

Motherhood and negotiations of patriarchy in Gyllenhaal's *The Lost Daughter* (2021)

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In Western patriarchal culture, the Good Mother is traditionally framed as rigidly self-sacrificing, submissive, and fulfilled in her role as “foundation parent,” but this is an idealised and damaging view of motherhood in the patriarchal imaginary. This romanticised maternal archetype has found expression and been promoted in popular screen media, setting an impossible example for women audiences. I argue that these destructive constructs require reassessment, in relation to the intersection of motherhood, personhood, and the patriarchal. One film to depart from such representations, and the subject of analysis in this paper, is Maggie Gyllenhaal's *The Lost Daughter* (2021). The film presents a searingly complex portrayal of motherhood and, according to the director, was used to explore maternal representation, feminism, and constructs of the Bad Mother. Through a close analysis of maternal figures, I argue that the film ultimately presents a radical and destabilising cinematic (m) other image which critiques and disrupts the deeply entrenched patriarchal control within the identity of the Mother.

Keywords: *The Lost Daughter*; Motherhood, maternal representation, Bad Mother, patriarchy

Maternità e negoziazioni del patriarcato in Gyllenhaal *La figlia perduta* (2021)

Nella cultura patriarcale occidentale, la Vergine Maria è tradizionalmente rappresentata come rigidamente sacrificante, sottomessa e realizzata nel suo ruolo di “genitore fondante”, ma questa è una visione idealizzata e dannosa della maternità nell'immaginario patriarcale. Questo archetipo materno romanticizzato ha trovato espressione ed è stato promosso nei media cinematografici popolari, imponendo un esempio impossibile al pubblico femminile. Sostengo che questi costrutti distruttivi necessitano di una rivalutazione, in relazione all'intersezione tra maternità, individualità e patriarcato. Un film che si discosta da tali rappresentazioni, e oggetto di analisi in questo saggio, è *The Lost Daughter* (2021) di Maggie Gyllenhaal. Il film presenta un ritratto complesso e penetrante della maternità e, secondo la regista, è stato utilizzato per esplorare la rappresentazione materna, il femminismo e i costrutti della Cattiva Madre. Attraverso un'analisi dettagliata delle figure materne, sostengo che il film presenti infine un'immagine cinematografica radicale e destabilizzante della madre che critica e interrompe il controllo patriarcale profondamente radicato nell'identità della Madre.

Parole chiave: *La figlia perduta*, Maternità, rappresentazione materna, Cattiva madre, patriarcato

The hegemonic patriarchal ideology of Western culture¹ dictates that “the only truly enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves, first, that you are a ‘real’ woman, and second, that you are a decent, worthy one, is to become a ‘mom’” (Douglas and Michaels 2004: 5). These patriarchal maternal ideologies have become transposed into the media landscape, including film. For example, maternal figures in mainstream Hollywood cinema are largely subject to the patriarchal view of the ideal feminine, and so often serve misogynistic and conservative ends. Such unrealistic maternal representations prove damaging

¹ The study refers to discourses of patriarchy pertaining to the Global North and Western culture, a context in which the film case study has emerged and in which its narrative is situated. As such, when making reference to “patriarchy”, it is specifically from the perspective of patriarchy as derived from the ambit of Anglo-American/European normativity. The study's views on motherhood and the patriarchal maternal are thus located within the Global North and Western discourses on culture and patriarchy. The study acknowledges that these views, ideologies, and archetypes may translate differently to the Global South or expressions of black motherhood.

in how they shape and manipulate beliefs, expectations, and experiences of motherhood, as well as how the institution of motherhood is conceptualised. These attitudes toward motherhood are problematic, especially considering that the maternal figure has become “hypervisible” (Orgad 2019: 23) in contemporary culture.

Diverse, real-world women cannot always identify with culturally sanctioned configurations of the Mother and endure hardship if they attempt to conform to them, as they are expected to do. Among other things, romanticised, distorted notions of the maternal coerce women into motherhood, through generating false expectations and legitimising societal pressures. This can lead to the “othering” of mothers, causing them to experience feelings of inadequacy and deficiency. Relatedly, when women speak out about “real” experiences of child-rearing, any negative (i.e. undesirable) feelings are often invalidated and stifled by society at large. In contrast to the Western phallogocentric ideal mother figure, there exists hardly any popular media coverage of these “uncensored” maternal concerns or divergent (m)other figures that would be eminently more realistic.

Maggie Gyllenhaal’s *The Lost Daughter* (2021) is one of few mainstream films to depart from traditional patriarchal maternal ideologies. Rather, the film presents audiences with a transgressive cinematic (m)other who interrogates the values of the patriarchal feminine. In the director’s words, “it’s a movie about trying to embrace and normalise the huge spectrum of feelings that are inherently a part of being a parent” (Rao 2022). Asking how the film foregrounds experiences of mothers at the margins of representation, this study draws attention to the complexity of the film’s thematisation of contemporary motherhood. To access the discourse in which the film operates, I draw upon feminist concepts of the patriarchal feminine and the Good and Bad Mother. A text-based approach is then used to argue how the content and formal elements of *The Lost Daughter* coalesce to suggest Leda’s diminishing experience of motherhood and her inability to inhabit the role of Good Mother. Analyses of key moments elucidate how the Bad Mother is employed as a mechanism problematising the routine conflation of motherhood and personhood. Lastly, the study concludes with how atypical maternal representations in popular media are necessary to normalise how motherhood is not a uniform experience for individual women, nor is it experienced in the same way by all women. Ultimately, the study wishes to investigate how the film lays bare the patriarchal dominance undergirding the identity of the Mother, which is placed at the forefront of contemporary Western female existence.²

Motherhood and Patriarchy in the images of the Good and Bad Mother

Western patriarchally-informed constructions of social and familial structures have translated to maternal roles in popular media and on the screen. The mediascape’s plentiful depictions of the maternal may largely be categorised according to the binary of the “good” or “bad” mother. For this study, I draw upon pertinent concepts outlined by Sarah Arnold and E. Ann Kaplan to explore *The Lost Daughter*’s thematisation of atypical motherhood and Leda’s characterisation as a

² The scope of this study does not extend to or encompass theories of trauma. Rather, it is an investigation into how *The Lost Daughter* presents an opportunity to interrogate patriarchal ideals of motherhood, through its exploration and critique of the binary cinematic archetypes of the Good and Bad Mothers. While the study does mention the resulting harm these patriarchal maternal ideals have on contemporary women, it does so not as a general sociological critique, but in specific relation to the aforementioned maternal paradigms and Kaplan’s patriarchal feminine in film, which translate to and impact society.

transgressive (m)other. Arnold employs feminist psychoanalytic theory to further investigate the Lacanian duality of the Good and Bad Phallic Mother in *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood* (2013). Arnold's maternal characterisations are scaffolded upon seminal feminist psychoanalytic theorist E. Ann Kaplan's Angel versus Witch trope (2013), which operates according to the patriarchal feminine. These concepts are discussed in Kaplan's 1992 survey of mid-1950s Hollywood melodramas (2013).

To understand the discourse of the Good Angel Mother, it is first necessary to contextualise Motherhood and Personhood from the traditional standpoint of the Global North, which considers these distinct roles as inextricably intertwined. Motherhood has long been deemed a "natural" and biological consequence of being a woman. In other words, due to the association of a woman's childbearing with her lactation capacities, women's corresponding desire for, complicity, and responsibility in childcare and maternal labour are readily presupposed and become taken for granted (Chodorow 1978: 3). Such devaluation of the role of women was instrumental in the establishing of sexual difference which undergirds women's consignment to "nature" - with reproductive labour an essential part of that nature. However, there has since been extensive feminist research to indicate that the linkage between motherhood and nature is merely a social, historical, legal, political, and philosophical construction (Neyer and Bernardi 2011: 165-7). The valuation of women solely for their biological capacity for procreation only relegates them to subordinate passivity in other spheres of life. In this light, second-wave feminists viewed motherhood as a basis of discrimination, and as a barrier to women's rights and equality which "concretely established [women] as the Other" (De Beauvoir 1953: 193) in Western phallogocentric society.

Kaplan highlights the sociopolitical positioning of the Good Mother within the patriarchal imaginary, underscoring how the archetype conforms to and buttresses the notion of the patriarchal feminine (Kaplan 2013: 1-6). The patriarchal feminine refers to the patriarchal ideal of womanhood constructed according to patriarchal male systems, desires, and ideologies. This highly constructed perception of women - which conflates women's biological capacity for childrearing with social motherhood, nature, and the idealisation of mother love - serves to "create, maintain, and legitimise women's subordination" (De Beauvoir 1953: 166). To clarify, the patriarchal feminine is geared toward justifying, enabling, and sustaining patriarchal male hegemony, even if the ideologies it promulgates are unattainable or harmful. The Good Mother, her values, characteristics, and desires, must thus be viewed through the lens of the patriarchal feminine, and scrutinised as a patriarchal product aimed at romanticising procreation, child-rearing, and motherhood devoid of agency.

The Good Angel Mother archetype finds its basis in eighteenth and nineteenth-century European Romantic ideals of True Womanhood (Kaplan 2013: 9) which demands that women aspire to the mythic role of self-sacrificial and all-providing Mother, as a path to fulfilment. This archaic ideology typifies an intrinsically nurturing and self-abnegating motherhood (Arnold 2013: 23), framed as an inevitable consequence of biology. Translated to the screen, the Good Mother is then cast in the image of "piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness" (Takševa 2017: 155). She is often defined in relation to or overshadowed by a paternal figure, occupied in her pursuit of living for and through her husband and children, and thus marginal to the film narrative. Spectatorial pleasure is derived from masochistic sacrifices and hardships endured by the mother as a means to maintain the mother-child bond. As such, the determination of "good" or "bad" corresponds with the cinematic mother's proclivity for self-sacrifice and prioritising her child above her own desires, which are derived from clearly-writ historical prescriptions of motherhood as a woman's true purpose (Kaplan 2013: 45-8).

To sum up, the hegemonic conflation of woman and nature establishes the Good Mother archetype as being entrenched in patriarchal ideals of womanhood. These ideologies uphold motherhood as the singular path to fulfilment and “true” womanhood, reinforcing childbearing not only as inherent to the female identity, but as presupposed and given. Kaplan (2013: 4) calls into question the reasoning behind women’s desire for the attainment of this “true” existence: “Since the patriarchy wants women to want children... how can a woman distinguish her desire for the child from that imposed on her?” Indeed, it may prove difficult to make such a distinction. The answer to Kaplan’s probing quantifies the Good Mother paradigm as existing intangibly outside of women’s agency and identity. Coercive enforcement of the reproductive ethic and ideals of the patriarchal feminine “not only deprives individuals of their freedom to make reproductive choices but also constructs a rigid social value system centred around procreation” (Venkatesan and Murali 2021: 109). The Good Mother paradigm “haunts and persecutes mothers... representing the full weight of personal guilt, failure, and grim accountability that accompany Western motherhood” (Quiney 2007: 24). Consequently, the image of the Good Mother is hinged on romanticised feminine ideals imposed by the patriarchy, ultimately serving its agenda.

Considering that Kaplan (2013: 86) identifies the patriarchy as being constructed according to the male conscious, the Bad Mother then serves as a corruption of the idealised, patriarchal feminine. If the imposed “patriarchal construct of idealised motherhood” (Kaplan 2013: 133-9), shaped by the patriarchal feminine, finds its basis in masochism and self-sacrifice, functioning as the “epitome of private, sacrificial femininity” (Quiney 2007: 22), the Bad Mother (Kaplan 2013: 45-6; Arnold 2013: 23-5) eschews this. Instead, she is typically characterised as selfish, evil, sadistic, hurtful, jealous, and transgressive, by extension aligning with notions of the Monstrous Feminine (Creed 1993) and the Abject (Kristeva 1980). Her actions are not merely repulsive, but are also enmeshed with a profound, ambiguous pleasure that threatens traditional hegemonic structures. This symbolic “phallic” Witch figure (Kaplan 2013: 107-10), who refuses the self-abnegation embraced by the Good Mother, demands individuality, agency, and differentiation from the child (Kaplan 1990). However, she herself is often symbolically “castrated” (Creed 1993: 122-3; Kristeva 1980: 158), punished, or disempowered for her desire for independence, as it comes into direct conflict with the idealised patriarchal feminine. Notably, although these archetypes tend to be punished upon reaching the film’s resolution, the characters embodying them are still presented with the opportunity to operate outside of their designated role, which may allow them a degree of agency that constitutes a powerful force within the text. The Bad Mother thus contributes toward enforcing patriarchal feminine ideologies or, conversely, challenging them through transgressive actions and decisions.

Overall, the Good and Bad Mother serve to concretise the constructs of maternal love and the patriarchal feminine, downplaying the lived experiences and realities of motherhood, and villainising maternal figures who resist this trope. In mainstream film, mother figures are frequently “demonised or deified, offering a narrow range of maternal representations that often serve misogynistic and conservative ends” (Smyth 2020). When representations of motherhood attempt to deviate from the sanitised, happy, subservience of the Good Mother to represent the harsh realities of motherhood, these renderings of abhorrent maternal experiences (as enacted by the Bad Mother) may be construed as obscene. In society, if struggles with the realities of child-rearing are openly depicted or admitted, mothers face cultural policing and censorship of their maternal speech. Breaking the Good Mother’s “saintly silence” and confessing maternal truths elicit moralising or unsympathetic reactions. Atypical maternal experience is seen as a subject decidedly not up for debate or theorisation, in Western culture or mainstream cinema.

Voicing and visibilising these narratives is seen as indecent, synonymous with low culture, and may garner accusations of “self-inflation... hysterical and imperfect femininity” (Quiney 2007: 26). This is because these radical women, who fail at being receptacles for birth, pose a threat to the patriarchal feminine and traditional family values. Indeed, when radical cinematic mothers resist the patriarchally-informed constructions of maternity in Western phallocentric and pronatalist society³, they are still presented as abnormal and Other. It is thus clear to see the sensibilities, agenda, and maternal ideals of the patriarchy represented and promulgated in the images of the Good and Bad Mother common to mainstream Hollywood cinema.

Implications for contemporary motherhood

The rhetoric, imagery, and fabrication of the idealised patriarchal maternal proves pervasive and harmful in its ability to shape and manipulate beliefs, expectations, and experiences of motherhood, as well as the ways in which individuals view the institution of motherhood (Heffernan and Wilgus 2018: 2). Understanding the implications of these maternal constructs is essential to contextualise the broader societal critique presented in *The Lost Daughter*. Sara Ruddick (2001: 189), in her assertion that the “idealised figure of the Good Mother casts a long shadow on many actual mothers’ lives”, underscores the importance of the film’s atypical maternal thematisation and its relevance to contemporary feminist discourse. It is especially applicable, considering that traditional affective dimensions have only intensified for mothers in the twenty-first century (Heffernan and Wilgus 2018: 7). For contemporary mothers, it is crucial that patriarchal maternal paradigms be challenged in favour of more healthy and realistic portrayals of motherhood.

Despite the potential for harm, contemporary culture superficially celebrates postfeminist mothers as “agents of their own destinies” (Douglas and Michaels 2004: 620), while parading impossible maternal ideals, emphasising motherhood as prerequisite to women realising their full potential. Such trends insist that mothers dedicate themselves wholly, joyously, and selflessly to their children, at the expense of their selfhood: “No woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids... to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children” (Negra in Douglas and Michaels 2004: 4).

In a landscape of maternal culpability, diverse, real-world women struggle to relate their lived experiences of motherhood to those inundating screen media, literature, and magazines. Regardless of context, resources, or income, mothers are expected to conform to these culturally sanctioned configurations of the ideal maternal, which serve as a form of neoliberal “responsibilising self-fashioning” (Littler 2013: 230). For mothers who do not conform to the

³ Pronatalist society refers to normative cultural practices, discourses, and institutions premised upon the belief that procreation and maternal labour are essential and non-negotiable parts of its ideology. Womanhood itself is situated within the boundaries of reproduction and the sociocultural and political structures that reinforce pronatalist ideology. Pronatalist society thus dictates that a woman’s role *must* involve childbearing and caregiving, where purpose and individual fulfilment are inextricably interwoven with that of maternity. Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Chinmay Murali (2021: 109) further assert that “enforcing motherhood as central to a woman’s identity through images, representations, and constructions of the maternal, usually perpetuated and enforced through mainstream cultural scripts, is the extant modus operandi of the pronatalist project.”

Good Mother paradigm, these media-fuelled representations inspire feelings of inadequacy, deficiency, and defectiveness (Collins 1992: 327-9). Mothers who do not fit this mould are not only denied “normalcy” by legal and welfare systems but are also exploited for the benefit of others by these very systems (Neyer and Bernardi 2011: 166; Collins 1997: 326), legitimising and promoting inequality and marginalisation (Kaplan 2013: 9; Littler 2013: 238; McRobbie 2013: 121). Due to these inherent social and personal inequalities, mothers – as the “foundation” parent - are tasked with the responsibility of childcare but deprived of agency in defining their own maternal subjectivities. Furthermore, placing the foetus at the centre of the mother’s universe effaces a denial of mothers’ “immediate and long-term needs, interests, and desires” (Takševa 2017: 155). Adrienne Rich, in her ground-breaking work *Of Woman Born* (1976), describes this as the yoking of mothers with “powerless responsibility”.

Additionally, unhealthy and unrealistic maternal ideologies (reflected and inculcated in popular media, culture, policies, and institutions) that cultivate circumstances in which mothers who cannot cope with their maternal labour must seek unhealthy or destructive outlets, have negative implications for the children involved. There is a notable relationship between maternal disengagement and misattunement and issues with children’s self-worth and ability to navigate adversity. Mothers - such as those without an innate desire to have children, who have consistently denied their own needs and desires, or who lack the necessary psycho-social or financial support - may struggle to meet their children’s bio-psycho-social needs.

Essentially, due to the homogenised, sanitised, and romanticised notions of the patriarchal feminine and Good Mother, women may be increasingly coerced into motherhood by false expectations or societal pressures, and those who are already mothers are “othered”. Furthermore, these constructs augment intersecting systems of oppression geared toward the subjugation and othering of “deviant” mothers. It is thus necessary to highlight and challenge the patriarchal discourse and gendered subjectivities that underwrite popular mainstream media of the maternal. *The Lost Daughter* offers a counterpoint to these patriarchal media representations in Leda’s atypical maternal experience, providing an opportunity for critical introspection and exploration into the underlying patriarchal dominance steeped in the identity of the Mother.

***The Lost Daughter*: transgressive (m)otherhood**

The Lost Daughter, a directorial debut from Maggie Gyllenhaal, is based on the 2006 Neapolitan novel *La Figlia Oscura* by Elena Ferrante and was released on Netflix in 2021. The psychological drama follows middle-aged professor Leda Caruso as she vacations in Greece. She soon begins fixating on the relationship between a young mother and daughter, Nina and Elena, which the film parallels in flashbacks to Leda’s strained relationship with her own daughters. It is thereafter revealed that Leda abandoned her young daughters for three years, leaving them in the care of her then-husband, in order to pursue a career in academia. During this period, Leda also embarks on an affair with a fellow professor. In the present, Leda’s theft of a beloved doll, belonging to the besotted Elena, precipitates a fallout between the two mothers. After confessing that she is a “selfish” and “unnatural” mother, Leda is stabbed by Nina at the film’s resolution. The film concludes surreally, with the image of a content Leda relaxing on the beach in conversation with her daughters via telephone.

Applying a text-based analysis to key moments within the film and using the feminist frameworks of the Good and Bad Mother, I will argue how the content and formal elements

of *The Lost Daughter* coalesce to suggest Leda's atypical experience of (m)otherhood, which exposes and interrogates the values of the patriarchal feminine. The analysis to come shall further reveal the film's thematisation of a capacious maternal experience, in a performance of womanhood that attempts to negotiate - and even critique - the patriarchal governmentality deeply entrenched in problematic maternal ideals.

First encounters

From the outset, the film establishes the binary paradigms of the Good and Bad Mother in Nina and Leda. These two archetypes, played up against one another, are later used to interrogate the meaning of motherhood as it is socio-culturally constructed.

Leda's first encounter with the young mother and daughter on the beach serves as the introduction to Nina as Good Mother. Nina emerges from the ocean, cradling Elena in her arms. Gyllenhaal's screenplay describes the two "TALKING TO EACH OTHER PEACEFULLY AS IF ONLY THEY EXISTED... They are a part of the big, noisy family but they seem like another species." In this quasi-ethereal scene, Nina is visually likened to the goddess of sacred love and beauty, icon of purity and saintliness, rising from the sea in Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1486). Nina thus becomes at once an idealised and desired figure, a notion one might parallel to that of True Womanhood and, considering that she emerges from the ocean *with child*, the very image of the Good Mother. Leda vicariously observes the young mother and daughter on the beach, in a display of idyllic mother-daughter connection characteristic of patriarchal feminine values. The camera, like Leda, is distanced and, through Leda's surreptitious gaze, the audience too witnesses Nina and Elena in their entirely private maternal sanctuary. The two are consumed by one another, in a peaceful exchange between mother and daughter. Here, the film primes the audience with the ideals of Motherhood that it will later subvert.

Now having established Nina as the Good Mother, the sequences that follow lay the foundations of Leda's consignment to the Bad Mother role. Leda's maternal unease (specifically evoked by the maternal ideal crusaded by Nina) is directly signified in the film's *mise-en-scene* and other formal elements. In almost the very next scene, Leda reaches for a plum nestled in a bowl of fruit in her holiday rental, but "exposes A MESS OF ROT AND MOULD under the pristine surface. All of the fruit is half rotten." Evocative of *natura morta* and *momenti mori* – iconography specific to seventeenth-century Dutch still life painting which signify death – this imagery appears misplaced amongst idyllic seascapes and holidaying families, thus proving rather unsettling for the viewer. Such injections of strange and disturbing imagery, not unlike the similarly toned and styled signposts found in early acts of the psychological thriller film, punctuate these scenes of motherhood with ominous foreboding. In doing so, they infer Leda's unease at Motherhood and inhabiting maternal ideals, as well as the air of liminality and instability. Furthermore, the proximity and chronology of this fruit bowl scene, occurring almost directly after Leda's observation of Nina and Elena, disrupts the sense of comfort and satisfaction evoked by their display of mother-child harmony. As discussed later, these and other arbitrary motifs mirror Leda's unwelcome intrusion into Nina and Elena's sacred relationship, with the intention of setting up Leda's othering and the "unconscionable" maternal acts to come.

To contrast our protagonist's suggested maternal impropriety, Leda's next encounter with the young mother and daughter concretely sediments Nina as the figure of the Good Mother. Elena, in a showcase of her intimate maternal bond, gently and dutifully bathes her sunbathing

mother and doll with ocean water gathered from her toy pail. Where Elena here assumes the role of caregiver, nodding to the interpellation of the girl-child, her mother is once again presented as an object of desire – inspiring not unease or disgust, but admiration and want. This is affirmed by Gyllenhaal and Dakota Johnson (who portrays Nina) in a *Vanity Fair* interview⁴ (2021), in which Nina is described as an initially objectified, “watched” character. These scenes are likewise shot with extreme close-ups and tight panning shots that hone into faces, limbs, and torsos. Nina, as “yummy mummy” (Littler 2013) is arguably objectified, and even dissected by the frame - recalling Mulvey’s male gaze. In accordance with the previously referenced image of Venus, the “yummy mummy” is at once desired and desirable. Here, she is simultaneously saintly, chaste, pure, and sacrificial, as necessitated by the unrealistic ideals of the Good Mother and patriarchal feminine. This scene not only asserts Nina as an object of desire (in her youthful beauty) but also as desired in her role as a mother. Nina appears oblivious to the ease with which she enthralls her daughter, almost flaunting the mother-child connection, suggested here as naturally given – and this too is attractive and satisfying from the pro-natalist patriarchal viewpoint. These intimate, even scopophilic, shots serve to showcase the enviable tenderness between Elena and Nina and introduce the mothering of the doll. At times, due to the extreme close-up shots that accentuate the corporeality of the characters, we are unable to distinguish mother from daughter, hinting at the mingling of the two identities and the slippage of the self. Here again, through Leda’s gaze, is the ideal of mythic motherhood (as well as female youth) and the intimated sanctity of the mother-child bond in the image of Nina as the Good Mother.

Leda then flashes back to a memory of herself as a young mother making a game of peeling an orange with her daughters, Bianca and Marta. While it is a “positive” memory and portrayed in a similar cinematographic style to the previously described scene, young Leda somehow does not seem as present or engaged as Nina. In the present, Leda is moved by Nina and Elena, and her memories of her daughters, implying a certain conflict in her maternal experience. Soon thereafter, Leda receives a call from her daughter, Marta. While Marta’s dialogue is inaudible, Leda’s responses are often superficial or interrupted. The scene touches on the physical and emotional distance between Leda and her daughters, which is so aptly juxtaposed against the preceding tightly framed shots of the mothers and daughters. In light of Leda’s voyeuristic observation of Nina and Elena and viewed from the film’s standpoint on motherhood, the aforementioned tightly shot sequences could conceivably connote an intense scrutiny of these maternal figures, evoking feelings of unease and claustrophobia rather than familial intimacy. Notably, the very next scene is another disturbing punctuator: Leda awakens to a loud male cicada on her pillow, looming large in the frame. Considering that only female cicadas are mute, the scene further infers supposed “lapses” in Leda’s maternal experience, while simultaneously hinting at the censorship of maternal subjectivities.

Already, the film suggests subtle incongruencies between Leda’s maternal experience and the Good Mother ideal embodied in Nina. The analyses to come shall further discuss the clash of the Good and Bad Mother archetypes, and how they are used to reveal and interrogate the patriarchal feminine.

⁴ Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnQg2nDNnv0>.

Reckless abandonment?

Having previously alluded to incongruences in Leda's attitudes toward motherhood, additional flashback sequences reveal the protagonist's maternally ambivalent and fraught relationship with her children. These flashbacks depict Leda falling asleep on the floor as Bianca roughly brushes her mother's hair like a doll, trying to escape her daughters' incessant demands, and angering at Bianca's desecration of a childhood doll, amongst other things. Throughout, there is little intervention from Leda's then-husband, Joe. While certain flashbacks indicate scatterings of familial joy, such moments are fleeting. In this way, Leda's multi-faceted, but admittedly bleak, maternal experience unfolds.

Leda's incompatibility with motherhood is evident in her feelings of hardship, failure, regret, anger, and inadequacy. Leda concedes Bianca "would never let herself feel deprived, she sucks everything out of me". As a foundation parent, Leda is unequivocally expected to heed this call of self-sacrifice and nurture. In one scene, Joe implores young Leda to deal with the children. Deeply immersed in work, Leda removes her headphones, hears the girls wailing, and puts them back on. Another scene sees Bianca repeatedly hitting Leda to gain her attention, while she is again engaged in work. Leda admonishes Bianca, shouting that she needs "fifteen more minutes". After forcibly moving Bianca to another room ("I don't want to see you right now"), Leda slams the door, shattering the glass panes, leaving Bianca sobbing in the doorway and Marta frightened. In both scenes, Leda is shown to prioritise her needs above those of her children, effacing the traits of the Good Mother. She strives to carve space (figuratively and literally) away from her children and differentiate her role as a mother from her ambitions as a scholar. Indeed, balancing the roles of Mother and individual proves exceptionally challenging.

These and other scenes announce the "incompatibility of creativity and procreativity" (Milkova 2013: 104) innate to Leda's maternal subjectivity. The narrative's polarisation of Leda's academic success and domestic failure further underscores Leda's inability to assume the role of the Good Mother. Conversely, Leda's sexual fulfilment is paralleled with her academic success and self-fulfilment: Leda is invited to present her paper at a conference, and is praised by an acclaimed professor, signalling an assimilation into a world of highly-achieving scholars. With Joe unable to satisfy her sexually and his feigned incompetency to co-parent, Leda embarks on an affair with this professor who can meet both her sexual and intellectual needs. Additionally, in Leda's choice to continue the affair, she further eschews the notion of the Good Mother, echoed by Rich (1995: 183): "The divisions of labour and allocations of power in patriarchy demand not merely a suffering Mother, but one divested of sexuality... Women are permitted to be sexual only at a certain time of life." If Leda's sexuality is paralleled with her academic success, personal growth, and individual freedom, the affair operates as a means to recuperate the aspects of her life divested of her by her children. Again, Leda resists the role of the self-abnegating and submissive Good Mother, instead demanding autonomy and differentiation from her Mother role.

Leda's fraught relationship with her children, unsupportive husband, newfound academic success, and love affair – compounding factors all related to maternal expectations Leda evidently struggles with – culminate in Leda choosing to abandon her children for three years to recoup her femininity and selfhood. The events unspool as a flashback, Leda presumably reminiscing on the past as she scrubs Elena's doll in her apartment sink, the doll oozing brown sludge. Young Leda returns home after time away, yet her daughters shy away and require coercion to embrace her. Marta finally approaches and asks: "Are you home now, mummy?" and whether Leda can wash her hair after dinner. Leda gifts her daughters "fancy" white dresses, reminiscent of those

she wears in the early beach montages. In an intimate, tightly-shot sequence, Leda plays with her daughters and dresses Marta, while Bianca refuses her help. Joe then begs, and subsequently threatens, Leda not to leave. The girls ask Leda to play their orange-peeling game, to which she acquiesces. In this deeply unsettling, perhaps even harrowing sequence, Leda gathers her belongings and leaves, despite her children's pleas and cries ("Where are you going, mummy? Are you coming back?"). The film cuts directly back to present-day Leda as she attempts to extricate dirt from the mouth of Elena's doll, dropping it as a worm slithers out from the orifice.

Radical of cinematic mothers, Leda leaves her children in an effort to afford more attention to aspects of her personhood. In her rejection that childrearing and the role of a mother must come at the expense of selfhood, Leda denounces self-sacrifice (as self-degradation) and the forgoing of ambitions as a cornerstone of motherhood. In choosing to pursue her individual desires and relinquishing her children, Leda rejects the self-abnegating role of the Good Mother. *The Lost Daughter* thus presents audiences with a radical and destabilising cinematic (m)other who commits the "cultural crime of having refused to sacrifice her ambition to her child" (Spackman in Milkova 2013: 104). Leda's numerous decisions taken in favour of herself, her ambitions and desires expose the subversion of motherhood as natural in the eyes of our protagonist. Leda thereby defies the socio-cultural and historical constructs that dictate the role of women as natural caregivers where womanhood and motherhood are incorrectly conflated.

Further contrasting the cinematic Good Mother's unwavering devotion and mother love, maternal ambivalence and indifference form an integral part of Leda's performance of motherhood. Here, "ambivalence" broadly refers to a mother's coexisting feelings of love and hatred for her offspring (Smyth 2020; Takševa 2017), and "indifference" to a "lack" of regret (framed by the patriarchal lens as resulting from personal failure to adapt to motherhood). Leda's maternal ambivalence is presented as a real and pressing aspect of her maternal subjectivity, rather than "pathology" (Takševa 2017: 153). In acknowledging and normalising co-existing conflicting maternal feelings and atypical maternal subjectivities, personhood and the respective desires of the mother are not harmfully conflated with prioritising the child over the self. Though real and pressing, these alternative maternal subjectivities remain largely under-represented on the screen but are central to Leda's story and her desire for autonomy. Through the showcasing of Leda's maternal ambivalence, the film further resists prescriptive and unhealthy ideals of motherhood.

One of few mainstream films to do so, *The Lost Daughter* insists on visibilising and normalising maternal realities that depart from the Good Mother and patriarchal feminine paradigms, in its portrayal of Leda's transgressive and atypical maternal experience. In an article titled *I watched Netflix's The Lost Daughter and felt completely validated as a mother*, on the mothering blog *Mamamia*, Cate Gilpin (2022) shares how she identified with Leda's complex maternal subjectivity:

Every day, I experience those feelings of frustration and suffocation that Leda felt... I know the intense, overwhelming desire to escape [motherhood] that Leda has, and it was almost shocking to see this portrayed on screen in such an honest way but without judgement of Leda as a mother and a person. This never happens, mothers who leave their children are normally pariahs. Writing these words down scares me because I know there are a lot of people who don't like it when mothers talk this way. We're constantly told being a mother is a privilege and we should feel grateful, that children are a blessing... [but] like Leda, I also have big ambitious dreams and goals for my life that are entirely unrelated to my children... I love them and want them more than I can ever express, but I also long to escape them and be alone and pursue other things.

Correspondingly, Kate Dyson (2022) in another parenting blog writes:

The agonising moments in *The Lost Daughter* are compounded by the truth that there are times when motherhood is tough... the lack of mental stimulation, the loneliness and the lack of freedom... The mental load that falls to women... There are times when we lie awake at night, knowing that we snapped with irritation, or we denied some element of easy love, and scream into the pillow with sheer frustration and guilt. There are moments of desperately wanting to swap lives with our old selves, or find a snapshot of Who We Are within motherhood, when it feels too sacrificial. And if we are honest, there are times when we have fantasised about walking out of the front door to relish the idea of selfish freedom, without the hundred things that need to be thought of, juggled, balanced, found. There are times when we resent being needed all the time, until we aren't needed all of the time and then we punish ourselves for the moments we resented. All of it steeped in guilt, shame and self-loathing.

These responses evince the harm in the patriarchal image of the self-abnegating “good” mother so deeply ingrained in our cultural consciousness, as well as women’s struggles to maintain selfhood in the face of unrealistic maternal expectations where atypical emotions must be routinely suppressed. As seen in Gilpin’s reflection, feelings of maternal ambivalence and hardship that would otherwise be a normal part of mothering may likely garner suspicion and condemnation in mainstream society and culture, where self-preservation is sometimes mistaken for self-absorption. The film, used reflexively, may thus encourage women to acknowledge and confront their own “non-normative” maternal feelings – including ambivalence and indifference. Dissonance between the realities and ideals of mothering is thus less perceived as personal failure (often due to internalised patriarchal coercion). Rather, there is a realisation that these expectations and ideologies are birthed from intersecting systems of oppression implicated in women’s personal oppression. On whether the film illuminated anything in her own relationship with motherhood, Gyllenhaal responded: “I hope the movie is compassionate about how complicated being alive is. I was really trying to open the spectrum of acceptable feelings, and that has been really helpful to me, to allow myself to see in myself all sorts of complicated feelings and not indict myself for them” (Olsen and Elorbany 2022). In this way, *The Lost Daughter* may be used as a reflexive tool to problematise maternal censorship and romanticised maternal expectations as they come into conflict with the imperfect realities of motherhood.

While offering an opportunity for maternal introspection and interrogation, the film simultaneously problematises what happens when radical mothers defy the deeply ingrained prescriptions of the Good Mother. Despite choosing to care for herself, Leda is punished for reclaiming her selfhood and forgoing the maternal role – congruent with the Bad Mother archetype. This occurs in the eyes of audiences likely shaken by Leda’s filial abandonment, and other characters who cast her as being emotionally stunted, unfulfilled, indecent, and deficient. While Nina, Nina’s sister-in-law, and Joe respectively view Leda as atypical, suspicious, and scornful, the audience is bewildered and unsettled by her choices, perhaps even viewing her as a “monster”. Leda’s abandonment forms the film’s climactic peak, and the culmination of sequences geared toward eliciting revulsion toward the protagonist.

Despite the film’s contextualisation of Leda’s choices, many viewers still regard Leda’s maternal desertion as callous. In response to Leda’s inability to inhabit the traditional maternal role, certain amateur reviewers⁵ pathologise Leda as an unstable and objectively terrible mother,

⁵ Rotten Tomatoes. n.d. *The Lost Daughter Audience Reviews*. Retrieved from https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_lost_daughter/reviews?type=user; The Blue Futon. 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e35SjQXAyvE>.

further alluding to the cultural policing of maternal speech practiced in mainstream discourse. Leda is commonly demonised through the patriarchal belief that women too focused on fulfilling their desires – personal or sexual – cause their children to suffer neglect because of their “self-centred” ambition. In this way, the (m)other’s drive for differentiation and individual agency is rendered selfish, reflecting Western phallogentric and pronatalist culture’s fear of the childless woman as a destabilising and radical figure, abominating their existence and projecting the idea that their lives are inevitably emotionally stunted and unfulfilling (Chodorow 1978: 77-91). Accordingly, Leda as a “malfunctioning” mother becomes an object of intense blame and is conceivably othered, ostracised, and punished in the eyes of the audience and other characters.

Gyllenhaal, however, resists leaning purely into the Bad “Witch” Mother archetype. She acknowledges that “parenting is designed to bring us to our knees... our survival literally depends on our parents wanting nothing more than to take care of us... [we] fantasise our mother as a good mother who’s bountiful and generous... And when our mother is anything other than that - which inevitably she will be because she’s a human being - that’s [a] ‘bad mother,’ almost like they are two different things” (Olsen and Elorbany 2022). Gyllenhaal’s observation problematises the totalising either/or nature of the “good” and “bad” mother, suggesting that mothering is far more fluid. This unjudgmental perspective is present even when Leda abandons her children for three years, an act which likely caused detriment both to herself and her children. The flashback of Leda leaving her children tactfully contrasts instances of motherly love (Leda’s peeling of the “snake” and gift-giving) with her forced consignment to the role of caretaker (Marta’s hair-washing request and Joe’s threat to send the girls away). While the urge to condemn Leda feels almost automatic, Gyllenhaal’s compassionate rendering of Leda creates opportunities to think beyond rigid binaries of the Good and Bad Mother, to consider new possibilities and approaches to maternal ideas and experiences.

Following the lines of how the abject operates in feminist film theory (Kristeva 1980), the adverse reactions of the audience and other characters, evoked by the protagonist in her display of “callousness”, evince a destabilisation of established norms and slippage of traditional boundaries. Leda’s inability to assume the traditional role of caretaker is initially inferred by abject iconography, such as the rotting fruit, male cicada, and worm emerging from the doll’s mouth. However, from a patriarchal standpoint, Leda’s filial abandonment establishes her within the archetype of the Bad Mother as she is now ostracised and forever changed from the perspectives of the audience. Disgust thereby acts as a civilising force when the civiliser-mother ruptures the boundaries of her presupposed role as the nurturing and self-sacrificing Good Mother. On some level, the unease and repulsion likely experienced by some viewers could function as a mirror for Leda’s emotional reaction to her stifling role as a mother, which torments her. In this way, the use of unease and disgust serves as a lens through which the audience may perceive the slippage of moral boundaries and the questioning of culturally-sanctioned maternal traditions.

In addition to destabilising related dominant ideological discourses, Leda’s act of desertion prompts a questioning of how and why certain maternal behaviours are deemed more appropriate than others. Ruth Quiney (2007: 27) explains:

Unease is generated by the highly articulate version of maternal embodiment and subjectivity... that threatens the cultural hegemonies governing writing [and speaking] about bodies and gender: the same dominant discourses that possess the rarely questioned power to marshal such terms as appropriateness, decency and... quality, and thus to sort the broadly normative and acceptable from the transgressive and dangerous.

Upon first encountering this montage, it is more than likely that viewers may find Leda's act of filial abandonment deeply distressing, despite the film's extensive contextualisation and justification of her actions. Forced to confront the inclination to respond so damningly, the film presents itself as a tool for introspection by inviting audiences to reflect on cultural hegemony's gendered expectations of parenthood. More specifically, when men abandon their children, or lump the responsibility of child-rearing on the maternal figure, it seems an unfair but unsurprising, even fairly routine, occurrence. This gendered domesticity is subtly evidenced in the film when Joe attempts to emotionally blackmail Leda by threatening to send Marta and Bianca to Leda's mother, her familial home fraught with turmoil. Contrastingly, a mother abandoning her children is construed as an unthinkable, unconscionable act. Thus, using unease, *The Lost Daughter* critiques double standards surrounding primary parenthood and responsibility, encouraging viewers to question culturally aggrandised maternal tradition, signalled by the abject.

Adoption/surrogate-mothering of the doll

The doll as an object signifies various thematic synchronicities within the narrative, reflecting and refracting the parallels of mothers who lose, abandon, and take a child's precious doll. This mirroring begins with the parallel of Nina and Elena and Leda and her daughters, extending to Elena's obsession with her doll and the mother-child dynamic in caring for it (inferring the interpellation from girl child to woman) which is mirrored by Leda and her daughters' interactions with Leda's childhood doll gifted, desecrated, and ultimately destroyed.

So, when Leda steals the doll, the surrogate embodies an "encroachment of Leda's past into her present" (Milkova 2013: 101). It is the object upon which Leda's feelings toward her imposed maternal role are enacted, alluding to Leda's punishment of her own daughters for destroying the agency she found as an individual and successful scholar, "usurping and exploiting the mother's body, time, and mind" (2013: 104). Meanwhile, the children's doll-like treatment of Leda reduces her to a mere object, a plaything, deprived of a voice, like the female cicada or mute surrogate doll. The futility of Leda cleaning the doll further repulses and disgusts, recalling the inevitable abject inherent to child rearing: the repetitive and ongoing changing of nappies and disposing of vomit and bodily fluids. With this view, the act of theft may be construed as Leda's attempt to sever the maternal bond, liberating Nina from the imprisonment of the sacrificial role of mother, where childcare is an all-consuming and never-ending task.

Contrastingly, some critics and viewers regard Leda's theft of the doll as a bitter sabotage. Noting particularly the film's close-on of Leda when Elena is lost (and presumably before Leda acquires the doll), the scene takes on the cadence of a psychological thriller with Leda observing the ongoings ominously from a distance. This is affirmed by Gyllenhaal who expresses that Leda is watching, aware of what she has done. Applying the Witch versus Angel archetype, Leda's transgression as the Bad Mother can be seen less as an act of jealousy, but rather one spurred by contempt and indignance toward the Good Mother. Leda stealing Elena's doll and rupturing the mother-child harmony belies a tipping of the ideal mythic motherhood performed by Nina. In doing so, Leda has simultaneously revealed the precarity of this façade, but also its ideal fallacy.

On the other hand, Leda's mothering – the cleaning, washing, and clothing - of the doll signifies the complexity of her maternal feelings. As surrogate mother of the doll, Leda attempts to assume the role of the Good Mother and absolve herself of her crime against culture and motherhood. In caring for the doll, Leda enacts the nurturing, self-sacrificing motherliness she

denied her daughters. However, as evidenced by flashbacks, while Leda is haunted by her choice to abandon her daughters, she does not regret her decision. Consequently, the cleaning of the doll, the undertaking of mothering, may then be construed as automatic culturally imposed self-responsibilisation, rather than a redemptive act.

Where the film suggests Leda's grappling with responsibility and expectation and the resulting guilt from rejecting these in favour of freedom and autonomy in Leda's act of desertion, Leda's surrogate-mothering of Elena's doll underscores *The Lost Daughter's* presentation of a maternally ambivalent mother figure, reckoning with coexisting conflicting maternal feelings.

Confrontations/negotiations

The film's resolution makes definitive statements about the film's discourse on motherhood. Leda's confessions of being an "unnatural" and "selfish" mother, as well as taking Elena's doll, spur Nina to revenge. Nina impales Leda's abdomen with a hatpin, gifted to her by Leda in a motherly gesture.

Leda's admission to being "selfish" speaks directly to the concept of True Womanhood, the patriarchal feminine, and the Good Mother. Such self-responsibilising exemplifies the maternal construct of selfishness as a lack of personal passivity. Leda's acts, such as her filial abandonment, refusal to sacrifice her ambitions of scholarship, and choice to recuperate herself and honour her femininity, are then branded selfishness - these aspects of normal, healthy personhood deemed scornful. Leda's fraught relationship with her imposed maternal labour, the expectation of pregnancy and motherliness conflict with and ultimately stifle her attempts toward individual freedom and personal ambitions. Already, she is set to fail when one must be chosen over the other. Self-responsibilisation, specifically regret, normally functions as a "powerful reproducer of the ideology of motherhood" (Donath 2015: 347) but remains largely unexplored as a part of maternal experience in mainstream discourse. Leda's confession is an affirmation that she is indeed haunted by her past. It is however significant to note that she does not regret the decisions made in honour of herself, which stand in opposition to the Good Mother and patriarchal feminine.

Furthermore, with Leda's confession of being an "unnatural mother", she distinguishes womanhood and motherhood as distinct aspects of identity. Leda is unnatural, other, due to her noncompliance with the maternal role. The struggle to extricate Nature and selfhood from Motherhood results in her being stabbed by Nina, who targets the corporeal site of procreation. This is, in accordance with feminism, the corporeal epicentre of compliance to patriarchal paradigms imposed upon women: their female labour in the form of "pregnancy, parturition, and motherhood" (Milkova 2013: 105). In stabbing Leda, who Nina perceives as her saboteur, the Good Mother figure at once eliminates the figure of resistance embodied by the Bad Mother and punishes Leda for her deviance.

The film culminates with Leda crashing her car on the way out of the holiday town one evening, later collapsing on the beach. In the next scene, she is bathed in morning light, jovially chatting to her daughters via telephone, and "peeling a snake" from the orange peel at the shore. The film's resolution and final metaphorical revenge thus leaves the audience in a liminal space, unsure whether Leda is dead or alive, dreaming, or in some afterlife. However, Gyllenhaal hints at a semblance of liberation in the figurative death of Leda. Perhaps in the death of the traditional

maternal role that Leda plainly admits she is unable to assume, Leda might begin again her life as woman and mother, these facets of identity and performance co-existing. Presented with such ambiguity, the audience is invited to tackle the emotions Leda's unsettling actions conjure up, make sense of the associated moral slipperiness, and contemplate the differentiated roles of mother and woman.

Conclusion: re-viewing motherhood

The Lost Daughter offers a refreshing counterpoint to patriarchally-informed Western cinematic maternal representation(s). As Gyllenhaal reflects during her interview with Mark Olsen and Heba Elorbany (2022):

I had never heard a lot of the things that [Ferrante] was talking about talked about before... about the experience of being a woman in the world that I think we've made an agreement culturally not to talk about and really not even to think about... desire, dissatisfaction, certainly the ambivalence and real complicated feelings about mothering, but also just being a thinking woman in the world, an artist as a woman in the world. And when I saw some of these things written down, it was really kind of shocking and intense for me. These were things in some ways I didn't even know I felt... I felt both disturbed and also kind of electrified by the truth of them and comforted, ultimately, by the fact that I wasn't the only person in the world having some of these feelings, which is how it feels if your experience isn't reflected back to you.

Leda's maternal experience is rendered as being (in her words) a "crushing responsibility", detracting from personhood, and (at times) depressing. Simultaneously, Leda's flashbacks and introspection suggest scatterings of the joy, love, and pride that popular culture and patriarchal pronatalist society tend to associate with motherhood, as evinced in the film's final image. In refuting the singular orthodox performance of Motherhood, the narrative honours a rightfully complex and nuanced maternal performance, arguably more resonant with contemporary mother figures. The film interrogates skewed parental responsibility and the influence of the Patriarchal embedded in the ideas of the Mother and Woman, which have informed Leda's complex feelings toward maternity. Rather than presenting moralising determinations of "good" or "bad", viewers are prompted to reflect on why and how these judgements are formed. Leda's maternal characterisation is thus not neatly encompassed in the rigid binaries of the Good and Bad Mother archetypes of cinema. Instead, Leda offers an iteration of motherhood that transcends and transgresses, where maternal experience is fluid and complex, involving potentially coexisting conflicting feelings.

The film prescribes no sole connotation or unified experience of motherhood, nor single emotion that children inspire in their mothers. This encourages a validation of Leda's experience as one of many versions of motherhood, even though this "atypical" rendition is culturally policed in dominant hegemonic structures and under or misrepresented in mainstream media. *The Lost Daughter* thus simultaneously functions as a tool for self-reflexivity and feminine introspection in that it forms a means to interrogate and resist normative maternal paradigms. It is crucial to amplify narratives that reflect and resonate with contemporary (m)others, so that media and society may begin to comprehend their realities. Ultimately, *The Lost Daughter* critiques the deeply entrenched patriarchal control within the identity of the Mother, tethered to women's biological capacity for childbearing. In truth, this maternal capacity is merely a capability - one eventuality among many - not a fated sentence, but a choice.

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