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Rebecca Liu On Maggie Gyllenhaal's 'The Lost Daughter'

I have become used to films about Mediterranean summers filled with sweeping wide shots of golden beaches, sand and greenery, inviting me along as spectator-tourist. Yet a third of the way into watching *The Lost Daughter*, Maggie Gyllenhaal's directorial debut, which she wrote and adapted from Elena Ferrante's 2006 novel of the same name, my chest had constricted with panic and my head was filled with a sense of vertiginous displacement; I was even trying to crane my neck in a subconscious effort to achieve a wider view. The film follows Leda Caruso (Olivia Colman), a 48-year-old Harvard comparative literature professor on holiday in Greece, but instead of opulent landscapes Gyllenhaal gives us strained close-ups: we see Leda's head nodding along to pounding music as she drives to the island for the first time; her chest, covered in a black bathing suit, bobbing above the surface of the ocean during a trip to the beach; her face set in irritation as she tries to shake off an overfamiliar stranger so she can enjoy her dinner alone. Watching Leda's ill-fated attempts to relax, I felt like another intruder. She nervously scuttles through the woods on the way to and from her holiday rental, has jarring interactions with local men, and takes her place on the beach alone. As she settles into her sun lounger, a loud, obnoxious family arrives. The next day, they gather near her chair and ask her to move so they can be together. She refuses: the first intimation we are given of her "difficultness".

Gyllenhaal's portrait of an anti-holiday filled with minor annoyances mirrors the intimate, self-conscious and at times unsettling nature of Ferrante's novel, a first-person dissection of a holiday in which Leda reminisces about her time as the mother of two daughters. Gyllenhaal achieves the same effect by intertwining Leda's present, in which she becomes entangled with the New York family, with an earlier timeline that follows Leda as a frazzled aspiring twenty-something academic (played by Jessie Buckley), who alternates between translating Dante and playing with her young children, Martha and Bianca. [1] (#_ftn1) What haunts the present-day Leda is her guilt over leaving her daughters for three years when they were young. "I'm an unnatural mother," she confesses. Leaving behind her children felt "fucking amazing".

Nina (Dakota Johnson), a young mother from the disruptive family, is the prompt for Leda's recollections. Though the rest of the group, which includes teenage bullies and middle-aged women full of inane prattle, are intensely irritating, Leda is drawn to Nina. She seems aloof and beautiful and spends most of her time on the beach playing with her baby daughter, Elena. Their playtime looks like a comically telegenic portrait of motherhood, with Nina lying serenely on a beach chair, muttering baby

talk to Elena as the girl plays with her beloved doll. Cinematographer Hélène Louvart constructs a world of women looking at women, moving back and forth between a watchful Leda and Nina in repose, Leda scribbling Nina's name in the margins of her book, resentful and desirous of this seemingly perfect mother. Soon the image is shattered: Nina runs around the beach, panicked, calling out Elena's name. The family searches for the girl, but it is Leda who finds her, tucked between the rocks. She is thanked by a grateful Nina: "I thought I was going to die," Nina confesses. But Elena's doll has gone missing, and the child won't stop crying. After this, everything begins to fall apart. Elena falls sick, constantly misbehaves, and prefers to play with her aunt over her mother. It is almost as if she is deliberately trying to spite Nina, who, frustrated, asks her daughter why she is behaving like this.

Seeing Nina's transition from beautiful, relaxed mother to a panicked, angry one, Leda remembers the times that she felt similarly when her daughters were growing up. Formally, the film relies on flashbacks to illustrate Leda's internal state, a device that sometimes feels too tidy, as though one's unease were a puzzle to be pieced together from difficult memories (I thought of Parul Sehgal's recent critique of "the trauma plot" which, she says, "flattens, distorts, reduces character to symptom, and, in turn, instructs and insists upon its moral authority"), though some of Gyllenhaal's images are haunting. I'm thinking in particular of a scene in which a toddler-aged Bianca, thinking it's a funny game, starts smacking Leda's head as she is working on a translation.[2](#_ftn2) Leda grabs her by the wrist, puts her in a separate room and slams the glass paneled door with such force that the glass shatters and lands on the floor. Yet the film's reliance on flashbacks comes at the expense of a more energetic exploration of how Leda carries around her past in the present and, by extension, undercuts Gyllenhaal's intended focus. Forgoing the novel's exploration of Italian class differences, Gyllenhaal has said that she wanted to adapt the novel due to its exposition of reluctant motherhood and the electrifying prospect of people watching the film together and experiencing a similar release.[3](#_ftn3) Despite this, the resulting film feels a product of conflicting impulses, with the bold telling of the story of a reluctant mother (Buckley as the ambitious young academic who waves to her children from across the playground while she talks dirty with her lover on the phone) pre-emptively softened by the vision of its aftermath (Colman, awkwardly tottering around, unable to shake off her past).

Moral condemnation even disgust, is never too far away for the mother who fails to live up to the ideal. Gyllenhaal decided to cast Colman because the actor, often attached to comedies, is seen as "fundamentally sane" (which seems to me an interesting rephrasing of someone "English and middle-class", behind whose restrained exterior generally lies vast reserves of uninterrogated psychic muck), while a more temperamental choice might have invited the contempt given to 'bad' mothers that she was trying to dispel. But the pressure placed on many mothers the world over – what Jacqueline Rose has called the "impossible demand" to make the world entirely safe and clean for their children – seem so intense that it feels natural that those subjected to it will be brought to the very edges of insanity.[4](#_ftn4) Buckley's storyline pushes at this: Leda displays feelings of despair, resentment and anger at her status as mother, as well as roiling ambition and self-possession in her professional life, in which her children feel like an intolerable weight. Yet in the film's present these feelings have all but dissipated. As Leda trudges through a holiday she cannot enjoy, haunted by her past and alienated by holidaymakers who congratulate her on "only looking 40", she seems less like a fully-fleshed character than a symbol of retrospective suffering and the social disgust heaped onto middle-aged women. While we do see flashes of what critics have deemed Leda's "unlikability", these are often followed swiftly by scenes of her humiliation, debilitation or retraction. It is one thing to depict an 'irresponsible' mother in the thick of her youthful ambition and another to consider how those emotions might continue to shape a 48-year-old Harvard professor who got everything she thought she wanted, instead of lapsing into a more general – and palatable – tale of shame and redemption.

Leda's distaste for motherhood, too, feels weaker for this privileging of the symbolic over the particular. The film gives little biographical detail, and her frustrations over her children largely come from their constantly demanding, and at times intolerable, presence. This absence almost feels like an effort to broaden the film's potential relatability, foregoing extraneous details so every mother can fill in the blanks with the many times they hated their own children. Though one of the most interesting points of the film is when, in a flashback, Leda protests against her husband's plan to take their daughters to live with her mother, railing against her "shithole" hometown and mother "who didn't finish school". But these details are never expanded on, and I was left wondering how Leda's intellectual striving, informed by deep self-hatred, might have driven her to embrace the traditionally masculine pursuit of complete self-invention, something that inevitably cuts against the grounded demands of motherhood.

The relationship between Leda and Nina also falls into archetype. In Ferrante's novel, Leda's standing as an educated professor who made her way out of Naples is contrasted with Nina, an awkward 23-year-old who never left; she did not finish university, does not work and is married to a much older, commanding man. Leda and Nina's conversations in the book painfully reflect their differences in education, class, and opportunity – and therefore what motherhood looks like to each of them. Nina reminds Leda a little too closely of what she escaped, and Leda encourages Nina to return to university (one of the many reasons attributed to 'Ferrante fever' is how her novels explore forms of women's relationships that go beyond the mutually alienating prism of observing one another's youth and beauty, and all its attendant jealousies. This is a low bar to clear – an indictment of our world and not Ferrante's nuances – but then again it was only a few years ago when we were identifying films that managed to feature two women talking about something other than a man.) Gyllenhaal's version of Nina – self-possessed and glamorous, married to an age-appropriate hunk, endowed with a movie star mystique – seems a move back to the less exciting tradition, with an out-of-place Leda, mesmerised by Nina's beauty, looking on enviously as she is courted by men Leda judges herself too old for (the sexual hunger of Leda's youth has all but disappeared). In this dynamic, even lines heavily inspired by the novel, as when Nina tells Leda she wants to be like her, sound like a twenty-something patronising the cute older lady, comfortably ensconced in their time-limited delusion that they will live forever until they are rudely awakened by the next baby-faced usurpers, thus reinscribing the whole doomed cycle in which a woman's life is considered most interesting when she is likely at her most insecure. After all, the world has an increasing number of Ledas – for whom beginning a family is thankfully becoming more of a choice, to be weighed

up against a number of other pursuits – but also many Ninas, women for whom motherhood is still the only way to gain any degree of social respect. Even Hollywood can do more than to envy them.

[1](#_ftnref1) Gyllenhaal's adaptation mostly transports the story to America. The family are from Naples in Ferrante's novel – here they are from Queens, New York, while Leda, who grew up initially near Leeds, teaches at Harvard. This *The Lost Daughter* was originally set(https://www.screendaily.com/features/a-part-of-me-was-afraid-maggie-gyllenhaal-on-producing-writing-and-directing-the-lost-daughter/5162847.article) to be filmed in New Jersey ("amazing tax incentive, especially for a mostly female crew") but moved to a quarantined set on Spetses, Greece.

[2](#_ftnref2) Parul Sehgal, "The Case Against the Trauma Plot"(https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/01/03/the-case-against-the-trauma-plot), The *New Yorker*, December 27, 2021.

[3](#_ftnref3) "If I'm having this feeling alone by myself over and over again reading these books, what would happen if you put it on screen and then you're in a room next to, say, a woman you don't know? Or your husband or your daughter or your mom? Like, how electric and terrifying and radical that experience could be!' And that was why I wanted to adapt it." Quoted in Interview with Anne Thompson, "How Maggie Gyllenhaal Went from Playing a Director on 'The Deuce' to Winning Awards as One for 'Lost Daughter'(https://news.yahoo.com/maggie-gyllenhaal-went-playing-director-203050474.html)" *Indiewire*, December 6 2021.

[4](#_ftnref4) Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers; An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (Faber, 2018)

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