A LIMPING MOTHER AND A WITCH-WHORE: MONSTROUS MATERNITIES IN ELENA FERRANTE'S *THE NEAPOLITAN QUARTET*

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ABSTRACT: Motherhood has traditionally been depicted as the greatest form of love and compassion in our society, and it was believed that maternity was the ultimate step a woman could take to accomplish a fulfilled womanhood. Maternity is supposed to become a source of happiness for the mother, who sacrifices her own identity in the name of motherhood. Nonetheless, for the biological phenomenon of becoming pregnant and a mother, society has set high-standard expectations, categorising women either as 'good mothers' or 'bad mothers', depending on whether they can fulfil unrealistic goals. This paper analyses the complexity of subversive mother characters in Elena Ferrante's saga *The Neapolitan Quartet*, examining the monsterisation female characters undergo when they do not conform to conventions.

KEYWORDS: bad mother, matrophobia, abject, monster, patriarchy.

UNA MADRE COJA Y UNA BRUJA PROSTITUTA: MATERNIDADES MONSTRUOSAS EN *THE NEAPOLITAN QUARTET*, DE ELENA FERRANTE

RESUMEN: En nuestra sociedad, la maternidad se ha concebido tradicionalmente como la mayor forma de amor y compasión, hasta el punto de considerarla como el último paso que una mujer debía dar para ser una 'mujer completa'. Se supone que la maternidad brinda una felicidad total a la madre, quien pierde su identidad a causa de la misma, ya que su rol como madre es el que predomina a ojos de la sociedad. No obstante, ante el fenómeno biológico del embarazo y de convertirse en madre, la sociedad asume unas expectativas irreales que terminan categorizando a las mujeres como 'buenas madres' o 'malas madres'. Este ensayo analiza la complejidad de personajes madre subversivos en la saga *Dos amigas* de Elena Ferrante y examina cómo los personajes mujer son representados como monstruos cuando no cumplen con lo establecido.

PALABRAS CLAVE: mala madre, matrofobia, abyecto, monstruo, patriarcado.

INTRODUCTION: ELENA FERRANTE AND *THE NEAPOLITAN QUARTET*

The Italian author Elena Ferrante–«the pen name, gendered female, of an Italian writer whose biographical identity remains unknown» (Milkova, 2021: 6)–depicts types of motherhood which depart from the canonical mother shaped throughout traditional patriarchal values. As Wehling-Giorgi has argued, «Ferrante's texts propose a new, female-focalized perspective on the portrayal of maternity and the feminine body» (2018: 67). Additionally, as this critic points out, her «female protagonists provide profound insights into the darker sides of mothering and of being mothered» (68), as they «undergo an unwelcome confrontation with their leaking, diseased and objectified bodies during pregnancy, and harbour ambivalent feelings towards their own offspring» (68). The

mother-daughter relationship is at the centre of Ferrante's poetics, which are characterised by her violation of «cultural or literary taboos in a gut-wrenching, realistic manner so that reading her novels blurs the borders between literature and reality» (Milkova: 2021: 10), as «[t]he painful realities of menstruation, pregnancy, and motherhood, and the brutal experiences of domestic abuse, rape, and abandonment haunt her female protagonists» (2021: 10).

This paper analyses the complexity of two mother characters in Ferrante's saga *The Neapolitan Quartet*, which portrays women's struggle to fit into the suppressive mould of the 'perfect mother'. *The Neapolitan Quartet* is a *Bildungsroman* in which the reader follows Elena Greco's personal and professional development from her childhood to her adulthood. Interestingly, this saga, all over the four books it comprehends, follows the story not only of Greco, but also of her best friend, Lina Cerullo. The story takes place in Naples, during post-World War II Italy, having as a background the socio-economic changes the country underwent during the twentieth century, characterised by poverty, migration, and religious and patriarchal values. Thus, the first book of the saga, *L'amica geniale* (2011)–*My Brilliant Friend*–[1]set in the 1950s, explores Elena and Lina's childhood and adolescence. The second book, *Storia del nuovo cognome* (2012)–*The Story of a New Name*, subtitled *Youth*–focuses on their late teenage years and early twenties. The third book, *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta* (2013)–*Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, subtitled *Middle Age*–recounts the protagonist's and her best friend's twenties and early thirties, and the hurdles they face personally and professionally due to the social changes of Italy in the 70s. Finally, the fourth book of the saga, *Storia della bambina perduta* (2014)–*The Story of the Lost Child*, subtitled *Maturity, Old Age*–set from the 1980s to the 2000s, keeps portraying the complexity of Elena and Lila's friendship, together with their motherhood. These novels, then, explore the journey of these characters from the 1950s until the 2000s, and the challenges they face due to their condition as women and their belonging to the working class in Italy. Consequently, the topics this saga discusses are female friendship, class struggle, motherhood and mother-daughter relationships, female agency, the female body, pregnancy, and all in all, the political, societal, and religious background of Italy during the decades it is set in.

This paper focuses on Elena Greco's mother and Lina Cerullo's dissident motherhoods, a depiction that makes these characters emerge as monstrous. By focusing on Elena's mother, this paper underlines her daughter's strong feeling of rejection towards her, together with how her physical impairment is presented in the story as something abject. Moreover, Lina's inability to become pregnant, her miscarriage, and the disappearance of her daughter are analysed to reflect on how motherhood is compared to the unknown and is even attributed monstrous qualities. In this way, fragments of the saga will be analysed aiming to understand why the performance of motherhood by these characters and their figure as mothers are perceived as monstrous. In order to do so, I will draw on Adrienne Rich's conception of motherhood as an institution; Marianne Hirsch's notion of the disidentification of daughters from mothers; Julia Kristeva's reflections on abjection in *Powers of Horror*; Barbara Creed's study of the relationship between monstrosity and the female body in *The Monstrous-Feminine*; and J.J. Cohen's explanation of the monster's qualities in *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*.

[1] The translations into English referenced in the text were made by Ann Goldstein and published by Europa Editions.

A LIMPING MOTHER: MATROPHOBIA AND PHYSICAL IMPAIRMENT IN ELENA GRECO'S MOTHER

Elena Greco does not mention her mother's name, Immacolata, until the very last book of the saga, *The Story of the Lost Child.* This fact is not coincidental, since it highlights the loss of identity this character suffers when she becomes a mother, as well as Elena's rejection of this maternal figure. Immacolata's background is twentieth-century Italy; she comes from a working-class neighbourhood and embodies conservative and traditional values. Due to her context, her role is solely conceived as belonging to the domestic sphere, as a wife and a mother. In other words, she portrays «motherhood as a single-minded identity» (Rich, 2021: 7). Nevertheless, Immacolata does not fit into the canonical role of the comprehensive, empathetic, and helpful mother–into the stereotype of the 'good mother'–at least not in her daughter's eyes. Rather, she reproaches Elena constantly, and there are certain moments in the saga where she becomes a hurdle for her daughter to progress in life–as further discussed below–, for example, when she is sceptical about her daughter continuing her studies in high school. What is more, the protagonist expresses a strong matrophobia all along the story as a response to her mother's lack of support, understanding and affection. Matrophobia, a term coined by the poet Lynn Sukenick, «is the fear not of one's mother but of becoming one's mother» (Rich, 2021: 240). This feeling is associated in other works of literature to the protagonist's search for her own identity, an identity different from her mother's:

> Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individual and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers'; and in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery. (Rich, 2021: 242)

Hence, when looking for this identity of her own, the protagonist undertakes a disidentification from her mother and her «maternal dominance» (Hirsch, 1989: 20), as happens to be the case with many female heroines in nineteenth-century novels. Furthermore, matrophobia and the rejection of becoming one's mother are related to what mothers may come to represent for their daughters. Often, motherhood can incarnate the traditional values the newer generations want to break free from. In fact, Adrienne Rich underlines how motherhood can become an institution of patriarchy through which mothers, who have been alienated and raised up according to patriarchal values, instil in their daughters such conventions all over again: «[I]t is the mother through whom patriarchy early teaches the small female her proper expectations. The anxious pressure of one female on another to conform to a degrading and dispiriting role can hardly be termed 'mothering', even if she does this believing it will help her daughter to survive» (2021: 250).

Elena Greco's disidentification from her mother takes place through education, since the protagonist believes knowledge will lead her out of her working-class neighbourhood and will give her the freedom and agency she seeks and her mother lacks. Greco's eagerness to learn is clearly discernible since the beginning of the saga, when she is only a child who looks for the validation of her teacher, Maestra Oliviero. For example, when Lila Cerullo, later her best friend, is the new student in the class, and is far ahead

from the rest of her classmates, Elena claims: «Something convinced me, then, that if I kept up with her, at her pace, my mother's limp, which had entered into my brain and wouldn't come out, would stop threatening me. I decided that I had to model myself on that girl» (Ferrante, 202a: 46). Thus, to Elena, education is her «womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of [her] mothers' bondage, to become individual and free» (Rich, 2021: 242).

Moreover, her interest in reading and literature is noticeable since her childhood. For instance, in the first book of the saga, Elena and Lina read *Little Women*, and Greco makes a promise to her friend that one day they will write books and earn money in order to leave the neighbourhood. This scene is a foreshadowing of Elena's career as a writer later in the story and the way she owns her agency, through knowledge and literature. The allusion to Louisa May Alcott's novel, which advocates for women's agency, and whose protagonist fights to become a female writer in a male-dominated world, anticipates Elena's struggles when following her career and especially when «perform[ing] radical surgery» (Rich, 2021: 242) from her mother's identity and finding her own. This is why Elena's matrophobia is recurrent during the saga, due to the role her mother plays when disapproving of her education, and hence, her agency. For example, when Elena is a teenager and she starts needing to wear glasses, her mother reproaches her and blames her for destroying her eyesight: «I went home and showed them the notebook, full of guilt for the expense that glasses would involve. My father darkened, my mother shouted, 'You're always with your books, and now you've ruined your eyesight.' I was extremely hurt. Had I been punished for pride in wishing to study?» (Ferrante, 2020a: 257). The protagonist's emotional response, «full of guilt» (Ferrante, 2020a: 257) for the cost these glasses will impose on her family, highlights the dissident mother role Immacolata plays for the main character.

Additionally, when Elena has the opportunity to study at university in Pisa, being the first one in her family to go to university, Immacolata tries to make her feel guilty if she leaves, and clearly does not show any positive feelings towards her daughter's achievement: «If you earn money, send it to me by mail; now who's going to help your brothers with their homework? They'll do badly at school because of you. But go, leave, who cares: I've always known that you thought you were better than me and everybody else» (Ferrante, 2020b: 327-8). Consequently, the protagonist's mother seems to differ from the canonical mother who «feels the likelihood of eternal love and tenderness toward her child» (Noddings, 1984: 130) whenever her daughter tries to assert her freedom and agency, and ultimately, a separate identity from hers.

In addition, the character of Maestra Oliviero, who young Greco admires, serves as Elena's mother's counterpart, since she shows the maternal feelings and affection Immacolata is supposed to feel–and Elena hopes for–, but which she does not show to her daughter. Maestra Oliviero praises and appreciates Elena's intelligence and abilities, while her own mother keeps disregarding the protagonist. Oliviero sees Elena's potential and encourages and helps her to continue her studies in a high school in Naples. Nonetheless, Elena's mother disapproves of Oliviero's advice and does not envision Elena's education as something necessarily positive for her family. For example, when Elena is a kid, her mother opposes paying for extra lessons for her, claiming that in that way «she'll be better off and we'll be worse» (Ferrante, 2020a: 63). Therefore, since Elena conceives of her education as the only way of escaping her neighbourhood, her mother and her social class, she harbours a strong matrophobia and hate towards her mother, who becomes an obstacle in her search for her own identity and agency. Such feelings arise after a violent episode that takes place in Lina's household, where her

abusive father plays an authoritarian role: «She never said so, but I had the impression that while I hated my mother, really hated her, profoundly, she, in spite of everything, wasn't upset with her father» (Ferrante 2020a: 69).

Hence, the character of the teacher highlights this matrophobia felt by the protagonist, as she embodies the qualities Elena praises: an education, knowledge, comprehension, affection, and understanding. At the same time, Maestra Oliviero's character points at all the maternal feelings Immacolata lacks to be a 'good mother', from Elena's point of view, which is why Immacolata hates Elena's teacher: «That imbecile always thought she was more a mother than I am» (Ferrante, 2020b: 454). In fact, this statement makes Greco reflect upon her teacher's role: «Had she really been more mother than my mother? For a time I hadn't been sure. But she had imagined for me a road that my mother wasn't able to imagine and had compelled me to take it. For this I was grateful to her» (Ferrante, 2020b: 454). In her process of disidentifying from her mother, Oliviero plays an important role, since she is seen by the protagonist as someone who managed to confront Immacolata's «maternal dominance» (Hirsch, 1989: 20):

> I should take note, I thought: not even Lila, in spite of everything, has managed to escape from my mother's world. I have to, I can't be acquiescent any longer. I have to eliminate her, as Maestra Oliviero had been able to do when she arrived at our house to impose on her what was good for me. (Ferrante, 2020a: 322)

What is more, this reflection derives from Lila's wedding as a teenager. When the protagonist points out that not even her best friend «managed to escape from [her] mother's world» (Ferrante, 2020a: 322), she is highlighting the patriarchal institution her friend has just entered, marriage, losing her own identity to that of a wife and, later on, a mother. As opposed to her friend's fate, Elena is determined «to eliminate» (Ferrante, 2020a: 322) her mother and to find her own identity.

The analysis carried out above helps understand Elena's relationship with Immacolata and, as a result, her monsterisation of her mother's physicality. Interestingly, Elena Greco's matrophobia is not reduced to finding an individual identity separate from her mother's, but she also expresses a strong rejection towards her mother's body. The protagonist's physical matrophobia is constantly expressed during the saga, together with the fear of inheriting her mother's body and physical impairment. Elena's rejection of her mother's body is manifested since the beginning of the first book, when Greco is only a child:

> The problem was my mother; with her things never took the right course. It seemed to me that, though I was barely six, she did her best to make me understand that I was superfluous in her life. I wasn't agreeable to her nor was she to me. Her body repulsed me, something she probably intuited. She was a dark blonde, blue-eyed, voluptuous. But you never knew where her right eye was looking. Nor did her right leg work properly– she called it damaged leg. She limped, and her step agitated me, especially at night, when she couldn't sleep and walked all along the hall to the kitchen. (Ferrante, 2020a: 44-5)

This first depiction of Immacolata already anticipates the kind of mother-daughter relationship that is going to prevail all along the saga. On the one hand, the mother is portrayed in a very unconventional way, since, far from feeling «eternal love and tenderness toward her child» (Noddings, 1984: 130), regards her daughter as «superfluous» (Ferrante, 2020a: 44-5). On the other hand, Elena's bodily rejection of her mother–«[h]er body repulsed me» (Ferrante, 2020a: 44-45)–shows that the protagonist's

repulsion is linked to her mother's physical impairment, which she condemns during the saga: «Would my mother truly emerge from me, with her limping gait, as my destiny?» (Ferrante, 2020b: 48). Elena obsessively fears becoming her mother, especially in a corporeal way, and there are numerous moments where this physical abhorrence is explicit. When Elena is a teenager and gets her first period, she already fears a bodily metamorphosis into her mother: «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» (Ferrante, 2020a: 96). In this regard, it could be argued that young Elena feels repulsed by her mother's physical condition because she wants to be desirable, now that she is aware of «[h]ow difficult it was to find one's way, how difficult it was not to violate any of the incredibly detailed male regulations» (Ferrante, 2020b: 80). In this passage, Greco is afraid of a bodily transformation into her mother that would prevent people from loving her. During the saga, however, her corporeal matrophobia becomes more complex. In fact, there are several moments when Immacolata's physical impairment is mentioned in relation to the protagonist's agency: «She continued to believe that she could tell me what to do and what not to, she limped after me, criticizing me. Sometimes she seemed determined to insert herself into my body, simply to keep me from being my own master» (Ferrante, 2020c: 179). Elena Greco fears that her mother's body, which she always describes by highlighting her limping, will impose on herself, dictating her future. Greco is afraid of her mother's body, because to her it symbolises the end of her agency: «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» (Ferrante, 2020b: 102).

Accordingly, the mother's body is seen as an imposition; the reproduction of the maternal body in the daughter's is viewed as an impediment to «perform radical surgery» (Rich, 2021: 242) from her, and such corporeal reproduction threatens the daughter's personality, which «seem[s] dangerously to blur and overlap with [her] mother» (Rich, 2021: 242). In addition, Greco's recurrent references to Immacolata's physical impairment could be read as a way of pointing out her flaws as a mother through her physical defects. In «The Disabling of Aging Female Bodies: Midwives, Procuresses, Witches and the Monstrous Mother», Encarnación Juárez-Almendros discusses how women regarded as inadequate or inefficient by society are often portrayed through flawed bodies. In her selected fictional works,[2] Juárez-Almendros analyses the «defective bodies» (2017: 83) of elderly women in relation to «their inefficient role as mothers» (83), among other traits in these characters' depiction. Indeed, in many of Elena's depictions of Immacolata's harsh behaviour as a mother or lack of comprehension, she also points to her physical impairment:

> My mother said that I was incident with those big breasts I had developed, and she took me to buy a bra. She was more abrupt than usual. She seemed ashamed that I had a bosom, that I got my period. The crude instructions she gave me were rapid and insufficient, barely muttered. I didn't have time to ask her any questions before she turned her back and walked away with her lopsided gait. (Ferrante, 2020a: 102)

[2] In her study, Encarnación Juárez-Almendros focuses on the following works: Fernando de Rojas' *La Celestina* (1499, 1502), Miguel de Cervantes's *Diálogo de los perros* (1613), Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599, 1604), and Francisco de Quevedo's *El Buscón* (1626).

In this passage, Immacolata's way of dealing with her daughter's female changing body evinces a lack of sex-affective education common in her generation. Nonetheless, when Elena's hope for a better understanding or explanation of what is happening to her is unmet, the protagonist refers to her mother's physical impairment again. Thus, at the same time Elena points out her mother's flaws as a 'good mother', she refers to her «defective bod[y]» (Juárez-Almendros, 2017: 83). What is more, not only is Immacolata's body a source of repulsion and rejection for her daughter–common in Ferrante's «poetics of desire and disgust underlying the mother-daughter relationship» (Milkova, 2021: 23)–, but Elena's body is also abject to her mother, as suggested in the above-mentioned fragment: «My mother said that I was incident with those big breasts […] She seemed ashamed that I had a bosom, that I got my period» (Ferrante, 2020a: 102). Influenced by her socio-historical context, Immacolata perceives Elena's period and changing body as something shameful. Furthermore, in this episode, the protagonist's first period is associated with an unknown fear and with a potential source of punishment:

> One afternoon I really fell asleep and when I woke I felt wet. I went to the bathroom to see what was wrong and I discovered my underpants were stained with blood. Terrified by I don't know what, maybe a scolding from my mother for having hurt myself between my legs, I washed the underpants carefully, wrung them out, and put them on again wet. (Ferrante, 2020a: 93)

Elena fears punishment from her mother because of her bleeding, and later, when she informs her about her period, Immacolata seems ashamed of Elena's changing body, despising it. In the light of Julia Kristeva's ideas, it could be argued both Immacolata and Elena perceive the body of the other as abject. On the one hand, Elena claims to be repulsed by her mother's body and her physical impairment. According to Kristeva, the maternal body can be read as abject, since abjection is «what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite» (Kristeva, 2024: 4). The protagonist's bodily matrophobia and constant reference to her mother's limping makes her physical impairment abject, since it challenges society as well: «The aged, like the disabled, provoke the same reaction on the part of mainstream society of repulsion, alienation and invisibility, and are commonly considered less intelligent and useless» (Juárez-Almendros, 2017: 84). On the other hand, Elena's period and changing body is abject for her mother, who seems to reject it or even be repulsed by it: «My mother said that I was incident with those big breasts […] She seemed ashamed that I had a bosom» (Ferrante, 2020a: 102). Such abjection takes place because menstruation disrupts borders and order, having been socially marked as impure and polluting, and being surrounded by cultural taboos and feelings of disgust: «[T]he feminine, particularly the maternal, is constructed as unclean specifically in relation to menstruation and childbirth» (Creed, 1993: 41). Additionally, as Immacolata embodies a type of motherhood conceived as an institution of patriarchy, incarnating its traditional and religious values, her daughter's period challenges such order: «Menstruation and childbirth are seen as the two events in woman's life which have placed her on the side of the abject. It is woman's fertilizable body which aligns her with nature and threatens the integrity of the patriarchal symbolic order» (Creed, 1993: 50). What is more, the fact that Immacolata incarnates an institution makes her maternity abject and monstrous, since by holding this power, she challenges and disrupts the borders of her gender expectations: «monstrous maternity produces chaos by blurring the traditional psychologies of gender,

in which femininity and authority do not coexist» (Francus, 1994: 832). Consequently, Immacolata' monstrosity stems from her power and embodiment of an institution in a woman's body, which proves ambiguous, because as Francus highlights, «the maternal monster is a phallic mother who is targeted as being insufficiently passive and feminine to be maternal, and insufficiently masculine to function as a legitimate authority» (1994: 832).

Finally, concerning this «integrity of the patriarchal symbolic order» (Creed, 1993: 50), and the above-discussed perception of motherhood as an institution, the character of Immacolata, who embodies the patriarchal and religious tradition, works as a sort of social Panopticon for Elena. In prison, «[t]he Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen» (Foucault, 1995: 202). Therefore, «[t]he Panopticon functions as a kind of laboratory of power. Thanks to its mechanisms of observation, it gains in efficiency and in the ability to penetrate into men's behaviour» (Foucault, 1995: 204). Immacolata is Elena's social Panopticon, because she constantly observes her daughter to punish or reprimand her, when she believes she disrupts «the integrity of the patriarchal symbolic order» (Creed, 1993: 50), that is, when Elena acts against the institution her mother incarnates. The protagonist's search for her own identity challenges her mother's role as an institution or keeper of patriarchal values, because, in order to make her own decisions, she steps outside the norm and conventions. For instance, Elena Greco has a civil wedding without a celebration to break with the *institution* of motherhood, claiming: «[A]nd my intention to demonstrate that I no longer belonged to the world of my mother» (Ferrante, 2020c: 229). Nonetheless, since Immacolata's role is «teach[ing] the small female her proper expectations» (Rich, 2021: 250), her daughter's actions are harshly criticised and punished by her mother. A case in point is when Elena decides not to baptise her first daughter: «We didn't baptize her; my mother screamed terrible things on the telephone, she swore she would never come to see her» (Ferrante, 2020c: 237). Immacolata's criticism is also present when Elena separates from her husband:

> Enough, Ma, it's pointless, I can't stay with Pietro anymore, I love somebody else […] She slapped me violently, shouting nonstop: Shut up, you whore, shut up, shut up […] She was on me, I felt as if she really wanted to kill me […] Her voice chocked, angry and at the same time very grieved, eyes starting, she gasped: You're not my child anymore, he's my child, him. (Ferrante, 2020d: 63-4)

Once again, this passage highlights Immacolata's position as an institution–«the maternal monster» (Francus, 1994: 832), «the phallic mother» (1994: 832)–, and, hence, lack of compassion and affection towards Elena. Rather than taking her daughter's side, she favours Elena's absent husband, because the dishonour and shame her daughter is causing her, by breaking with conventions and the *institution*, are more important than maternal feelings of pity: «You're not my child anymore, he's my child, him» (Ferrante, 2020d: 63-4).

To sum up, Immacolata's reproaches and criticism towards her daughter, emanating from her incarnation of the institution of motherhood and traditional values, make her motherhood monstrous–by «blurring the traditional psychologies of gender, in which femininity and authority do not coexist» (Francus, 1994: 832)–and provoke a strong matrophobia in the protagonist, having to do with her identity and with her corporeality, which is described with disgust. All in all, Immacolata can be read as abject

in her role as a mother, due to her ambiguity and transgression of boundaries from Elena's point of view. Although Immacolata complies with the institutional motherhood of her time, her daughter's hopes for understanding and empathy are often unmet. In fact, her abjection and subversion in her role as a mother, read as a flaw, are physically reinforced throughout her limping. Finally, these moral and physical flaws–from Elena's perspective–become an antithesis to her own name, Immacolata, which, coming from Latin, means «without *macula*», signifying, «without stain», and thus, «without flaw».

A WITCH-WHORE: UNPREGNANT, AND HENCE, A MONSTER

Elena's best friend, Rafaella Cerullo, called Lina in their neighbourhood, and nicknamed Lila by Elena, gets married at the end of the first book of the saga, when she is only sixteen. This event constitutes from then on an abyss between Lila's and Elena's lifestyles, the former working as a mirror to the latter to highlight the protagonist's evolution outside their neighbourhood. While Elena keeps studying and goes to high school in Naples, and later to university in Pisa, Lila loses her identity to that of a wife, trapped in the domestic sphere with an abusive and authoritarian husband who expects her to give him a child. Lila's intelligence and imagination make her a character who provokes admiration as well as aversion since her childhood. Since the beginning of the saga, Elena's best friend is presented as an unruly character and a prodigy at times. Lina is a complex, strong-willed, creative, and charismatic character, as can be seen in the following quotes from the novel: «Lila appeared in my life in first grade and immediately impressed me because she was very bad […] Lila didn't obey and didn't even seem frightened» (Ferrante, 2020a: 31-2); «Lila, on the other hand, had from a young age […] the characteristic of absolute determination» (Ferrante, 2020a: 34); «Yet, surprisingly, Maestra Oliviero, although Lila had made her fall and sent her to the hospital, said that she was the best among us. True that she was the worst-behaved» (Ferrante, 2020a: 42); «According to Rino, Lila's older brother, she had learned to read at the age of around three by looking at the letters and pictures in his primer. She would sit next to him in the kitchen while he was doing his homework, and she learned more than he did» (Ferrante, 2020a: 43). Lina is described as someone whose ambiguous character causes attraction and rejection at the same time among her neighbours, family and friends: «I had long known that Michele wanted her–wanted her in that abstractly obsessive way that was harmful to him» (Ferrante, 2020d: 168). Even to her best friend, Elena, Lina is seen as someone enigmatic and unpredictable, which sometimes can lead her to a feeling of unease. For instance, Lina's unpredictability is reflected when Elena is invited to her Latin teacher's house for a party, and she brings Lila with her. This makes the protagonist anxious, since she admires her high school teacher and wants to cause a good impression on her, but fears Lila's presence might ruin it:

> I was afraid that whatever she wore, her beauty would explode like a star and everyone would be eager to grab a fragment of it. I was afraid that she would express herself in dialect, that she would say something vulgar, that it would become obvious that school for her had ended with an elementary-school diploma. I was afraid that, if she merely opened her mouth, everyone would be hypnotized by her intelligence and Professor Galiani herself would be entranced. I was afraid that the professor would find her both presumptuous and naive and would say to me: Who is this friend of yours, stop seeing her. (Ferrante, 2020b: 151)

Such ambiguity makes Lila's character definitely abject and uncanny, even to Elena, since her familiar friend is often surrounded by a sense of the unknown she cannot decipher:

> There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. (Kristeva, 2024: 1)

Thus, the character of Lila is impregnated by abjection, as she arouses both admiration and aversion. What is more, the protagonist describes her friend almost as having supernatural powers: «[E]veryone would be hypnotized by her intelligence» (Ferrante, 2020b: 151); «Professor Galiani herself would be entranced» (Ferrante, 2020b: 151). Nonetheless, this is not the only time Elena portrays her best friend through non-human traits; it is common that throughout the saga Greco compares Lila's gaze with «the narrowed eyes of a bird of prey» (Ferrante, 2020a: 310), whenever she is thinking: «She narrowed her eyes. When she did that, turning serious, without a smile, as if leaving the pupils only a crack allowed her to see in a more concentrated way, she reminded me of birds of prey I had seen in films at the parish cinema» (Ferrante, 2020a: 105). Additionally, Lila's gaze, associated to her intelligence, since these similes are always make when this character is thinking, is even depicted as not human:

> Her quickness of mind was like a hiss, a dart, a lethal bite. And there was nothing in her appearance that acted as a corrective. She was disheveled, dirty, on her knees and elbows she always had scabs from cuts and scrapes that never had time to heal. Her large, bright eyes could become cracks behind which, before every brilliant response, there was a gaze that appeared not very childlike and perhaps not even human. Every one of her movements said that to harm her would be pointless because, whatever happened, she would find a way of doing worse to you. (Ferrante, 2020a: 48)

Such «perhaps not even human» (Ferrante, 2020a: 48) traits, attributed to Lila's intelligence and complex and uncanny character, become even more prominent in the narrative once she gets married and is unable to get pregnant during the first months of her marriage. This makes her even more mysterious to her husband and neighbours. In fact, her husband, Stefano Carracci, even claims that Lina possesses a supernatural force that prevents her from getting pregnant:

> I had to beat her again, she shouldn't have gone to the Solaras' dress like that. But she has a force inside that I can't subdue. It's an evil force that makes good manners–everything useless. A poison. You see she's not pregnant […] With that force she has, she murders the children inside, Lenù, and she does it on purpose to make people think I don't know how to be a man, to show me up in front of everybody. (Ferrante, 2020b: 85)

Stefano's depiction of Lina as a venomous «evil force» (Ferrante, 2020b: 85) who purposely kills her potential babies from her inside, to prevent him from being seen as a man, is the result of his lack of understanding, together with the fact that the character of Lina is surrounded by a sense of the unknown in the story. The inability by Lina's social circle to comprehend why she is not getting pregnant, along with how she is perceived by them, turns her into an even more uncanny character for them–a monster. Just like Lina,

«the monstrous lurks somewhere in that ambiguous, primal space between fear and attraction» (Cohen, 1996: 19). Besides, Lila is believed not to get pregnant because of her own will, since she does not desire to become a mother; due to her determinate and stubborn character, it is thought that «[w]ith that force she has, she murders the children inside» (Ferrante, 2020b: 85). Elena's best friend is unwilling to get pregnant, and she is trapped with her violent husband who forces her to have sex with him, which is why she does not envisage her potential pregnancy as something positive: «I don't want to talk about it, it's a disease, I have an emptiness inside me that weighs me down» (Ferrante, 2020b: 109). Nonetheless, Lina gets pregnant at the end, but the crude way she describes her pregnancy differs from conventions:

> Men insert their thingy in you and you become a box of flesh with a living doll inside. I've got it, it's here, and it's repulsive to me. I throw up continuously, it's my very stomach that can't bear it. I know I'm supposed to think beautiful things, I know I have to resign myself, but I can't do it, I see no reason for resignation and no beauty. Besides the fact, she added, that I feel incapable of dealing with children. You yes, you are […] Not me, I wasn't born with that gift. (Ferrante, 2020b: 112)

Lina evidently possesses dissident feelings towards motherhood, because she feels repulsed, even if she knows that she is supposed to feel «beautiful things» (Ferrante, 2020b: 112), since «women–above all, mothers–have been supposed to love this way» (Rich, 2021: 7). This repulsion makes her even more subversive concerning traditional motherhood, which brings her closer to the character of the monster in the eyes of society: «Perhaps one is a monster–an anti-woman–something driven and without recourse to the normal and appealing consolations of love, motherhood» (Rich, 2021: 2). In addition, even Elena describes her as having «the sickly look of a woman who is unwillingly pregnant» (Ferrante, 2020b: 125). Nonetheless, Lila ends up getting pregnant, although she suffers a miscarriage, for which she is blamed as well:

> Lila came out of the bathroom and Stefano, as if he had been waiting in ambush, immediately grabbed her by the arm. She wriggled free, irritated, and joined me. She was very pale. She whispered, 'I've had some blood. What does it mean, is the baby dead?' Lila's pregnancy lasted scarcely more than ten weeks; then the midwife came and scrapped away everything. The next day she went back to work in the new grocery. (Ferrante, 2020b: 128)

The miscarriage seems to come as no surprise to Stefano, who previously assured that his wife has an «evil force» (Ferrante, 2020b: 85) with which «she murders the children inside» (Ferrante, 202b: 85). He is described as if «waiting in ambush» (Ferrante 2020b: 128) in this scene, because he thinks poorly of Lina and believes she is determined to contradict him by not getting pregnant, just to prove him not manly enough: «[S]he does it on purpose to make people think I don't know how to be a man, to show me up in front of everybody» (Ferrante, 2020b: 85). Stefano Carracci's pursue of the hegemonic masculinity[3] of his time, and the neighbours' incomprehension, who already blamed Lina

[3] «Hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue. Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all

for her inability to get pregnant, then blame her once more for her miscarriage: «Stefano and Pinuccia [Stefano's sister] blamed her for her inability, or unwillingness, to keep a baby inside her» (Ferrante, 2020b: 129), claiming that «she wants to stay a girl, she doesn't know how to be a wife» (Ferrante, 2020b: 129). Lina's and Elena's background is embedded in the conventional patriarchal idea that motherhood makes a woman fulfilled and complete, which is why Lina's unpregnant state, feelings of repulsion towards maternity, and miscarriage turn her into a «monster–an anti-woman» (Rich, 2021: 2). What is more, her sister-in-law, Pinuccia, admits to Stefano: «You're jealous because I'm a woman and Lina isn't» (Ferrante, 2020b: 148), as if the only quality that makes a woman be a woman were her ability to stay pregnant. «Woman's status as a childbearer has been made into a major fact of her life. Terms like 'barren' or 'childless' have been used to negate any further identity. The term 'nonfather' does not exist in any realm of social categories» (Rich, 2021: lx), which is why Lina is reprimanded so badly even after suffering a miscarriage, or when not getting pregnant, while Stefano is not.

In addition to Lina's uncanny character and relation to pregnancy, Elena's best friend, who is often described by the protagonist as pale and bony, is depicted, after her miscarriage, in an almost ghostly way: «For a while her face remained pale, she had pimples on her forehead, her eyes were sunk deep into the sockets, the skin was stretched so tight over her cheekbones that it seemed transparent» (Ferrante, 2020b: 129). This portrayal adds to the uncanniness that surrounds Lina, since she is presented almost like a character from out of gothic fiction, like a ghost or a skeleton. Moreover, the neighbours conspire and invent rumours around Lina and her pregnancy up to the point of considering her a witch. In a scene where a collage, designed by Lila, of her photographed in her wedding dress, burns, she is even compared to the devil:

> But the girl couldn't bear either the first hypothesis or the second, and with a fiercely combative look blamed Lina herself, that is she blamed the disfigured image, which had caught fire spontaneously, like the Devil, who attempting to corrupt the saints, assumed the features of a woman, but the saints called on Jesus, and the demon was transformed into flames. She added, in confirmation of her version, that Pinuccia herself had told her that her sister-in-law [Lina] had the ability not to stay pregnant, and, in fact, if she was unsuccessful she would let the children drain out, rejecting the gifts of the Lord […] But Gigliola especially had no doubts by now: Lila was a witch-whore, she had cast a spell on her fiancé; that's why he wanted her to manage the shop in Piazza dei Martiri. (Ferrante, 2020b: 140-1)

Lila's uncanniness and her neighbours' aversion towards her, due to her unwillingness and inability to get pregnant, make them compare her with the devil and think that she possesses supernatural powers which allow her not to stay pregnant, and, that «in fact, if she was unsuccessful she would let the children drain out, rejecting the gifts of the Lord» (Ferrante, 2020b: 140). Such divine «gifts of the Lord» (Ferrante, 2020b: 140), understood as motherhood and the faculty of being able to bring children into the world, which are not appealing or desirable in Lina's eyes, is what makes her a monster from the point of view of her society:

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other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men» (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832).

> This refusal to participate in the classificatory 'order of things' is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose extremely incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions. (Cohen, 1996: 6)

Hence, Lina's dissident feelings towards pregnancy and maternity, feeling disgusted by them, make a monster out of her, since she disrupts the established order of patriarchal society, which expects her to harbour positive emotions towards motherhood. To her husband and neighbours, her body is «extremely incoherent» (Cohen, 1996: 6), and the uncanniness surrounding her failed pregnancy turns the unknown into the monstrous–as «[m]isogyny and teratology have always met in the image of the maternal monster» (Francus, 1994: 832). Since there is no explanation to her unpregnant state, rumours are spread claiming that «she would let the children drain out» (Ferrante, 2020b: 140-1), and that «she murders the children inside» (Ferrante, 2020b: 85). Additionally, other than being compared to the devil, she is called a «witch-whore» (Ferrante, 2020b: 140-1). Interestingly, the figure of a witch can be associated to that of the monster, since it provokes fear and rejection from society too:

> Witches were feared because it was thought they could cast terrible spells and bring death to those they cursed. Historically, the curse of a woman, particularly if she were pregnant or menstruating, was considered far more potent than a man's curse. A 'mother's curse', as it was known, meant certain death. The curse of a woman who also practised as a witch was even more deadly than that of an ordinary woman. (Creed, 1993: 74)

The perception of Lina as a witch and a monster by her neighbourhood, which she makes fun of–«[y]ou'd better go, we're witches here, we're very dangerous» (Ferrante, 2020b: 141)–is the result of the menace she embodies to patriarchal order and to the institution of motherhood, this menace being the female body–the reproductive body–being unable and/or not wanting to reproduce. Thus, she shows that «[t]he woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith ('die erste Eva', 'la mère obscure'), Bertha Mason, or Gorgon» (Cohen, 1996: 9). The monsterisation Lina's character undergoes is a mere reaction to her unclassifiable and abject nature, which does not live up to the expectations of her pregnancy:

> The too-precise laws of nature as set forth by science are gleefully violated in the freakish compilation of the monster's body. A mixed category, the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or merely binary opposition, demanding instead a 'system' allowing polyphony. (Cohen, 1996: 6-7)

The polyphony Lina proposes is being a wife, but not a mother, having a reproductive body and not reproducing, which remains unconceivable for her society, which undoubtedly expects a child after marriage. What is more, since she is believed to have the power to prevent her own pregnancy, this supposed agency makes her monstrous as well, since «monstrous maternity produces chaos by blurring the traditional psychologies of gender, in which femininity and authority do not coexist» (Francus, 1994: 832). Furthermore, Lina's opinions on motherhood make her even more polyphonic or monstrous, because she defies the conventional perception of womanhood–a womanhood not repulsed by the idea of becoming a mother. Lina is viewed as a monster because she is completely abject, not only regarding motherhood, but in terms of her character and the impression she leaves on people as well. Greco's best friend is «ejected beyond the scope

of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable» (Kristeva, 2024: 1). In this respect, Lila's nature as something abject is made intrinsic to her character because, not only does she break society's boundaries and expectations, but also has a weird obsession with boundaries themselves:

> She used that term: dissolving boundaries. It was on that occasion that she resorted to it for the first time; she struggled to elucidate the meaning, she wanted me to understand what the dissolution of boundaries meant and how much it frightened her […] She was still holding my hand tight, breathing hard. She said that the outlines of things and people were delicate, that they broke like cotton thread. She exclaimed that she had always had to struggle to believe that life had firm boundaries, for she had known since she was a child that it was not like that–it was absolutely not like that–and so she couldn't trust in their resistance to being banged and bumped […] And so if she didn't stay alert, if she didn't pay attention to the boundaries, the waters would break through, a flood would rise, carrying everything off in clots of menstrual blood, in cancerous polyps, in bits of yellowish fiber. (Ferrante, 2020d: 175-6)

Consequently, Lila's concern with boundaries, or rather «dissolving boundaries» (Ferrante, 2020d: 175), aligns with the idea of the monster, since «the monster's very existence is a rebuke to boundary and enclosure» (Cohen, 1996: 7). Additionally, Lina's hyperfixation with boundaries is not deliberate, since it is a trait of Ferrante's poetics, whose novels are characterised by:

> an entire poetics of incision or rupture that Ferrante encloses within two words: *frantumaglia*–a dialectal neologism implying fragmentation, shattering, or a jumble of fragments, and *smarginatura*–an obscure technical term Ferrante employs in an innovative way to signify the dissolving or cutting off of margins, the collapse of physical outlines or the blurring of edges. (Milkova, 2021: 33)

On the other hand, Lina's role as a mother, once she has children, and hence, complies with what was expected from her, is criticised as well. First, Lina gets pregnant while having an affair with Nino, Elena's first crush and ex elementary school classmate of both, with whom she flees from their neighbourhood and her violent and abusive husband. They move to another working-class neighbourhood, San Giovanni a Teduccio, but Nino ends up leaving her and she then starts living with a friend from the neighbourhood, Enzo, with whom she does not share sexual intimacy until later on in the saga. This situation of a single and separated mother taking care her of her child, Rino, by slaving in a precarious job, and living with another man who is not her husband, whom she left, disrupts again the established order of patriarchal society at that time: «How brutal the factory where Lila was working, and Lila herself–Lila with her small child, Lila who lived in a run-down building with Enzo, although they didn't sleep together» (Ferrante, 2020c: 27). Thus, her way of living, outside society's norms and borders, is regarded as disruptive and shameful, which is why Stefano yells at Lila: «You are the shame of your family. Even your mother doesn't want to see you anymore» (Ferrante, 2020b: 444), the maternal repudiation being conceived as the biggest punishment one can get, because it means a rejection from someone who is supposed to love you unconditionally. Therefore, even if Lila is looking for her agency and escaping from domestic abuse, stigma and criticism on her lifestyle as a mother keep chasing her, leaving the mark of the 'bad mother' on her: «And without a doubt he considered her a terrible mother, since she could have brought up her son in the comfort of the Carracci grocery

stores and instead she had dragged him into that poverty» (Ferrante, 2020c: 115). Additionally, her disruptive lifestyle and motherhood reveal the social aspect that surrounds maternity, since once Lila is separated, Stefano protests in the following way: «If you have another child you'd better abort it, because you have my surname and I don't want it to be my child» (Ferrante, 2020b: 445). This assertion proves that in Lina's society, motherhood and paternity are merely social constructs. The abortion Stefano suggests would have been previously condemned by him and his family and would have been judged as something unnatural for what Lina would be to blame–just as she was blamed for her miscarriage. Hence, Stefano demonstrates that his early concern with parenthood was solely a question of manhood, and of following conventions, the rules, and fitting in the mould of the societal expectations for a married couple.

On the other hand, Lila's subversive motherhood and feelings towards becoming a mother are recurrent themes along the saga. Even if she is a responsible and loving mother, she is aware of the side effects of motherhood regarding women's freedom. This is why she speaks frankly about it and does not adorn the motherhood experience to fit in the expected subdued mother role whose love is everlasting and unconditional, finding «chief gratification in being all day with small children» (Rich, 2021: 3). Lina is not «haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is 'unconditional'; and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity» (Rich, 2021: 7). For instance, Lina's sincerity is manifested in her confession to Elena on her experience of pregnancy:

> But, happy or not, you'll see, the body suffers, it doesn't like losing its shape, there's too much pain. From there she went on in a crescendo that got darker and darker, telling me things she had told me before but never with the same desire to pull me into her suffering, so that I, too, would feel it. She seemed to want to prepare me for what awaited me, she was very worried about me and my future. This life of another, she said, clings to you in the womb first and then, when it finally comes out, it takes you prisoner, keeps you on leash, you're no longer your own master […] It's as if you fabricated your very own torture. (Ferrante, 2020c: 233)

Naturally, her view on motherhood and pregnancy as «torture» (Ferrante, 2020c: 233), and a jail where the mother is a «prisoner» (Ferrante, 2020c: 233) does not resonate with the ideal of the traditional mother and the «unexamined assumptions» (Rich, 2021: 3) of motherhood. The disruption her point of view on maternity poses to the established order is seen in an episode where Elena takes Lina to a doctor, because she has had a breakdown. Here, Greco's friend asks the doctor for contraception pills, whereas he tries to persuade her to have more children. First, the doctor asks her if she is married and has children already, to which Lina answers that she is separated and has one child, which is enough for her. Then, the doctor responds: «One isn't much […] In your condition pregnancy would help, there is no better medicine for a woman» (Ferrante, 2020c: 194); to what Greco's friend replies: «I know women who were destroyed by pregnancy. Better to have the pills» (Ferrante, 2020c: 194). The fact that Lina goes to the doctor because she has had a breakdown and gets advised to have another child demonstrates the conception her society has of motherhood. This point of view of maternity as women's panacea differs from Lina's perspective, for which she is punished during the saga through blame, rumours, and criticism.

Furthermore, her role as a mother of her second child, Tina, in the fourth book, *The Story of the Lost Child*, proves complex as well. For example, in a chapter where Lina's labour is described, she is depicted again through an uncanny quality, just like

when she was trying to get pregnant at the beginning of the saga, and when she had a miscarriage too. Once more, Lina is portrayed as if possessing an unnatural or monstrous nature, according to the nurse who helped her deliver her daughter: «Lila had done her best not to bring her infant into the world. She held onto it with all her strength and meanwhile gasped: Cut my stomach open, you get it out, I can't do it» (Ferrante, 2020d: 217). Subsequently, the nurse continues saying that: «[I]n the delivery room she had seen a struggle against nature, a terrible clash between a mother and her child. It was, she said, a truly unpleasant experience» (Ferrante, 2020d: 217). Therefore, again, Lina is described through the uncanny, since there is in her a «struggle against nature» (Ferrante, 2020d: 217), and this unnaturalness makes the nurse perceive her labour as «a terrible clash between a mother and her child» (Ferrante, 2020d: 217). This, once more, highlights her disruptive maternity and, thus, monstrosity. Nonetheless, Lina, unlike Elena's mother, Immacolata, who is constantly reproachful of her daughter, is proud of Tina and takes good care of her: «She took Imma [Elena's daughter] from my arms and cared for her and Tina as if suddenly her daughter had doubled. She changed them both, washed them, dressed them identically, cuddled them with an extraordinary display of maternal care» (Ferrante 2020d: 243); «How lively Tina was: to see her, to hear her talk put you in a good mood. And to see mother and daughter together was touching» (Ferrante, 2020d: 263-4). Nevertheless, Lina seems chased by the shadow of the «terrible mother» (Ferrante, 2020c: 115), since the unfortunate and sudden disappearance of her daughter, at the age of four, makes her again the target of blame. For instance, Elena's teenage daughter, Dede, even recriminates her role as a mother to her after Tina's disappearance:

> «Mamma entrusted my sisters to me, it's up to me to decide whether to go inside or not.»
> «When your mother isn't here I'm your mother.»
> «A shit mother,» Dede answered, moving to dialect. «You lost Tina and you haven't even cried.»
> Lila slapped her, crushing her. Elsa defended her sister and was slapped in turn, Imma burst into tears. You don't go out of the house, my friend repeated, gasping, outside it's dangerous, outside you'll die. She kept them inside for days, until I returned. (Ferrante, 2020d: 355)

Lina's bottled-up feelings after losing her daughter makes her «[a] shit mother» (Ferrante, 2020d: 355) in the eyes of Elena's daughters and some of her neighbours, because the reaction expected from a mother after the disappearance of a child would have had a dramatic outcome, while Lina's shock after this event blocks the expression of her feelings on the outside. Not to mention that in society losing one's child is the epitome of the 'bad mother' and everlasting guilt. Evidently her neighbours gossip about this tragic disappearance: «The dead–Carmen said to me–are a certainty, they have stones, the dates of birth and death, while her daughter doesn't', her daughter will remain forever with only the date of birth, and that is terrible, that poor child will never have a conclusion, a fixed point where her mother can sit and be tranquil» (Ferrante, 2020d: 384-5). Like Carmen suggests, the disappearance of one's child is perceived as an eternal grievance, and even if from the outside, her neighbours do not see an outburst of tears, Lina is consumed by doubt, just like Enzo, Tina's father, claims:

> If a being a few years old dies, she's dead, it's over, sooner or later you resign yourself. But if she disappears, if you no longer know anything about her, there's not a thing that remains in her place, in your life. Will Tina never return or will she return? And when she returns, will she be alive or dead? […] Are people making her do horrible things and

> selling the photographs and films? […] Or is she under the ground intact, because she died accidentally after she was abducted? And if earth and fire didn't take her, and she is growing up who knows where, what does she look like now, what will she become later, if we meet her on the street will we recognize her? And if we recognize her who will give us back everything we lost of her, everything that happened when we weren't there and little Tina felt abandoned? (Ferrante, 2020d: 410)

Hence, Lina is naturally in a state of permanent unease, fear, and hope to see her daughter again. Nonetheless, the lack of tears even makes her best friend Elena suspicious, coming to think that that uncanny nature of Lila has something to do with the disappearance:

> On the evenings of greatest depression I went so far as to imagine that she had lost her daughter in order not to see herself reproduced, in all her antipathy, in all her malicious reactivity, in all her intelligence without purpose. She wanted to eliminate herself, cancel all the traces, because she couldn't tolerate herself. (Ferrante, 2020d: 462)

Elena's intimate relation with Lina makes her well acquainted with her unreliable and abject character, which provokes a hint of doubt and suspicion, even if she is aware of the crisis her best friend is experiencing after the loss of Tina: «She instead didn't want to be her […] The tragedy of Tina, her weakened physical state, her drifting brain surely contributed to her crises. But that was the underlying cause of the illness that she called 'dissolving boundaries'» (Ferrante, 2020d: 371). What is more, regarding the bottled-up feelings Lina harbours, their close friendship makes Elena believe that she would open up with her. Nevertheless, Lina's refusal to do so is what probably makes Elena have distrusting intrusive thoughts about her friend:

> I wanted her to say in the authentic Neapolitan of our childhood: What the fuck do you want, Lenù, I'm like this because I lost my daughter, and maybe she's alive, maybe she's dead, but I can't bear either of those possibilities, because if she's alive she's alive far away from me, she's in a place where horrible things are happening to her, which I see clearly, I see them all day and all night as if they were happening right before my eyes […] leave me in peace, Tina would have been better than all of you, and instead they took her, and I can't bear it no more […] I would have liked to lead her into a conversation like that, jumbled, intoxicated. I felt that is she made up her mind she would extract from the tangled mass of her brain words of that sort. But it didn't happen. In fact, as I think back, in that phase she was less aggressive than in other periods of our story. Maybe the outburst I hoped for was made up of my own feelings, which therefore hindered me from seeing the situation clearly and made Lila even more elusive. (Ferrante, 2020d: 362-3)

Thus, Elena's suspicion, together with the societal expectation of a dramatic outburst after Tina's disappearance, are due to their inability to really understand Lina, which leaves her in the position of a misunderstood character who does not live up to expected and «unexamined assumptions» (Rich, 2021: 3). As Elena highlights: «Maybe the outburst I hoped for was made up of my own feelings, which therefore hindered me from seeing the situation clearly and made Lila even more elusive» (Ferrante, 2020d: 363). As a reaction to this lack of comprehension, Lina is perceived as a 'bad mother' who does not even express her feelings after the tragedy that happened to her daughter: «Is it you who tell your daughters that I lost Tina and never cried? […] Dede called me a shit mother» (Ferrante, 2020d: 355-6).

Finally, Lila's uncanny character and disruption of patriarchal boundaries in her role as a mother and relationship with motherhood monsterises her persona. Her agency

is manifested in her «blurring [of] the traditional psychologies of gender, in which femininity and authority do not coexist» (Francus, 1994: 832). That, along with the belief that she harbours unknown powers regarding pregnancy, categorises her within monstrous motherhood. To sum up, Lina's inability to get pregnant, miscarriage, dissident perception of motherhood, pregnancy–feeling repulsed by it–and the disappearance of her daughter, make her abject and the constant target of societal criticism and blame, up to the point of considering her a monster.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Ferrante's *The Neapolitan Quartet* carried out above highlights her crude portrayal of maternities, at odds with idealised motherhood. This approach aligns with the author's poetics, which are known for giving visibility to the unsayable. The study undergone by this article–taking into consideration the above-explained theoretical notions of the abject, the monster and the feminine monstrous–shows that Immacolata's and Lina's characters are seen as monstrous by the former's daughter and by the latter's society respectively. This monsterisation occurs due to Immacolata's and Lina's «refusal to participate in the classificatory 'order of things' [which] is true of monsters generally […] whose extremely incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration» (Cohen, 1996: 6). Moreover, their maternities are regarded as monstrous motherhoods due to the powers both characters harbour–one having to do with the incarnation of an institution, in the case of Immacolata, and the other with the constant enactment of her agency, in the case of Lina–which contradict and disrupt the constricted borders marked for their gender. On the other hand, the monstrosity of both female characters is related to physical abjection and disgust, as seen in Immacolata's physical impairment and Lina's revulsion towards pregnancy.

In short, the monsterisation of these complex characters suggests how difficult it is for women to enter the realm of the 'good mother', and to be understood as something more than their mere role as mothers in society. Their errors are harshly criticised, while in the saga there are plenty of absent father figures and abusive fathers and husbands who do not receive any criticism for not performing their fatherhood accordingly, since they are free from the «unexamined assumptions» (Rich, 2021: 3) intrinsic to motherhood. As Ferrante demonstrates, mothers do not come with instructions and, what is more, they are more than mothers, they have other identities, and they had other goals and dreams before being reduced to the «single-minded identity» (Rich, 2021: 7) of motherhood. The analysis of such complex characters leads us to question as a society maternity's constrictions, to better understand those who are rapidly judged as 'bad mothers': Do we know who our mothers were before they became mothers?

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