofia, in *Hot Milk*, often claims that her mother's illness comes at the price of her own mobility. 'She is my eyes. I am her legs', Sofia says about her relationship with her immobile mother (*HM*, 99). The mirror effect is brought out in the structure of these two sentences, which reflects the porous bodily borders between Sofia and Rose.

Similarly, throughout the *Neapolitan Novels*, Elena is constantly troubled by Immacolata's body, and this anxiety defines Elena's relationship to her own body: 'The only woman's body I had studied, with ever-increasing apprehension, was the lame body of my mother, and I had felt pressed, threatened by that image, and still feared that it would suddenly impose itself on mine'.[23] Crucially, at one point in *My Brilliant Friend*, the young Elena looks at her reflection in the mirror and comments on her bodily changes due to puberty:

> As soon as I could I locked myself in the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror, naked. I no longer knew who I was. I began to suspect that I would keep changing, until from me my mother would emerge, lame, with a crossed eye, and no one would love me anymore. I cried often, without warning. My chest, meanwhile, became large and soft. I felt at the mercy of obscure forces acting inside my body, I was always agitated (*MBF*, p. 96).

It is significant that as Elena matures and becomes more biologically attuned to the maternal feminine, her fear of changing into her monstrous mother heightens. The life-giving power of the maternal body is turned into an 'obscure force', an unknowable power that is the cause of much anxiety for the daughter. Elena acutely feels the threat of the mother to the daughter, which Lynn Sukenick coins as 'matrophobia': 'the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of becoming one's mother'.[24] What Sukenick seems to suggest is that matrophobia is not a general fear of the maternal feminine, but a very *personal* fear the daughters feel of never developing an autonomous self, of becoming a reincarnation of their mother. Matrophobia, Rich writes, comprises 'the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free', and this because the daughter feels 'a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely'.[25] The daughter therefore fears that instead of coming of age, she will become her mother, as if her body could tap into an atavistic source and somehow give birth to the woman who gave birth to her. Matrophobia is an unarticulated fear of the fluid bodily borders between mothers and daughters, who are biologically similar, and of the possibility that the likeness goes beyond just image. The danger the mother poses to the daughter is that of inheriting the maternal disability, the suffering of the mother that also stands for the pain inflicted upon her in the male-dominated society. In both *Hot Milk* and the *Neapolitan Novels*, matrophobia is a particular, personal anxiety that manifests itself in a physical manner. Sofia and Elena are troubled by the maternal transmission of 'damaged legs' and fear the impaired mobility that the matrilineal bond seems to impose upon them like an unwanted gift.

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[21] Irigaray, p. 64.

[22] Ibid., p. 61.

[23] Elena Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2017), p. 102. Henceforth cited in text and footnotes as (*SNN*, page number/s).

[24] Lynn Sukenick, 'Feeling and Reason in Doris Lessing's Fiction', *Contemporary Literature*, 14(4) (1973), 515–35, p. 519, as cited in Rich, p. 194.

'My/your paralysis'

The daughters' personal fear of becoming their mothers is a very particular kind of matrophobia, in Sofia's and Elena's case, because it centres on a specific body part: the maternal legs. From these daughters' perspective, their mothers are not as defined by their reproductive functions as much as their disability and the question of im/mobility. This is interesting since although motherhood plays a major role in the othering of the mother in patriarchal society, these narratives challenge the reader to think of how the mother suffers not only in the manner of the *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*—maternal non-physical suffering for their child's pain—but also suffers from somatic pain, which is aptly marked on her body since her life is so defined by it. The shift of focus from reproduction to mobility helps to remind the reader of the more personal suffering that the mother goes through as an individual. Giving birth is a physically painful experience, yet what is also painful is the often unseen suffering of the mother as arguably the prime figure that embodies otherness in a society that is predominantly patriarchal. By fulfilling her social "destiny" of becoming a mother, as conceived in masculinist fantasy, the maternal woman becomes a victim of social and patriarchal violence, in both the *Neapolitan Novels* and *Hot Milk*, due to how she is expected to fill her restrictive social role, rendering her literally and metaphorically immobile. As shall be discussed, the mother is depicted as more of an object, rather than a subject, through which her husband asserts his masculine power, and against which her children construct their own self. The sense of restricted physical mobility therefore foregrounds notions of personal and social space as well as freedom—and the lack thereof—to move for a woman who has a life beyond the institution of motherhood. Disability serves to highlight the extent of the violence upon the mother that leaves them almost paralysed or unable to walk properly. It is a disability that can be seen, that is abject, and that exposes, through damaged flesh, the otherness of the maternal body.

Both Immacolata and Rose are depicted as victims of patriarchal law, whose disabilities are a somatic articulation of this suffering. Immacolata, who is married to a porter, is a mother of two daughters and two sons. The male-dominated and violent environment of Naples constantly comes through in the *Neapolitan Novels*, and it also finds its way in Elena's novels as well as her book tours: 'I talked about how, since I was a girl, I had observed in my mother and other women the most humiliating aspects of family life, of motherhood, of subjection to males'.[26] From a very young age, Elena witnesses the suffering of silent and obedient wives and mothers, who are constantly beaten by their husbands. In the women of the neighbourhood, Elena observes abjectness and otherness, which she expresses in bodily terms; these mothers were '[e]xtremely thin, with hollow eyes and cheeks, or with broad behinds, swollen ankles, heavy chests' and 'lugged shopping bags' while their young children 'clung to their skirts' (*SNN*, 102). These women are disfigured, almost monstrous beings that 'appeared to have lost their feminine qualities', and Elena asks herself: 'When did that transformation begin? With housework? With pregnancies? With beatings?' (*SNN*, 102). Elena crucially attributes their suffering and their abject transformation to the imposition of 'the bodies of husbands, fathers, brothers' unto their feminine bodies (*SNN*, 102). She fears that her body too would someday be mutilated by paternal violence, particularly since her mother's body carries the mark of patriarchal power through her distinct limp. In *The Story of a New Name*, Elena acknowledges that 'her lameness had required her to have greater strength than normal, in order to survive' (*SNN*, 414); meanwhile, in *The Story of the Lost Child*, Immacolata reveals to Elena that she is lame because of a childhood illness that she survived. She then shows Elena 'the injured leg', which Elena describes as a 'relic of an old battle' (*SLC*, 151). The 'old battle' refers not just to the illness that the young Immacolata had to fight, but also the battle against the masculine society of Naples, since the limp for Elena also embodies the hardships that her mother had to survive through as a woman playing the role of the wife and the mother in this patriarchal society.

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[25] Rich, p. 194.

Unlike Immacolata's limp, Rose's leg paralysis in *Hot Milk* is ambiguous because it is not clear whether Rose's mobility is indeed impaired or if she suffers from an extreme form of hypochondria. Although Rose claims she cannot walk because her legs are physically paralysed, Julieta from the Gómez Clinic tells Sofia 'not to mistake her paralysis for physical fragility' (*HM*, 116). As the novel progresses, in fact, Rose's disability becomes less biologically credible to the reader and more explainable through trauma. Sofia narrates that when she was about five years old, her Greek father abandoned them, leaving Rose with a child to raise and no money. Similarly to Immacolata's limp, then, Rose's paralysis is symptomatic of a larger social malady—the male mistreatment of women—and, to a certain extent, it is not important whether Rose is actually disabled as long as she literalises her suffering through physical illness. In fact, Rose 'has a lot of contempt for her body', as Sofia describes her, and she often comments that doctors should consider cutting off her toes or her legs (*HM*, 63). By the end of the novel, this recurring thought becomes a wish, or even a longing, for amputation. Increasingly, as an anthropologist writing her doctoral thesis on cultural memory, Sofia claims that her mother's illness is 'of cultural interest' to her since she senses there is more to her mother's illness than her personal history (*HM*, 26). With her anthropologist cap on, Sofia traces Rose's suffering back to the ancient Greek civilisation, which perceived woman primarily as 'a vessel to impregnate' (*HM*, 129). In Sofia's view, within this masculinist world, Rose could not fit in but she had to succumb in the end with the birth of Sofia.

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[26] Elena Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2017), p. 56. Henceforth cited in text and footnotes as (*SLC*, page number/s).

It is significant to note that both the *Neapolitan Novels* and *Hot Milk* are narrated from the daughter's perspective, meaning that the mother does not have narrative agency and is therefore an object rather than a subject. However, this does not amount to a limited presence of the maternal since, in these narratives, the daughters' thoughts and anxieties constantly gravitate towards the maternal figure and her immobility. In 'Mothers', Ferrante writes that '[a] secret cord that can't be cut binds us to the bodies of our mothers' and that 'it's hard to move past her shadow'.[27] The reference to the 'shadow' suggests that the mother, particularly the mother's illness, has a somewhat spectral effect on the daughter. The spectral is present in David Wills's *Prosthesis*, which hinges on a son's relationship with his father's artificial leg. Wills comments that the amputated leg leaves a 'ghost of a space', where fluidity of bodily motion is replaced by the artificial leg, 'a beast rampant in triumphant otherness'.[28] Proximity to his father's body, Wills observes, is what pulls him into his father's suffering. Distance from his father frees the son from being drawn to his father's pain, but the father's disability crucially 'comes back to [him] like a chilly haunting'.[29] In the *Neapolitan Novels*, the cord that binds Elena to her mother's body is also a spectral bond since she is constantly haunted by her mother's damaged leg. As a result, the daughter starts experiencing her mother's disability as a kind of phantom illness. Throughout the quartet, Elena asks herself the following question: 'Would my mother truly emerge from me, with her limping gait, as my destiny?' (*SNN*, 48). Ever since she was a young girl, Elena claims in *My Brilliant Friend*, she was haunted by the crippled figure of her mother 'which had entered into [her] brain and wouldn't come out' (*MBF*, 46). Elena narrates how, in her childhood, she was particularly troubled by Immacolata's abject leg when her school friend Lila being to capture their teacher's attention in class because of her intellectual precociousness. The young Elena therefore conceives of academic failure as related to the inheritance of her mother's illness, which would deny her the agility a young girl needs in order to leave the neighbourhood and succeed. Elena's friendship with Lila, which lies at the core of the quartet, therefore stems from Elena's 'constant risk of becoming crippled' like her mother and Elena's consequent vow to model herself on Lila and her 'agile legs' so that she could escape her mother's limping gait and, through education, the damaging patriarchal society of Naples (*MBF*, 46).

Her mother's limp, however, is not just a mental fear, a threat that in some way or another Elena could keep distance from, but a *physical* threat. As Marina Terragni and Luisa Muraro acutely observe in an interview with Ferrante, 'it's as if the phantoms and the flesh, as if what happens, what could happen, and memory stood on the same plane, had the same density as reality' in Ferrante's novels.[30] This is an unsettling experience for the daughter, which instils a deep sense of matrophobia, the fear of becoming one's mother in a very physical sense. As discussed earlier, the mother is shaped by her body and her dysfunctional legs embody her suffering. In these mother-daughter narratives, since the boundaries between the mother's body and the daughter's body are fluid, the daughter fears that her legs will succumb to her mother's disability and become immobile. This threat is particularly terrifying for Elena and Sofia when this fear becomes matrophobia and when the *phantom* illness becomes a *physical* illness. There is no longer a division between the spectral and the real, the mother's body and the daughter's. During Sofia's quest for a diagnosis that would explain her mother's illness, she unexpectedly receives a diagnosis from Dr Gómez of her own phantom yet physical illness: 'Sometimes you limp, as if you have picked up on your mother's emotional weather' (*HM*, 58). Terragni and Muraro's reference to memory in relation to flesh is invoked by Sofia, when, in a self-reflective moment, she confirms Dr Gómez's hunch: 'Sometimes, I find myself limping. It's as if my body *remembers* the way I walk with my mother' (*HM*, 26; emphasis added). Sofia often limps in step with her mother in order to help Rose walk and, in so doing, mirrors her mother's impeded movement. This creates the same uncanny effect that Irigaray strives to capture in the title of her essay 'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other'. In the essay, this parallel mother-daughter movement results in a corresponding mother-daughter immobility which she refers to as 'my/your paralysis'.[31] After years of anxiety, Elena notably experiences her mother's limp in a spectral yet still markedly physical manner when she is pregnant with her first daughter. She recounts that, in her seventh month, she experienced a pain that made her limp, and when visiting her gynaecologist to have it checked, the latter told her that there was nothing to worry about: the heaviness of her womb caused a minor case of sciatica. Upon asking her why she was so concerned, Elena narrates: 'I lied, I said I didn't know. In reality I knew perfectly well: I was afraid that my mother's gait had caught up with me, that she had settled in my body, that I would limp forever, like her'.[32] It is not surprising that matrophobia emerges when Elena's body starts shifting closer to the maternal. Elena's anxiety heightens and she dreads maternity since, in her view, motherhood means sacrificing her long education to become tied to the household as a wife and a mother. Her sciatica, then, is not just limited to matrophobia, but also related to the wider context of being a mother in a patriarchal society.

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[27] Ferrante, 'Mothers', p. 73.

[28] David Wills, *Prosthesis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 2.

[29] Ibid., p. 7.

[30] Marina Terragni and Luisa Muraro, as quoted in Elena Ferrante, 'The Erotic Vapor of the Mother's Body: Answers to Questions from Marina Terragni and Luisa Muraro', in *Frantumaglia*, pp. 218–26 (p. 224)

While there is a sense of haunting that ties the parent to the child in both Wills's *Prosthesis* and the mother-daughter narratives analysed in this essay, there are differences between the father-son and the mother-daughter dyads in relation to the parent's disability and filiation that cannot be overlooked. For instance, while the prosthesis that is attached to the father's body is that which is considered as other, the mother's body is perceived as other in its entirety. Interestingly, these daughters' physical reiteration of their mothers' disability in the novels discussed is not just a case of muscle memory. The daughter almost serves like a prosthetic leg, a supplementary limb in the othered body of the mother. In other words, it is the daughter that fills in 'the ghostly space of the prosthetic', as Wills puts it, rather than the artificial leg.[33] This is especially evident in *Hot Milk*, where Sofia helps her mother Rose to walk. Bodily boundaries dissolve between Sofia and Rose, between mother and daughter, so that, as Sofia claims, 'My legs are her legs', and, later on, 'I am her legs and she is lame' (*HM*, 14, 125). Sofia does not want to be merely a limb in the othered body of her mother. She seeks to free herself, as Dr Gómez recommends, from her mother, but escape from the disabling maternal influence proves to be difficult. This is because Sofia recognises that her mother suffered for her, and guilt, as Julieta Gómez points out, 'is very disabling' (*HM*, 117). In this way, the body of the daughter also becomes othered, abject, by being an active part of the mother's suffering and bearing the burden of being the prosthesis. Meanwhile, as Elena's body swells with her second pregnancy (another daughter) and she starts resembling more and more 'the venomous figure [she] had always feared' that of her mother (*SLC*, 183). Elena confesses:

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[31] Irigaray, p. 62.

[32] Elena Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2017), p. 64.

[33] Wills, p. 12.

> [B]y now I couldn't look at myself in the mirror without disgust. I had puffy cheeks and an enormous nose. My bosom and stomach seemed to have consumed the rest of my body, I saw myself without a neck, with short legs and fat ankles (*SLC*, 183).

When Immacolata dies, it is the mother that acts as a form of supplementary limb living in Elena's body. When Elena finally reconciles with her mother, Elena 'nurture[s] that pain' of the recurring sciatica, which is both spectral and physical, 'like a bequest preserved in [her] body' (*SLC*, 222). Just as her mother once contained her, the daughter now contains her mother, dismissing any notions of successive linearity in the female genealogy and inheritance. Accusingly, Lila tells Elena that she is merely faking a limp in order to keep the memory of her mother alive in her body. The way that Lila personifies the mother's leg, however, gives it an uncanny quality, as if the leg had a life of its own: 'Her leg is glad that you limp and so you, too, are glad. Isn't that true?' (*SLC*, 369).

Elena, however, is at a point in her life when she stops trying to escape the haunting leg of her mother—either through education, by aligning herself with her father, or by following Lila. What was once a terrifying prospect that threatened the boundaries of her body becomes a haunting yet physical presence that she cherishes and nurtures. At the end of *The Story of the Lost Child*, Elena is no longer matrophobic, but rather willingly accepts her mother living inside her and even reflects, as she lets her youngest daughter Imma (named after her grandmother) feed on her breast, that a part of her mother also lives in her daughter. The *Neapolitan Novels* narrate the story of the complex relationship between Elena and Lila, but they also recount a daughter's long journey towards reconciliation with the maternal figure, especially her disability, that acutely underscores her suffering as a woman living in a violent patriarchal society. Only when Elena stops trying to escape her mother and learns how to walk with her mother's limp, how to understand her mother's suffering by allowing her mother's leg limp to perform through hers, is she able to reconcile with not just her mother but her own motherhood. By accepting the haunting limp, Elena accepts the burden of the female genealogy but she also helps her mother to walk. Ultimately, redeeming maternal violence and suffering helps her to accept her own othered maternal body.

Our damaged legs

Towards the end of *Hot Milk*, Rose tells Sofia that mothers watch their children closely, implying that their gaze is Medusan: 'We watch our children. We know our gaze is powerful so we pretend not to look' (*HM*, 218). As a mother, Rose acknowledges that her gaze has the power to petrify the daughter, to immobilise her and deny her the mobility the daughter needs in order to develop an autonomous self. However, as Irigaray points out, there is a much more menacing gaze than that of the mother for the growing daughter: 'I, too, a captive when a man holds me in his gaze; I, too, am abducted from myself. Immobilized in the reflection he expects of me. [...] Trapped in a single function-mothering.'[34] Is the immobilising effect of the mother upon the daughter similar to that of the masculine, who seeks to trap her in the role of the wife and the mother of his children? The mother-daughter relationships portrayed in Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* and Levy's *Hot Milk* suggest that the mother's suffering paralyses the daughter only if the daughter does not realise that the limp is hers as much as it her mother's. Within a patriarchal society, the mother's limp is also the daughter's limp inherited through the matrilineal genealogy. The spectral yet physical bond forged through the damaged leg stands for the suffering that is shared between the mother and the daughter, which the daughter denies because she believes it stops her from developing her own self.

However, what hinders her movement is precisely her repudiation of the mother, which is ultimately a negation of herself. As Elias-Button states, 'having confronted Medusa herself directly, [the daughter] is able to understand that the powers she has feared are really her own'.[35] Likewise, she has feared her own suffering. *Hot Milk* ends with Sofia's realisation that all this time she has waited for her mother to 'step into her self or step out of her invalid self' (*HM*, p. 216) only so that Rose could take Sofia along with her. Thus, Sofia understands that her mother's suffering is also her own, and by letting her mother's paralysis take over her own life, she has immobilised her mother too. The mother's disability stops being a hindrance when the daughter acknowledges that it is her disability too, and that this mutual paralysis forges a strong bond through which the mother and daughter can claim strength. The mother's othered body stops being abject when the daughter accepts its abjectness and recognises it as her own. The daughter can then walk with her mother's limp and her mother's limp can walk through her. However, the daughter performs the mother's limp in a different manner. When the daughter's gait reclaims and re-enacts the mother's limp, she transforms the othered flesh of the mother from a physical symbol of paternal violence to that which reinforces the filial bond between mother and daughter.

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[34] Irigaray, p. 66.

[35] Elias-Button, p. 204.

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