

The Friendship Experience: The Construction of Girlhood and Womanhood in Select Contemporary Fiction

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Doctor of Philosophy

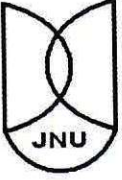
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DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This thesis titled “**The Friendship Experience: The Construction of Girlhood and Womanhood in Select Contemporary Fiction**”, submitted by me for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.


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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents; my mother, Mary Philip and my father, Philip John for their unwavering love and support. I could not have done this without them. I would like to thank my sister Shalin for her encouragement. I would like to thank all my friends for supporting me and fighting for me. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Saugata Bhaduri for his guidance and support which is greatly appreciated.

(Sharon Ann Philip)

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INTRODUCTION

Friendship is a fundamental social relation that is uniquely defined by the people who exist within it. The importance of platonic female bonding has been placed at the forefront of some of the works of fiction by women writers and these texts draw attention to the portrait of female friendships in the context of childhood, adolescence and adulthood. This thesis aims to examine the transformative power of female friendships in identity formation of the self and its continued clarification in relation to another self as all the characters navigate a deep, platonic relationship that defines them as 'girl' and as 'woman'. The texts chosen for this thesis include the series of four Neapolitan novels by Elena Ferrante (translated by Ann Goldstein) - consisting of *My Brilliant Friend* (2012), *The Story of a New Name* (2013), *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2014) and *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015) - in addition to *The Secret Place* by Tana French (2014), *The Girls From Corona Del Mar* by Rufi Thorpe and *The Girls* by Emma Cline (2016). It must be noted that the Neapolitan tetralogy has not been studied in the original Italian but in the form of the superlative English translations by Ann Goldstein. However, Ferrante's novels are extremely important to examine the scope and objective of this thesis despite the texts being read in translation.

An important of inquiry will be the construction of femininity in the chosen novels and its multiple, dissimilar and complex performances by the characters in the role of teenage girls and adult women and how these performances can be interpreted within the larger perceptions of womanhood in feminist writing. Furthermore, the concept of girlhood in the chosen texts will be examined as a cultural category mediated by the social relation of friendship within the framework of the interdisciplinary field of girlhood studies that focuses on girls as a separate group first, with agency of their own, rather than as women in waiting. In the seven chosen texts, the treatment of girlhood intersects with the themes of violence, sexuality and identity formation. Ferrante's tetralogy presents a bildungsroman with two central characters, Elena (sometimes called "Lenu") Greco and Rafaella ("Lila") Cerullo beginning from the 1950s as they grow up in a poor neighbourhood in the outskirts of Naples, Italy. An elderly Elena acts as narrator throughout the series and reflects upon their lives in the present day. Ferrante explores the themes of women's response to violent domestic and social environment, the sexual and

intellectual rivalry between women, class conflict, the social role of a female writer, motherhood and the portrayal of the female body. Thorpe's novel set in the 1990s and Cline's novel set in late 1960s provide themes of power, teenage sexuality, violence, motherhood, and agency to capture the dramatic evolution of long-term friendships between two pairs of white, American girls. Thorpe and Cline explore the devotion but also the brutality embedded in female friendship where childhood and adolescence frame the larger interpretation of the gruesomeness of girlhood. Cline's novel focuses on popular culture as a forceful element that shapes the identity of the characters, Evie and Suzanne, who are drawn to a hippie commune and the murderous intentions of its charismatic male leader. Thorpe's characters, Mia and Lorrie Ann, navigate through a tumultuous friendship that has lasting consequences in their adult lives whereas French examines the warped psychology behind the intense friendship and rivalry between eight girls at a girls' boarding school in modern day Dublin in the light of a murder committed on the school grounds and their secret ties to the crime. In order to unravel the relevance of female friendship as a social bond, we must first examine the complex category of girlhood that influences and creates the environment in which the act of female friendship can exist and function in myriad ways.

Girlhood as a category is constructed and ever-changing revealing the various experiences and societal expectations that define the experience itself of being a girl. The girls who inhabit the world of the chosen texts find that their identities are somewhere stuck between that of a child and an adult. Beth Rodgers in *Adolescent Girlhood and Literary Culture at the Fin de Siecle - Daughters of Today*(2016) argues that "adolescent girlhood was a distinct cultural category in late nineteenth century literary and print culture"(1). She examines the stereotypes and characteristics associated with girlhood in the late nineteenth century such as those found in girls' magazines like *Girl's Own Paper*, *Girl's Realm* and *Atalanta*; she also focused upon the school stories of L.T. Meade, Mrs. George de Horne Vaizey and Raymond Jacberns as well as the New Woman fiction of Olive Schreiner and Sarah Grand. She argues that "the advent of adolescence as a recognizable life stage between childhood and adulthood can be explicitly connected to the social conditions of the late nineteenth century"(2). However, Rodgers notes that the examination in fiction or as historical figures of female adolescents is notably absent in the studies devoted to this new category of the teenager. She adds that in the studies of John Neubauer and Jon Savage, the category of the teenager is a masculine one where only male

writers and artists are depicted as critically engaging with it. Sally Mitchell's work heralded a change in this regard whereas scholars like Michelle Smith, Sarah Bilston, Hilary Marland and Kristine Moruzi have made immense contributions towards the construction of girls' culture and girlhood in the fiction and print culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Rodgers argues that "the difficulty of just how we define and understand girlhood echoes throughout the majority of scholarly discussions of girlhood, no matter the historical period under consideration it seems"(4). Miriam Forman-Brunell in her Foreword to *Girlhood: A Global History*(2010) says that girlhood is a "constructed, changing and contested category of experience and expectations"(xi). This category and the various conflicts within it also give rise to questions about the anxieties faced by girls in relation to larger debates about political, social and biological roles of women and how literature and mass media play an important role in creating the cultural space that enables or restricts the responses of girls towards these anxieties. An example of this is given by Rodgers using the essay, 'The Girl Of The Period' by novelist Elizabeth Lynn Linton, published in 1868 in the *Saturday Review* where girls due to their vanity, immodesty and excessive love for cosmetics were condemned as they were destined fail as wives and mothers. However, views such as those expressed by Linton would be challenged by other writers seeking to expand upon the concept of girlhood through the lens of positive change. Rodgers writes that

"Girls' magazines, for example, tend to characterize modern girlhood in terms of a range of key features shared by and aspired to by their readers- such as heroism, creativity, community, resourcefulness- no matter their difference in social status, geographical location or age. For a range of other writers, the clash between theoretical discussions of girlhood on one hand and the developments taking place in real girls' lives on the other made the adolescent girl the ideal figure to explore social hypocrisies, appeal to new readership of girls and make political points about the wider Woman Question."(11).

Social class, age and marital status had become the prominent signifiers of girlhood in the nineteenth century in the earliest attempt by writers and scholars to negotiate with this separate category. Therefore, an idealized understanding of girlhood is not possible. Dyhouse in *Girls Growing Up* explains that "the behaviour of middle-class girls was likely to be defined as problematic when they sought to pursue goals outside marriage and family life. Working-class

girls, on the other hand, were criticized for a narrow obsession with courtship and marriage."(138). Now, the aspects of work and social class will have a bearing on our understanding of some of the chosen texts such as Elena Ferrante's novels. However, social class gradually began to play a lesser role in the understanding of girlhood and the immediate focus was upon age. Mitchell writes that "as work became part of girls' culture, girlhood was increasingly conceptualized as an age class without reference to economic status"(43).

In the Victorian era, editors of girl's magazines considered 'girls' to be any female between the ages of twelve and twenty-five. Rodgers says that even though their actual readership may have been older and more diverse, these magazines contributed towards broadening the definition of girlhood. She adds that the term 'girl' "can be applied both to the twelve-year -old correspondents of the *Girl's Own Paper* and the thirty year olds who are refusing to be the 'brides of today' strongly implies that marital status also plays a key role in the distinction between girlhood and womanhood.

Rodgers also points out that "adolescence as a term only truly came into popular usage at the beginning of the twentieth century, thanks to the US psychologist G. Stanley Hall" who in 1904 authored *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*. However, she also adds that even if authors and scholars in the decades prior to Hall's work did not use the same language, their study of girls on the cusp of womanhood already existed in a nascent form. This shows the importance of language in examining girlhood as an individual category. Rodgers adds that girls were usually described as young females who were not children but were not considered as adults either - this description would in turn differ across social classes and time periods. Therefore, girlhood is usually understood by what it lacks(adulthood) and what it has ceased to be(childhood). However, it would be incorrect to call this intermediary phase as superficial. Sally Mitchell in *The New Girl* suggests that at the end of the nineteenth century, girlhood functions as "a separate culture with its own values, customs and social standards"(22). She adds that the space "in between is therefore not empty, not merely an incubation period in which the girl resides on her way to something more important and significant. Rather : the new girl- no longer a child, not yet a (sexual) adult- occupied a provisional space. Girls' culture suggested new ways of being, new modes of behaviour, and new attitudes that were not yet acceptable for adult women(except in

the case of the advance few)"(3). Margarida Morgado in her essay talks about "secrets and disclosures that go with narrating girlhood" in contemporary women's fiction.(111).

"The concept of "girl" is in itself quite complex, taken in the sense of child-girls or pre-teen childhood and only incidentally as the passage between puberty and marriage. Girlhood is taken to be a temporary life stage and a learning experience between birth (pre-birth) and womanhood, thus a stage that emerges fully as a category in the last quarter of the 19th century. The interesting features to emphasize in the representation of girlhood since then are the many representations of growing up as a girl and their development across the time/space divide." (111)

In the selected novels, the girls grow up to become women and the narrative is presented to the reader from the latter's perspective. But why is this important? Why must the model of female friendship in society be examined? This thesis will attempt to examine the transformative power of female friendships in identity formation of the self and its continued clarification in relation to another self as all the characters navigate a deep, platonic relationship that defines them as 'girl' and as 'woman'. An important point of inquiry will be the construction of femininity in the novels and its multiple, dissimilar and complex performances by the characters in the role of teenage girls and adult women and how these performances can be interpreted within the larger perceptions of womanhood in feminist writing. Furthermore, the concept of girlhood in the chosen texts will be examined as a cultural category mediated by the social relation of female friendship within the framework of the interdisciplinary field of girlhood studies that focuses on girls as a separate group first, with agency of their own, rather than as women in waiting.

The broader areas of the thesis in Chapter One examines the ideas of self-realization and gender identity formation within female friendship where the scope of female bonding includes the themes of intense mutual loyalty as well the equally fierce reversal of it that helps shape the emotional co-dependency of the female friends. In all of the chosen texts, this co-dependency or the lack of it, influences the significant life choices of the characters. A strong desire to be accepted by each other changes their relationship with their social environment as in the case of Elena and Lila, both of whom attempt to read in each other the same jealousy, competitiveness, anger and love that each of them is driven by. This enables them forge and fracture all other relationships with other people and also with their hometown. Elena as the successful writer and

Lila as the working class mother engage with the disharmony of how truly different they are in the backdrop of the political and cultural developments in the Italy of the 1960s and 70s. Thorpe's characters are situated in the Californian surfing community where the Corona Del Mar beach neighbourhood is the site of teenage rebellion which leads to a later unexpected repetition of it in adulthood. Mia, the narrator, sees Lorrie Ann as the angelic contrast to her own harsher personality and steadily builds up a fiction of sainthood for her friend that Lorrie Ann first embraces and then rejects outright. The female friends in Cline's novel also struggle with the stubborn bond that regulates their identities completely until its tragic rupture, whereas the young girls in French's novel fiercely protect their differences when not seeking active comfort in their shared experiences. In all the chosen texts, the authors explore how young girls are objectified and used by society and the isolation and trauma that informs female sexuality. In this context, the thesis will examine how "being" a woman can be differently interpreted within the concept of girlhood as constructed by the authors. This is examined in Chapter Two.

In Chapter Three, the thesis studies the role of women as narrators of their girlhood in the context in of the multiple readings of self-representation provided by some of the characters such as Elena who puts to paper the evolution of her friendship with Lila when the latter suddenly disappears at the beginning of the tetralogy. The narrators in the novels of Thorpe and Cline are middle-aged women who engage with, formulate and resist the personal mythologies and fantasies of their intense friendships whereas the characters in French's novel navigate their identities within the framework of girlhood alone. The proposed thesis will examine if female narrators provide a stronger scope for many intersecting, hybrid identities to emerge successfully, rather than the experiences of childhood and girlhood being coherently integrated by the narrators within the larger concept of female bonding.

Apart from chapter specific concerns, the thesis will also overall study the role of cultural movements in shaping the experience of female bonding and its relation to the emergence of the agency of the characters. Ferrante presents a picture of the worker and student struggles in the Italy of the 1960s and 70s whereas the characters in the novels of Thorpe and Cline directly engage with the counter cultural movement of 60s America with differing results. The characters in French's novel are firmly embedded in the cultural milieu of contemporary Dublin that shapes their ideas of exclusion and equality within their female friendships.

Also, the thesis examines the development of the intellectual and political agency of the characters within the specific kinship unit of female friendship. The treatment of female education in the chosen texts will be a point of inquiry in this regard. This aspect of education will be examined in Chapter Four.

Ferrante (who in *My Brilliant Friend* divides the novel into 'Childhood' and 'Adolescence') and the other authors present the relevance of understanding the adolescent girl as a separate subject. The proposed thesis will examine the agency of a 'girl' in determining how femininity is performed in the chosen texts and its relation to the ideas of femininity within a larger feminist theoretical framework as a whole. The nature of female bonding as a means of relational self-definition and its transformative contribution to alternate interpretations of female subjectivity will be examined within the framework of the interdisciplinary field of girlhood studies. Girlhood studies primarily discusses girlhood from the disciplinary perspectives of history, anthropology, psychology and sociology with a special focus on education, literary criticism, and youth and cultural studies. The thesis will attempt to examine the relation between the nature of girlhood that emerges in the novels and that which is discussed in the disciplinary perspectives.

In Chapter Five, the thesis examines the theme of motherhood and how the protagonists of the chosen texts have negotiated the emotional landscape attached to the experience of motherhood and how it develops the process of their self-actualization.

The thesis examines the role of violence in relation to female power dynamics in Chapter Six. The domestic and social environment inhabited by all the characters in the chosen texts is strongly coloured by the presence of actual physical violence as well as psychological violence. A specific violent crime is significant to the narrative in the novels of Cline and French. Here, in the context of the gory nature of the acts themselves, the thesis will also examine the manipulative psychology behind the acts and why it was successfully nurtured within female friendship. Ferrante's novels depict both physical and psychological assault where both Elena and Lila are victims and perpetrators of the latter as seen in the early years of their friendship and in the later stages of motherhood and marriage whereas Thorpe's novel depicts the trauma of teenage pregnancy, forming a crucial point of divergence in the friendship of Mia and Lorrie Ann. The thesis will also attempt to study the contribution of violence in formulating the female subjectivities that emerge in the chosen texts. The thesis will examine the relationship between

female friendship and the promise of psychological wholeness for the women that it appears to contain. The idea of female friendship that emerges in the novels will be examined with respect to larger questions of solidarity and sisterhood in feminist writing. The thesis will study if the presence of such a psychological wholeness contributes to the transformation and validation of the female selves that is embodied by the characters.

In Chapter Seven, the thesis examines how the experiences of female girlhood and womanhood can dismantle and undermine the notions of masculinity as presented in the chosen texts. The ideas of female identity and femininity forged in the novels have been studied within a feminist framework of various ideas of girlhood presented by scholars such as Sally Mitchell, Sarah Bliston, Anita Harris, Claudia Mitchell and Kristine Moruzi. Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer have in their works acknowledged the burden of confinements and expectations imposed upon girls but only so far as they represented a transition to more important discussions about womanhood. Greer states that the "pre-pubescent girl, however sluggish and confused she may seem to be to the disenchanted observer, is a passionate creature" (80). Catherine Driscoll argues against erasing discourse on girlhood and says that its independent relevance must be explored, outside of being just a developmental stage prior to the "independent woman as feminist subject" (9). Judith Butler's theory of performativity has become important to the way the hyper femininity showcased by pop culture has been discussed as influential in girlhood studies.

Girlhood studies emerged as a recognizable and interdisciplinary outgrowth of the work of scholars from the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, youth and cultural studies and literary criticism from 1990s onwards through influential works such as *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* by Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown (1992) and *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls* by Myra and David Sadker (1994). Girlhood at this time emerged in the context of the seemingly feminist empowerment where girls and women enjoy sexualized hyper femininity as a celebration of womanhood while rejecting and escaping a male defined future for themselves. In this body of research, women's magazines on beauty and fashion, advertisements, soap operas and romance novels were studied as commercial representations of adult femininity that fostered female subordination and girlhood was the stage where this was begun to be internalized. Girlhood was seen as the developmental stage where soon-to-be adult women learnt to comply with gender

roles that were subordinate. From 1980s onwards, the experiences of girls from differing class and race backgrounds and their implications have been studied by feminist theorists in academics such as the examination of working class girlhood in *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* by Carolyn Kay Steedman (1987); the examination of race and ethnicity in *Women Without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity* by Julie Bettie (2003) and also in the context of activism on the ground mapping their quality of education and psychological development along with issues of self-esteem and body image. A highly influential work in this regard is *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self Esteem and the Confidence Gap* by Peggy Orenstein (1995). Further, Christine Alder and Anne Worrall in *Girls' Violence: Myths and Realities* (2004) has placed girlhood in relation to youth and crime and the representation of violence done by young women in contemporary forms of media.

The representation of girlhood in fiction has been examined in the context of mother-daughter relationships and concerns of kinship in *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture 1748-1818* (2004) by Ruth Perry. Janet Todd provides a thorough analysis of female friendships in eighteenth century English and French fiction in *Women's Friendship in Literature* (1980). The importance of female bonding and its psychological implications have been addressed in *Communication and Women's Friendships: Parallels and Intersections in Literature and Life* by Janet Doubler Ward and Joanna Stephens Mink (1993). Nina Auerbach addresses the question of female bonding in nineteenth and twentieth century fiction in *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (1978). Female friendship in the context of girlhood has been studied in *Introduction to Colonial Girlhood in Literature, History and Culture, 1840-1950* (2014) by Kristine Moruzi and Michelle Smith, and by Elizabeth Abel, who has examined fiction of the 1960s, 70s and 80s by women writers in her essay "(E)merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction" (1981). More specifically, some of my primary texts – Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels – have been assessed in *The Works of Elena Ferrante: Reconfiguring the Margins* by Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie Love (2016) in relation to questions of gender and feminist theory.

The following is an overview of the chosen texts that have provided an enormous range to explore the nature of female friendship. *My Brilliant Friend* (2012) by Elena Ferrante (translated by Ann Goldstein) presents the beginnings of the friendship between Elena ("Lenu") Greco and

Rafaella ("Lila") Cerullo as they grow up in a poor, working class neighbourhood in Naples, Italy of the 1950s. An elderly Elena in 2010 decides to commit to paper the evolution of her friendship with Lila upon receiving news of Lila's disappearance. Elena believes that Lila has vanished because she wanted to as she reflects on their long lasting and complex friendship as a challenge to Lila's voluntary act. From their first meeting in first grade, Lila is successful in impressing Elena because she is fearless and "very bad" (9). The "terrible, dazzling girl" (9) impresses and intimidates those around her with her intellectual ferocity and Elena is relegated to second best in the shadow of her gifted friend. However, it appears as though both girls will be able to escape their impoverished existence through education until Lila is forced to abandon middle school by her family whereas Elena is able to remove her parents' initial resistance. Their mutual instinct to rely on each other is informed by the pain they readily inflict on each other but their jealousy about who is prettier or more popular does not damage the friendship. Lila tutors Elena and pushes her to excel even as the bitter disappointment with her own fate threatens to rupture her relationship with Elena. Ultimately, Elena, the daughter of a shoemaker, has a chance to eventually move out of her hometown and pursue dreams of literary fame while Lila, the daughter of a porter, must miserably stay behind. In the Italian society of the time, the benefits of labour over learning having a firm hold in the lives of women. Towards the end of the novel, Lila at 16 has agreed to marry the grocer's son, Stefano Carracci, because he can help her in fulfilling her ambitions of transforming her family business. Elena, on the other hand, enjoys a sexual relationship with Antonio Cappuccio even as her feelings for the academically oriented Nino Sarratore end in disappointment when he leaves their town. At the end of her novel, Lila is at the receiving end of Stefano's act betrayal that dooms their relationship when he presents a pair of shoes made by Lila to Marcello Solara, who is despised by Lila for forcefully attempting to marry Lila using his mob connections. In a significant reversal at the end, Lila says to Elena, "you're my brilliant friend, you have to be the best of all, boys and girls" (300)

The Story of a New Name (2013) by Elena Ferrante (translated by Ann Goldstein) opens with Elena recalling the time in 1966 when Lila entrusts her with a box of her notebooks so that they do not come into the hands of her husband, Stefano. Elena breaks her promise to Lila and reads the detailed accounts of Lila's many experiences with mixed emotions of thrill, fascination and shame. In the end, Elena makes a fateful choice of throwing the box, as if throwing the memories of Lila with it, into the river. Then Lila's new marriage is revealed to be a cycle of violence and

sexual assault, something that Elena believes Lila is starting to accept. Also, Lila is an angry witness to the increasingly growing connections between the Solara and Carracci families and partnership with the Solara family results in a store selling Cerullo shoes. Elena's contradictory feelings for her friend are foregrounded when she seeks the help of the Solara family in preventing Antonio from being drafted in the army which Stefano had already done. Elena still immerses herself with comparisons to her friend as they perform a twisted parody of each other's choices. Through these two characters, we see larger tensions with respect to power, money, love and family reputation within the community. When the Solara family insists on displaying Lila's photo on the window of the shoe store, Lila cuts it up and transforms it into a piece of art. Elena reflects that this was perhaps a means of erasing oneself. This is followed by Lila's miscarriage which could have been self-inflicted. A significant thread in this book is Elena's quest for love. She is intensely attracted to Nino but he begins an affair with Elena instead. Their plans to start a new life together are short lived when Nino, intimidated by Lila's intellectual ferocity, leaves a pregnant Lila. Lila is forced to return to Stefano briefly before moving in with childhood friend, Enzo. They study together in the hopes of becoming computer technicians. Lila begins work at a meat factory while becoming obsessed with the intellectual development of her son Gennaro. Elena, however, leaves for the university and writes a novel about her childhood and her experiences with Nino and gets engaged to Pietro. Lila learns that Elena's first published work has been inspired by a book that she wrote as a child and burns a copy of it presented by Elena. At the end, Elena is reunited with Nino on the occasion of the first public reading of her novel in Milan.

Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay (2014) by Elena Ferrante (translated by Ann Goldstein) is the third book, where Elena first recounts her last meeting with Lila during a visit to the neighbourhood in 2005. Here, Lila asks Elena to never write about her. The elderly Elena admits that she is writing about them now for Lila and wishes she would reappear and stop Elena from writing any further. Continuing from the 60s, it is revealed that a dismissive review of Elena's novel published by an old professor, calling the author who had attacked Elena at the public reading has the effect of fuelling interest in the novel particularly due to its risqué sections that propel Elena to a certain amount of fame. Lila at this time finds herself at the centre of a political upheaval at the meat factory when Pasquale, a childhood friend and fervent communist, attempts to make Lila and Enzo to join in his cause. Soon, a speech by Lila about the reality of the

working conditions of factory workers, which has contributed to her own deteriorating health, is turned into a communist leaflet without her permission. Lila quits her job upon learning that Solara family money was behind the factory making them Lila's employers all along. Elena returns to join Lila upon hearing of these events and promises to take care of Gennaro if something happens to Lila. Elena helps Lila publish a piece about the miserable working conditions prevalent at the factory. Elena goes on to marry Pietro and has a daughter, Dede. She struggles with motherhood and work and embarks on extramarital affairs including one with Nino who has married into a powerful Neapolitan business family. Elena writes a second novel which is rejected by Lila who says it is an "ugly, ugly book and the one before it was, too" (113). Elena's decision to leave Pietro is mocked by Lila who is enjoying a comfortable and unconventional life with her son and Enzo with whom she continues a platonic, intellectual bond, whilst running a successful computer business that frees them from the Solara family completely and enables them to invest in their community. Ferrante's portrayal of Elena's relationship with her writing and her fame presents the idea of self-censorship, happiness and humiliation within the larger commercial machinations of the publishing industry.

The Story of the Lost Child (2015) by Elena Ferrante (translated by Ann Goldstein) is the fourth and final book of the series, where the characters journey from middle age to their 60s. Elena returns to Naples in late 1970s with her two daughters as her relationship with Nino collapses, as warned by Lila years ago. Elena accepts the offer of the apartment above Lila's and her relationship with Lila is resumed who acts as mother to Elena's daughters so that Elena can focus on her writing career. They then both give birth to daughters but similar problems converge again in their lives. The women clash when a photograph taken for an article on Elena misidentifies Lila's daughter Tina as Elena's daughter. What follows is the sudden disappearance of Tina who is never seen again. In the aftermath of her child's disappearance but believing her to be alive, Lila "grew old, screeching and quarrelling" (321). She leaves Enzo and travels around Naples, researching the city's history of violence. By 1995, Elena leaves to run a publishing house in Turin but eventually returns to Naples and to Lila after her novels run out of print. Upon Elena's return, Lila blames her for Tina's disappearance arguing that public intellectuals like Elena could have attracted enemies who could have taken Tina due to the magazine photograph that misidentified Tina as Elena's daughter. Elena feels sorry for her friend but disputes her theory and is instead inspired to write about their "splendid and shadowy" friendship including

the incident of Tina's disappearance. The subsequently reproduced novel restores Elena's fame and reputation. Lila who refuses to discuss the book entirely and does not reproach Elena for writing it, disappears soon after. Ferrante in the tetralogy has presented the flawed paths taken by Elena and Lila towards an autonomy of the self. In the journey from vulnerability to self realization, Lila's inherent strength, courage, resourcefulness and intellect are provided a parallel in the education that Elena must go through as woman and writer. Elena writes, finally that "I've finished this story that I thought would never end. I finished it and patiently reread it not so much to improve the quality of the writing as to find out if there are even a few lines where it's possible to trace the evidence that Lila entered my text and decided to contribute to writing it. But I have had to acknowledge that all these pages are mine alone." (471)

In *The Girls from Corona Del Mar* by Rufi Thorpe (2014), the novel opens in the 1990s when both girls are 15. Mia, who has recently had an abortion, asks Lorrie Ann to break one of her toes so that Mia can be excused from participating in a school athletic event. Later in the novel, Lorrie Ann becomes pregnant before graduating high school and decides to keep the baby. This development would mark the first crucial departure in the lives of the two friends. Mia's violent domestic environment with an absent father, alcoholic mother, and two half-siblings that she looks after is contrasted with the sober and stable childhood of Lorrie Ann. As a middle aged Mia reflects upon their relationship, it is revealed that Mia has always been fascinated by Lorrie Ann's goodness and willingness to sacrifice which is embodied in her decision to devote herself to her son born with cerebral palsy. Mia, however, goes to university to study Classics. As the novel progresses, Mia constructs an almost saint-like portrayal of her friend which is disrupted by Lorrie Ann's return in Mia's life. The adult Lorrie Ann is vastly dissimilar to the individual that was conjured up in Mia's memory, on the basis of her girlhood friend that she was. Mia sees herself and Lorrie Ann in the Sumerian goddess Inanna who a medium to navigate the theme of motherhood and trauma in the novel. Mia begins to question who Lorrie Ann really is and the implications of that question for herself as Lorrie Ann breaks away from her maternal tendencies and embraces a life of freedom.

The Girls by Emma Cline (2016), a novel set in 1969, depicts the relationship between the emotionally insecure, 14 year old Evie and a rebellious group of older girls in Sonoma County in California. Evie is instantly drawn to the charismatic Suzanne and will do anything to be

accepted and admired by her. An adult Evie reflects upon this saying “how girls are the only ones who can really give each other close attention, the kind we equate with being loved. They noticed what we want noticed.” (20) Suzanne introduces Evie to Russell Hadrick, the narcissistic leader of a hippie commune, who wields absolute power over the women. Evie, with her desperate need to be fully noticed and accepted in this community of women, inhabits a girlhood that is replete with neglect and violence. The narrative of the novel is built around a mass murder but Cline is more interested in presenting the brutal emotional landscape of girlhood which can possibly prepare some girls to commit murder. Another point of inquiry is the role of the distinct countercultural nature of the commune as a space in shaping the idea of female friendship that emerges in the novel.

The Secret Place by Tana French (2014) takes place in modern day Dublin at St. Kilda's, a girls' boarding school. The lives of eight girls at the school are upended when a boy, Christopher Harper, is found murdered on the school grounds. The initial investigation by Detective Stephen Moran is inconclusive, but a year later 16 year old Holly Mackey, daughter of another detective, volunteers information to the detective that she has found evidence in the form of a photograph of Christopher with the statement "I know who killed him" (29) on the school bulletin board called 'secret place'. The narrative is seen through the perspectives of Moran and Mackey. Here, the concept of female friendship has been situated in the exclusive context of girlhood intersecting with themes of power, violence and intense loyalty. The fear, ambition, tension and reassurance of the bond between the groups of girls at the school are also informed by the component of class conflict. Towards the end of the novel, the murder is linked to Holly's clique.

The thesis examines the formation of gender identity and notions of femininity as facilitated by female friendship within a broader framework of the adolescent girl emerging as an active agent. This approach will be in the context of feminist theory and the interdisciplinary field of girlhood studies. The study of the evolution of female autonomy in the chosen texts has to be seen in relation to the experience of female friendship. The notions of intimacy and longing are important to understand the dynamics of friendship that shape the lives of the female characters.

The theme of memory and trauma become important to understand the themes of violence, motherhood and self-actualization when some of the protagonists serve as adult narrators and proceed to self-interrogate their lives. This self-interrogation and reflection is necessary to map

the range of the intimate and conflicting friendship shared by the female characters in the chosen texts. The intimate and urgent reflection of their selves places the young girls in opposition to the other female and male characters around them. All the protagonists display a rich interiority which becomes a gift and a curse for them. Both Elena and Lila respond very differently to the patriarchal norms that restrict them as opposed to their mothers. They choose to engage critically with the changing socio-political norms around them which again makes them targets for the men who possess economic and political clout in society.

The existence of violence as crime is also notable for its persistence presence in all the chosen texts. Crime taints the key relationships that young girls and women learn to forge with each other and the people around them. The Camorra crime syndicate plays a key role in creating the quagmire of bloodshed and misery that Ferrante's characters grow up with and then must confront later, as adults. Crime demarcates the nature of community relationship in the Neapolitan novels and has a direct impact on the lives of the female characters. For example, Carmen Peluso falls in love with the son of the man her father has killed. Elena as a young girl, in particular, is enamoured by the drama and tragedy of it all where the twisted romance of the subject matter makes it more interesting than the heavy doses of violence that occur everyday around them. Carmen's brother Pasquale is unpopular with the Solaras due to his status as a communist and must suffer the consequences of his firm political views. In French's novel, the crime of murder provides also the template for the female psyche to come to the forefront whereas in Cline's novel, gruesome murders form the specific background to the systematic exploitation of young girls and women disguised by the principles of free love. In Thorpe's novel, the scope of crime is distilled through larger questions of choice and motherhood which presents a more subtle treatment of the concept of crime. Overall, through these various themes and concepts, the thesis aims to analyze the spectrum of the female psyche that emerges due to the life-affirming experience of female friendship.

Chapter One: Portrait of a Friend

Throughout history, women have led their lives within families, co-existing with parents and siblings and then forging ties with their husbands and children. Therefore, the first step towards friendship for women then and now has been through kinship -sisters or cousins - which then expands to people outside of that intimate circle. In this regard, the female friend is an important witness to the other girl's identity formation. The concept of friendship as seen through the chosen texts will present the question of to what extent did the individual girls author their own lives or did they become authors for each other's lives?

Marilyn Yalom and Theresa Donovan Brown in *The Social Sex: A History of Female Friendship* state that "With the exception of medieval nuns, European women did not begin to leave written records of their views on friendship till the fifteenth century. Once vernacular languages displaced Latin in writing, women took up the quill with greater ease and wrote to their friends with increasing frequency. Some also penned essays and fiction, so that from the time of Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*, written in French around 1405, we have evidence of women's friendships from their own points of view. In Italy, Moderata Fonte (1555-92) wrote a mini-dialogue on friendship based on the argument that "women make friends with other women more easily than is the case with men" and that such friendships are more lasting. By the time of Fonte's death in 1592, a new era of friendship had opened up for women, not only on the continent in France and Italy but also across the channel in England. There, many women of the upper and middle classes were acquiring new freedoms, among them that of bonding publicly with other women"(10).

They describe how the socially elevated friendship circles of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe enabled women to seek out companions within the comfortable and respectable confines of their parlours. However, this could be enjoyed by upper class women whereas "working women had to enjoy friendship on the run, often when necessity called one friend to assist another in childbirth, illness or death. But for more privileged women, entertaining female friends was a sign of their social position, to be savoured in private and even trumpeted about among their peers"(10).

Yalom and Brown trace the beginning of how friendship as an act transformed from its predominantly male driven characteristics towards incorporating more concrete feminine responses.

"If 1600 marked the beginning of a grudging social recognition of women's claim to friendship in Europe, 1800 was the turning point that changed the public face of friendship in both Europe and the United States. Increasingly, friendship came to be understood as a feminine, not just a masculine, endeavor. Indeed, it can be argued that the entire concept of friendship, especially in the Anglo-American world, became feminized. Girls and women began to write letters to one another in a language of love not so different from the language of heterosexual longing. Words like dearest, darling, precious, heart, love, and devotion flowed easily from the pens of Victorian girls and women as they passionately corresponded with one another. The formation of numerous clubs based on religious, ethnic, political, and cultural interests allowed middle-class, as well as upper-class, women an opportunity to meet in social groups that spawned countless pairs of friends." (11)

The establishment of girls' schools, seminaries, and colleges played an important role in deepening the ties of friendship among women.

"By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the idea that friendship was exclusively or even primarily a male affair had been largely reversed. Women were thought to be more caring, more tender, and more loving than men, and thus more suited for friendship. Friendship itself became identified with the feminine characteristic of emotional intimacy and was no longer synonymous with heroic or civic comradeship—though men periodically made attempts to reassert the hegemony of earlier forms of male bonding. Female friendships, once denigrated by men and often experienced by women themselves as little more than the by-products of family relations, became highly valued in their own right. For the past 150 years, the stock in women's friendship has been on the rise." (11)

Here it becomes important to note that historically, female bonding has been mostly examined and written about by men where the complexities of girls' experiences are ignored and even as adult women, they are presented in roles that are reactionary or marginal so as to enforce patriarchal stereotypes of female behaviour. It is important then to see how women's writing is

able to differentiate between feelings of love and friendship. In order to examine the various representations of friendship, medieval convents and nunneries have been found to be the earliest sites where such relationships have been documented. Yalom and Brown provide examples of women writing about their meaningful friendships with other women such as the letters of the nun Hildegard of Bingen who lived in the eleventh century. They state that "in our study of female friends, we have found examples of women loving other women passionately and even physically, with caresses and kisses, though not necessarily sexually. These are what we call loving friendships"(36). These relationships are separate from the instances of sexual relationships that were not uncommon in medieval convents and nunneries. Yalom and Brown state the following while attempting to gauge the value of such "loving friendships":

"Again following Aristotle, Aquinas distinguishes between friendship and love. He argues that the latter is based on desiring something for oneself, whereas the former concerns the good that one desires for another. Though both friendship and erotic love may be seen as forms of love, only friendship has the quality of mutual benevolence that makes it, according to Aquinas, superior to erotic love."(27)

Apart from convents, other manifestations of same-sex communities gradually became significant in providing opportunities for like-minded women with similar life experiences to meet and bond together.

"Throughout Europe, other religious communities of women that did not require enclosure in a convent sprang up. The best known of these communities were the beguines, single or widowed women who lived together for spiritual purposes. The movement started in the Low Countries and eventually spread to Germany and France. Beguines shared a communal life in a house called a *béguinage*, in which each woman had her own apartment or room. All beguines were committed to chastity, poverty, charity, and prayer, though each group had its own guidelines. Unlike women in convents, most of whom came from noble families, beguines came from all levels of society and earned their modest living by taking care of the sick or working in the textile industry. Voluntary poverty and a commitment to saving souls were the hallmarks of these pious women, but the Church tended to treat them with suspicion because they were not bound by the regulations of an established order. Because many of these women were literate and left behind letters, poetry, or treatises, we are able to get various glimpses of their lives.

Some had joined the beguines because the two other options —marriage or the convent—were not possible for them: entry into marriage or a nunnery in the Middle Ages usually required a substantial dowry. Medieval society did not permit women to live together openly, but beguine communities offered female friends a reasonably respectable way to do so. Some, if they had a choice, preferred to live collectively with other women than to be confined within marriage or a convent."(45)

Yalom and Brown note that the spread of convents from Europe to the colonies of the New World by the seventeenth century injected the class and racial hierarchy prevalent in society into these communities as well. However, the nuns remained isolated from the wider world and their rich stories of comradeship did not highly influence the way women outside of the convent were conceptualizing friendship during the same period. This was because outside the walls of the convent, the concept of friendship continued to be constructed by men and written about through the use of male subjects. For example, "The French philosopher Montaigne, inspired by his platonic love for Étienne de La Boétie, wrote his magisterial essay "Of Friendship," which quickly joined the works of Aristotle and Cicero to form a trio of foundation texts for anyone seriously interested in the subject. Other sixteenth-century humanists like Montaigne continued to conceptualize ideal friendship as an uplifting experience for virtuous men who were committed to one another through personal, religious, military, and civic bonds."(50)

Here, it is in the works of Shakespeare that we find multiple manifestations of loyal comradeship between women who are often superior characters in comparison to their conniving, disgraceful counterparts. If the male characters are prone to misunderstandings and violence, Shakespeare's female characters often join forces to resolve situations and untangle mistaken assumptions. We can see this in the case of Portia and Nerissa in *The Merchant of Venice*; Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page in *The Merry Wives Of Windsor*; Rosalind and Celia in *As You Like It*; Beatrice and Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing* to name a few. For the first time, a male writer had unambiguously painted a clear and elevated picture of female friendship even though it predominantly centred around high-born ladies of the upper class of British society. Another drawback of this literary treatment of female friendship is the eventual and ultimately privileged position provided to heterosexual relationships. Heterosexual love was second to none in life and in literature during this time. This conflict between heterosexual love which must end in marriage and homosocial

love and friendship features not just in the works of Shakespeare but can be seen in contemporary literature and society. Yalom and Brown write about the extent of society's distrust of single women stating that "It was common for teenage girls in the sixteenth century to enter the service of gentry families in the countryside and afterward move into large London households. On average, they spent about four years working as a servant before marrying. Society did not tolerate single women living alone, as evidenced by a 1562 Act of Parliament, the Statute of Artificers, which required that all unmarried women be employed in service or sent to prison."(52) However, this requirement did not extend to girls from middle and upper-class families. Therefore, working-class girls formed bonds through their common situation in life and gradually women would progress from simply being members of the more social sex that were prone to being chatterboxes and gossips to becoming insightful writers of their own stories.

"What Englishwomen themselves thought and wrote about their condition as friends would become easier to discern during the seventeenth century, when they took up the pen in greater numbers and left behind a substantial body of writing, ranging from letters and diaries to poetry and plays. Two subjects that had been absent from most of the male-authored literature of the past would now come to the fore: woman as mother and woman as friend. Both of these subjects would find their way into the poetry of Katherine Philips, who championed friendship between women like no English author before her."(54)

Katherine Philips (1632-64) expressed a particular concept of female friendship in her poetry based on the neoplatonic ideals popularized by the wife of King Charles I, Queen Henrietta Maria in England. This concept of platonic love was inspired by Plato's Symposium and it was a widely embraced idea that a woman could succeed in having another woman as her soul mate. By excluding the husband from this valuable position, this concept of platonic love favoured an intense, almost spiritual connection over eros. While in despair over the loss of her Anne Owen friend, due to marriage, Philips calling herself Orinda and Owen as Lucasia writes the following as stated by Yalom and Brown:

"Great Soul of Friendship whither art thou fled, Where dost thou now chuse to repose thy head?"

Then to the Great Lucasia have recourse, There gather up new excellence and force. Lucasia and Orinda shall thee give Eternity and make even Friendship live."(55)

The concept of female friendship would leap into the world of prose through the works of the philosopher Mary Astell in the seventeenth century. She believed that women's lack of self-centeredness made them more amenable to sustain long lasting friendships unlike men. However, society did not look upon kindly towards the desire of women to indulge in such friendships. Yalom and Brown write about the derision reserved for women with intellectual aspirations and the particular "accusations of immorality against female friends that were first voiced in early-eighteenth-century scandal literature. Anonymous pamphlets likened women's friendships to the sexual practices associated with the ancient Greek poet Sappho, or the reputed intimacy of Turkish women in their harems"(57). Here, it must be noted that the subjects of eighteenth century scandal literature were upper class, literate white women who had the ability to spare wealth and time to meet their friends and participate in stimulating conversations. Also, this attitude of women towards their friendships with women remained limited to England in the West and was not replicated in the colonies such as America during this time period. This was because in the case of America, Puritan beliefs would have uncompromisingly prized the ties of marriage and family above any other bond. The historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich in her *Good Wives* elaborates upon the conditions in which female friendships would have functioned in colonial America where proximity provided the easiest route for friendships to form through neighbourly interactions, assisting in childbirth and through intervention in quarrels etc. However, none of the women in the colonies regardless of social rank were using the pen to pay homage to their female friends.

Here, this recurring aspect will be examined in this thesis through the idea that a female friend has to navigate through themes of loyalty and betrayal if the friendship is seen to be superseded by any other relationship and especially if that relationship involves a male figure. This overwhelming fate befalls almost all female characters in fiction because in the absence of healthy and mutually nourishing friendships, the only spaces occupied by female characters involve torturous love triangles or highly sexualized identities for the benefit of the main male characters. The thesis will examine how the chosen texts provide alternatives to such petty and marginal characterizations. This is because the expectations and obligations involved in the dynamics of female friendship in relation to girlhood can be seen clearly in contemporary fiction written by women. For example, if *Sula*(1973) by Toni Morrison revealed the extent to which women can harm each other and *Cat's Eye*(1988) by Margaret Atwood portrayed a close knit yet

exploitative friendship through the figure of the 'mean girl'; then *Swing Time*(2016) by Zadie Smith explores the intense competitiveness between two biracial girls growing up in London in the 1980s. Their love for dance becomes the setting for feelings of kinship, jealousy, longing and even disdain. *The Burning Girl*(2017) by Claire Messud examines the friendship between pre-teen girls through the lens of class whereas her 2013 novel, *The Woman Upstairs*, provided an intimate portrait of the friendship between two women artists. Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk*(2016) presents how obligation and duty can keep women tied to troubled familial relations.

The recent spurt in women writing about female friendship allows the reader to explore essential data in the form of the complex and rich interior life of women. The chosen texts examine the fluid and ever changing identities of the female characters who sometimes may come across as divergent versions of the same personality where the long period of friendship is punctuated by phases of antagonism, estrangement and reconciliation. Though the protagonists of these novels encounter divisive male figures who alter the dynamics of their friendship, more importantly, these texts by Ferrante, Cline, Thorpe and French, invoke women as creators of art, identity and their own history with skill and sophistication. This process begins for them as girls where the burden of limitations and expectations imposed upon them informs their transition to womanhood. But how did the figure of the young girl or the adolescent decisively emerge in English fiction?

The concept of the French salon when imitated throughout Europe succeeded in keeping its female-centered nature while advocating for a particular refinement in speech, behaviour and wit so that it remained in essence, an upper-class Parisian concept. As woman in time moved away from the parlours/salons and established reading/book clubs in Europe and America in the twentieth century; the chic aristocrat, the selfless wife and mother or the femme fatale were not the only focus of literature but there was a newfound interest in the figure of the school girl. The girls' boarding school novel has a unique status in British literary culture. Significant contributions in this genre have been made by L.T. Meade(born Elizabeth Thomasina Meade), Mrs. George de Horne Vaizey and Raymond Jacberns(born Georgiana Mary Isabel Ash) in the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. These writers were followed by Enid Blyton, who authored the St. Clare series from 1941-45 with Pamela Cox and also wrote the *Malory Towers* Series from 1946-51, and Elinor Brent Dyer, author of the *Chalet*

School series from 1925-70, who have since been accused of perpetuating classist and sexist ideas through their unrealistic characters. Blyton, in particular, is now seen to have been highly indulgent of British colonialism and xenophobia. However, what Blyton and the other writers succeeded in doing was to provide young girls with humour, intellect and good sense to overcome obstacles in a space that does provide central status to the adults. She also gave them enough flaws in order to highlight a certain lack of honour and propriety in them and then subsequently advocates her idea of English values and ethics. Both Blyton(in the *Malory Towers* and *St. Clare* series) and Brent-Dyer(in the *Chalet School* series) present girls who are not just vain, spoilt and selfish but also bullies. The trope of the sporty, mystery solving heroine can also be found in the *Trebizon* series by Anne Digby which was first published in 1978. After the end of Digby's series in 1994; there was a sharp decline in school stories in the twentieth century. This traditional British genre has since been notably revived by J.K. Rowling but the *Harry Potter* series does not exclusively concern itself with the same tropes that authors before her had dealt with.

The all-female boarding school ceased to be an effective site to portray women as strong and united because of one-dimensional characters and settings that did not match the reader's experiences as most readers would not have been educated in boarding institutions mostly meant for the affluent class. However, the boarding school as a space of growth and disruption will be explored in French's *The Secret Place*. French uses the boarding school as a contemporary setting to examine themes of female education and violence where the girls' application of physical and psychological strategies to fulfill their desires; reveals the emergence of distinct female subjects. The nature of female bonding portrayed in the chosen texts when examined within the framework of girlhood studies throws open questions of agency and solidarity within the close-knit ties of friendship. The female friends play a role in creating each other's identities as well as dismantling any fantasies associated with them. This affects how femininity is performed by them in their myriad settings. Here, girlhood becomes a vital category as compared to the later stage of womanhood. This is because friendships between these fictional girls is passionate, exclusive and obsessive who pledge eternal loyalty and experience explosive emotions towards each other as they experience puberty.

Elizabeth Abel in her essay *(E)merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women* argues that "works of fiction that use female friendship as a device for exploring the different trajectories of women's lives, is that women seek complementarity rather than commonality in their friends. This emphasis on complementarity, however, is a misleading by-product of primarily narrative and thematic considerations. Narrative interest encourages the differentiation of female protagonists, and concern with the fragmentation implicit in the exclusive quality of women's roles makes dividing the female character into "different friends" an attractive strategy. Serious novels that focus on the actual friendships of women, however, suggest that identification replace complementarity as the psychological mechanism that draws women together."(415) Thus, the union of souls is crucial to the dynamics of female friendship according to Abel. She adds that for girls knowledge fosters intimacy and "friendship becomes a vehicle of self-definition for women, clarifying identity through relation to an other who embodies and reflects an essential part of the self"(416). This intimacy is keenly felt by Lori Ann as she drives Mia to an abortion clinic in Thorpe's novel whereas Cline's Evie credits Suzanne for recognizing her dread of remaining invisible to others. The girls of St. Kilda's in French's novel are bound by secrets but nothing governs them with more power than obsessive loyalty towards each other within their cliques and the intellectual rivalry and literary ambitions of Ferrante's Lila and Elena are fueled by a shared ferocity to be the best and to escape their small town. At the end of *My Brilliant Friend*, as Lila fails in their joint mission, she says to Elena, "you're my brilliant friend, you have to be the best of all, boys and girls"(300).

In striving to know their friends, these girls uncover aspects of themselves. They are the agents for each other's self- knowledge. The most detailed texts in this regard form Ferrante's tetralogy where Elena's endeavour to know her friend Lila initiates her role as narrator and writer. In the series, she writes the long history of their friendship as a response to the news of Lila's disappearance which the reader knows as the complete tetralogy but within the four novels, specifically in the final installment, Elena as the writer revives her career by chronicling her life with Lila including the disappearance of Lila's daughter Tina. Here, the act of writing becomes the tool to assemble multiple facets about a friend and the finished product becomes the space for Elena's self-reflection as a young girl to a woman in her sixties. All the chosen texts record the histories of the two central female characters while providing the most authentic image of their

selves- in their girlhood. These texts, therefore, differ in their approach towards female friendship as compared to the works that preceded them.

For all the protagonists who will be examined in this thesis, girlhood provides the space for such acts of imaginative empathy which will dictate the course of their friendship. As memories are uncovered, the evolution of the friendship is presented to the reader as the characters also evolve from empathy, identification and towards the aim of autonomy. However, this process is not without conflict due to the differences that set the friends apart from one another. Unlike Abel who considers the differentiation of female characters as a weak narrative strategy, I would like to argue that the chosen texts opt to present the differences between the girls/friends in order to highlight the theme of emotional co-dependency that is shaped by the intense mutual loyalty shared by the girls. These feelings of loyalty are also open to fierce reversals and therefore, in all of the texts, this co-dependency or sometimes, the lack of it, influences the significant life choices of the characters. For example, a strong desire to be accepted by each other changes their relationship with their social environment as in the case of Elena and Lila, both of whom attempt to read in each other the same jealousy, competitiveness, love and anger that each of them is driven by. This enables them to forge and fracture all other relationships with other people and also with their hometown. The stubborn yet fluid bond shared by the friends in these texts is made malleable by their differences and the disharmony that it can create.

Another aspect that enables girlhood to ripen such female friendships is because of the vulnerability that is ensconced within this phase of life. In the chosen texts, the girls are clearly constricted if not suffocated by the confines of their social environment. Cline's Evie finds both her mother and the Californian summer distasteful. The casual neglect of her mother is the last straw for the fourteen year old who is desperately seeking attention and waiting for the truer, more exciting version of her life to happen. As Evie sees her divorced mother attempt to reinvent herself with experimental tea, macrobiotic cooking classes and aggressively "ready to attend to her own life with the eagerness of a schoolgirl with a difficult math problem"; she is critical of her mother's eagerness for an aim or a plan that will lead to happiness(29). This is because in the eyes of Evie, her mother "searched until there was only searching left"(30). Evie is more concerned with outcomes and the deliberate actions that make them possible. She and her friend Connie "licked batteries to feel a metallic jolt on the tongue, rumoured to be one-eighteenth of an

orgasm"(27). Here, her mother is in some ways, chasing the ghost of her former girlish self by shedding the responsibilities of motherhood whereas on the other hand, Evie is just discovering that the "constant project of our girl selves seeming to require odd and precise attentions"(27).

The texts by Cline and others present girlhood as a desperate and complex waiting game for the female characters. Evie ascribes this to "the countdowns in magazines that urged us to prepare thirty days in advance for the first day of school" or that she, when starved of attention, "dressed to provoke love, tugging my neckline lower, settling a wistful stare on my face" when out in public to imply "many deep and promising thoughts"(27). These are examples of sanctioned performances of femininity that girls are expected to polish and eventually master during their lifetime. A push and pull tactic used by society to control the female psyche and the body. Therefore, girlhood is presented to girls themselves as something to be spent solely in a state of anticipation. If only girls would prepare themselves and wait for love, attention, visibility and importance to be bestowed upon them by others; then their lives would be better. French in *The Secret Place* how teenage girls religiously preach to each other the gospel of magazines like *Elle* for the sake of self-improvement. They cannot seem to agree as to what an exfoliator is supposed to do but they are sure it is beneficial. For example, Joanne Heffernan and her clique has the reputation of doing "every single thing the magazines say you have to do to your face and your hair and your cellulite"(20). It is the bond of friendship that serves to counteract this sense of endless anticipation for Evie and the other female characters. Elena when recollecting her school years says that even though she was a hard worker, "most of all I liked pleasing the teacher, I liked pleasing everyone"(44). Before meeting Suzanne, Evie says that "I waited to be told what was good about me"(28). As an adult, Evie looks back and realizes that this could explain the presence of more women than men at Russell's ranch because there would always be broken women starved of affection and they would usually find a man to fix them. Through the course of their friendship, these girls/friends in all the chosen texts would attempt to reclaim the time that they had lost as we will see in the later chapters. A time not invested in self-awareness but in planned uncertainty. As Evie says, this was the time "I had spent readying myself, the articles that taught me that life was really just a waiting room until someone noticed you- the boys had spent that time becoming themselves"(28).

Another point of inquiry that informs girlhood studies is the significance of geography or place in providing specificity to the term 'girl'. This is not just because girlhood studies is a transnational field but because a lack of geographical markers will lead to a less diverse understanding of girls' culture as a whole. Both the place and the girl inhabiting it, inform each other's characteristics in the chosen texts. Elena and Lila's stories are presented against the backdrop of the political and cultural developments of the Italy of the 1960s and 70s. Thorpe's characters are situated in the Californian surfing community where the Corona Del Mar beach neighbourhood of teenage rebellion which leads to a later unexpected repetition of it in adulthood. French situates her schoolgirls in contemporary Dublin whereas Cline's Evie and Suzanne can be read as the distorted versions of the flower children of the 1960s, as they tried to live and feel to the fullest in a Californian commune. Claudia Mitchell and Carrie Rentschler in the Introduction to their edited work, *Girlhood and the Politics of Place*, argue that place and geography is a "contentious reality that shapes girls' lives; girls and young women struggle to assert their rights to territory and autonomous spaces, to represent their experiences of belonging to and relating with others in key spaces"(2). The response of girls in this context is to challenge or resist the spatial control of the adults which can be done by either removing girls from public places or limiting their access to them by prioritizing specific spaces over others. An example of this is presented in Lila's struggle to educate herself as the daughter of a poor shoemaker when her older brother, Rino, was given the opportunities and the attention that she craved for herself. Her teacher, Maestra Oliviero, was astounded that six-year old already knew how to read and write at an advanced level unlike her peers. Even more surprising was that she was not trained by her parents or other tutors. When asked as to who taught her, Lila replies without hesitation, "Me."(43) Here, six-year old Lila experiences and expresses an independent sense of self for the first time.

The adult Elena ponders about Lila's methods of self-education and says that she probably "had precociously learned how the alphabet worked from the sheets of newspaper in which customers wrapped the old shoes and which her father sometimes brought home and read to the family the most interesting local news items"(44). Eventually, Lila's persistence is tragically unrewarded. At first, she is denied permission by her parents to take the entrance test for middle school and when her father later agrees, she is meant to study neither Latin nor arithmetic but stenography, book-keeping and home economics. With such restrictions on her intellectual growth, Lila skips

school and fails her year. The school or the classroom as a space was a safe haven for Elena to escape her mother who was the only one who did not give her any attention. Whereas for Lila, who was a disruptive student and the worst-behaved, it was still a space where her intellectual superiority over other students and especially Elena was unmistakable and which she enjoyed. Their academic competitiveness becomes the immediate aspect of their rivalry. The unexpected result of Elena besting Lila in the final test of elementary school and Lila's own helplessness at the uncertainty of entering middle school spurs her to punish Elena in the most tormenting way possible- invite a third person into their friendship. "She never said a word to me of anger or discontent. She began instead to go around with Carmela Peluso, the daughter of the carpenter-gambler, as if I was no longer enough. Within a few days we became a trio, in which, however, I, who had been first in school, was almost always the third."(79). Here, Lila ruptures the dynamics of her friendship with Elena with the abrupt inclusion of Carmela which exposes a new fragility in their relationship. When Lila's education is cut short, she vents her anger and frustration at her family, because what stings her most is that she can now no longer relegate Elena to the position of second-best. However, for Elena herself, the expectation of finally being the best student in Lila's absence did not produce excellent results and for her the idea "began to quietly form that without Lila I would never feel the pleasure of belonging to that exclusive group of the best"(92). As these two girls can no longer inhabit the shared space of the classroom; they cannot use it as a relational marker of defining the self. Therefore, tensions are created because of the conflict between imaginative empathy and self-definition.

Similar tensions would emerge for the girls at St. Kilda's as cliques navigate both the spoken and unspoken rules of hierarchy. The sprawling grounds of the boarding school hold secret spaces for different groups of girls; private sanctuaries that keep away the rigid nuns and also fellow students. The access to such spaces is about isolation as well as exclusion. Selena, one the members of Holly's clique, says that other students "have got their own places", adding that "We don't go there."(24) In Thorpe's *The Girls From Corona Del Mar* which opens in the 1990s, Lorrie Ann and her family reflected the perfect ordinariness of what a blissful life should be. They all loved each other and preferred the company of each other over anyone else. Born to a Christian rock musician and a preschool teacher, Lorrie Ann's family was content with Del Mar's beach neighbourhood where other families like that of Mia had ended up because of real estate crashes or because of the Baby Boomer crisis where "they had lost faith in their own

capableness"(4). For Mia, their happiness made the beautiful Lorrie Ann more perfect and good than she already was in her eyes. Lorrie Ann could cleanse any of Mia's sins by simply being her friend. As Lorrie Ann at sixteen drove fifteen year old Mia to her appointment at Planned Parenthood; Mia writes that "I needed her, in all her goodness and her primness, to forgive me, to give me her consent by participating in my scheme"(5). This was because their experience of girlhood was through the roles of opposite identities until certain circumstances, would unravel the previously established binaries in their relationship. Therefore, Mia recollects that it "made a lot of intuitive symbolic sense to force the beautiful, pure and good Lorrie Ann to break my toe and punish me for my abortion. To us, Lorrie Ann's family was magic, and this magic was transferred to Lorrie Ann herself. It honeyed her golden hair and deepened the oceanic blue of her eyes."(5) When the good, kind and considerate Lorrie Ann stops being the person Mia knew and loved; the consequences resonate deeply for Mia too as she questions who this Lorrie Ann is and what means for them both. Thorpe raises the question of who we are without our friends through this novel where Mia in her girlhood believes that in some way "Lorrie Ann made me everything I am, for my personality took shape as an equal and opposite reaction to who she was, just as, I'm sure, her personality formed as a result of mine"(6).

The treatment of female education in the chosen texts is an important point of inquiry to examine the political and intellectual agency of the girls/friends. This aspect also needs to be studied in relation to the role of the female writer within the texts and outside of it. Before an elderly Elena decides to write herself and Lila into a bildungsroman; Lila and Elena in their girlhood had made a promise to write a novel together. Learning in school had become a shield for these girls against the crude, unpleasant poverty of their existence but that too was only accessible, especially for Lila, within the boundaries set by her gender. Learning was synonymous with joy for Elena and Lila as they read a single copy of *Little Women* together till it was tattered or "our book" as Elena calls it(68). However, they had already recognized a lack of wealth as an obstacle for their ambitions, for their freedom when they began "to link school to wealth"(70). Elena adds that "if we studied hard we would be able to write books and that the books would make us rich"(70). Suddenly, learning or the act of writing came to represent the freedom to create whatever they wanted and they can use the finished product to control their circumstances instead of being controlled by it. Another example of this is seen in the dissimilar paths taken by Mia and Lorrie Ann which lead an adult Mia, in 2005 as a Classics scholar, to undertake the

challenge to translate the Inanna cycle or the collection of ancient songs that tell the story of the Sumerian goddess Inanna. On the other hand, Lorrie Ann suffers the loss of her father; becomes a teenage mother and wife; rejects a scholarship to Berkeley and thus, in the eyes of Mia, betrays her true self and their friendship. Before Mia's fascination with Inanna due to her fierce uniqueness; Mia credits her "mother's mid-life crisis purchase of a self-help book *Goddesses in Everywoman*" for her decision to study the Classics. Mia sees herself and Lorrie Ann in the Sumerian goddess and the figure of Inanna becomes one of the ways the themes of motherhood and trauma are explored in the novel. The theme of female education in French's novel is presented through the network of friendships and rivalries that play out in the pressurized atmosphere of the private boarding school which is a bastion of privilege and where nuns were desperately trying to contain the fierce femininity of the schoolgirls. The real learning experienced by the two girl gangs at St. Kilda's is of their own making- it involved the practice of blind loyalty towards your own clique and blind hatred towards the rival clique. Lastly, Evie Boyd's experience at the commune brings her back to the home and boarding school that she desperately wanted to leave behind. The countercultural aspect of the commune shapes the friendship between Evie and Suzanne and also presents the strange, unexpected lure it holds for those girls who feel trapped within the high pressure environment which is their own girlhood.

All the narratives as presented in the chosen texts also highlight one of the most important features that shape the nature of girlhood that is experienced by these girls/friends. All the protagonists are touched by and inflict physical and psychological violence upon each other and their surroundings. Male violence reverberates through Ferrante's novels like a shockwave. The clash between communalism and fascism silently looms over the violent neighbourhood of Naples where bloody fights, domestic violence and murders are the toxic ingredients of the daily lives of the inhabitants. Elena describes in *My Brilliant Friend* the perverse permeation of violence into the very fabric of a typical Neapolitan neighbourhood and hence established its ordinariness:

"I feel no nostalgia for our childhood: it was full of violence. Every sort of thing happened, at home and outside, every day, but I don't recall having ever thought that the life we had there was particularly bad. Life was like that, that's all, we grew up with the duty to make it difficult for others before they made it difficult for us. Of course, I would have liked the nice manners that

the teacher and the priest preached, but I felt that those ways were not suited to our neighbourhood, even if you were a girl. The women fought among themselves more than the men, they pulled each other's hair, they hurt each other. To cause pain was a disease"(37).

This predominantly male violence against women and girls returns as a specter throughout the lives of Lila and Elena whereas the girls themselves inflict psychological scars upon each other which are buried and dug open throughout their friendship. The normalization of causing and receiving pain, often falsely disguised as love, would inform their girlhood, marriage and also their friendship.

Another aspect that informs the nature of female friendship is the burgeoning sexuality of the protagonists as represented in the chosen texts. In Ferrante's tetralogy the theme of gendered violence is linked closely with the emerging sexuality of the young girls of the Neapolitan neighbourhood. The brutality of everyday harassment and assault is described clinically by the author to highlight the extent to which violence against women has been normalized by society. Elena, Lila and their friends cannot escape being looked at even though Lila is the one who dares to return the debilitating male gaze that is directed towards them. This is presented alongside the internalized need for attention among the young girls who have yet to deliberately vocalize their desires but they feel their intensity all the same. Elena's crush on Nino Sarratore; her first declaration of love from a boy and the shame and titillation that her ample bosom inspires in herself and the opposite sex respectively become the private features of a yardstick to measure herself against Lila who was too wild and too skinny to elicit male attention. The blossoming of Lila's femininity would coincide with the misfortune of her becoming a target for the Solara family; a development that will continue to haunt both friends decades later.

Ferrante's treatment of Lila's turbulent marital life with Stefano Carracci also demonstrates that everyone except Lila seek to become a stakeholder in her life. The sweeping economic changes transforming the ace of the neighbourhood falls short of diminishing the male stranglehold over women's lives and the power that comes with wealth only aids in the further contributing to the vulnerability of women and young girls. The assertion of a female through the means of her sexuality has always been a threat to toxic masculinity and the society that normalizes and perpetuates gendered violence would not celebrate or condone the choices of Lila and Elena simply because they chose themselves over others. In Cline's novel, Evie Boyd makes her own

decisions but those decisions are accompanied by the terrifying realization that she is being used but allows it in order to fulfill her debilitating need and longing for visibility and attention. Being party to one's own humiliation becomes a recurrent theme in the presentation of girlhood as written by Cline. Evie sees Suzanne as someone who seemingly rises above these indignities but only because it engenders a rage that sustains them through it all. This fury is similar to the female rage that powers the characters of Elena and Lila but in Cline's novel, this anger is externalized in a more explicit way. Both Cline and Thorpe also indict pop culture in their role in perpetuating and prescribing ways of performing femininity that removes young girls and women as stakeholders in their own lives. The girlhood of the characters in the chosen texts is marked by the awareness that they must be told who they are and what they must be. Whether it is the teachers at school or the glossy pages of fashion magazines; the warping of female agency is a never ending process. In French's novel, the setting of a claustrophobic and contemporary boarding school reveals that this ugly thread runs through the settings of 1950s Naples to modern day Dublin.

Susan Cahill examines the stories of L.T. Meade to understand the construction of Irish girlhood as presented in her writing. Cahill "considers the importance of Meade's Irish girls within a conception of girlhood that is both intensely marketable and is linked culturally to anxieties about consumerism and artificiality"(213). She adds that,

"Irish novelists who wrote for girls like Meade, were popular during their writing careers but have subsequently been forgotten and critically neglected, and their books are now long out of print. It is likely that their popularity (and thus their association with popular or low culture) and their young female middle-class audiences account in a major way for their neglect. Furthermore, in an Irish context, this literature does not generally fit into the types of cultural nationalism popular towards the end of the nineteenth century. John Wilson Foster, in his recent study of the popular novel in Ireland during this period, argues that the disregard of such fiction in critical accounts owes much to orthodox histories of the Irish Literary Revival, in which popular novels that do not reflect the concerns of the Revival are ignored."(214)

Here, Cahill is pointing towards the domination of male narratives in the literary imagination of the people and that the exclusion of female narratives were not considered problematic. She adds that, "Although the Irish writers of popular girls' fiction do not all share similar outlooks,

politics, and set of values, they all suffer from this gender and class bias among the critics, the result of which is an invisibility of Irish girls' culture and Irish girlhood in critical accounts of the period. This invisibility is symptomatic of a more general representative elision of girlhood in Irish culture.”(214)

Cahill points to the marginalization of girlhood in the discourses of Irish nationalism where “the boy represents the idealized, heroic future of the nation and the woman the passive producer of this future”(214). She adds that the Irish feminist criticism of this aspect points to “this masculine impulse of Irish studies, which articulates a self-birthing national subject that is based on and sustained by the erasure of the maternal body”(214). Here, the female body has been given a place within nationalist discourse but without the accompaniment of any kind of female subjectivity. Over time, the identity of the Irish began to be examined in the commercial sphere with an explosion of concerns surrounding sexuality, fashion and consumerism. She says that,

“The articulations of girlhood, nationality, and the commercial that emerge in Meade’s work are complex, varied, and often contradictory. Irish girls populate many of Meade’s novels, and their representations negotiate a range of assumptions and associations surrounding Irishness and girlhood in the period. The Irish girls in her school stories owe much to late-nineteenth-century stereotypes of Irishness, particularly Mathew Arnold’s sentimental feminine Celt and the exaggerated brogue of stage Irishry. They are often wild, rebellious, frank in speech, unruly in manners, and overemotional, and their English counterparts in the stories are both attracted to and repelled by them for these reasons.”(217)

In French’s novel, the female characters are frank and outspoken with the exception of Becca and Selene who only tend to confide their innermost thoughts in the company of their friends. French has attempted to foreground the rich interiority of her characters where the focus alternates between the spectacle of their girlhood and its secrecy. The interactions of the girls are filled with warmth and candour which can nevertheless lend itself to a sharpness whenever required. Here, the contemporary setting of the novel becomes important as the girls are navigating the exposure provided by social media which the characters of Meade’s novels would not have had to. However, both Meade and French portray Irish girlhood as effective agents of disruption in their school. The insidious ways in which girls hurt each other at St. Kilda’s reveals the inability of their prim and proper school to contain the darker impulses of the girls.

Moreover, the preoccupation and dissection of pop culture by French's characters and their deep investment in fashion and consumerism is an attempt by French to look into the contemporary spaces provided to the Irish girl in her process of self-assertion and need for visibility. The sense of social and cultural anxiety around these spaces is examined through the lens of sexuality by French. The modern Irish girl is bold but still beholden to the unwritten codes that determine her powers of femininity and seduction. Though French does not explicitly look into the link between nation and gender; she does examine Irish masculinity within the scope of its relation and response to Irish girlhood. The boys at Colm's are raucous, sex obsessed and are also bound by similar unwritten codes that determine the validity of their masculinity as performed in front of their female counterparts. Hence, both the female and male characters in French's novel are playing a delicate dance to impress the other but without exposing the raw need for attention beneath it; that would be uncool and unacceptable.

All the themes and features presented in the chosen texts attempt to make the reader understand the complexities of female friendship yet every woman can recognize something of their own life in the experiences of these fictional girls/friends. The only qualification is to have been a girl who was friends with another girl; of being a woman who is friends with another woman. Through their writing, I would like to argue that these women writers have enabled stories, which were written about a specific time and place, to invoke and explore universal emotions experienced by all women. Stories about women and written by women are relevant in any age but the relevance of female friendship is in its life changing and eternal nature- these girls/friends are me and my friends; they are my cousins and nieces and they will be my children too.

Chapter Two: Becoming Girls

Margarida Morgado in her essay *Girls are not "ordinary": Some priorities of contemporary fictional autobiographies of girlhood* says that the ways of "fictionalizing the self as a young female child and modes of "packaging" the girl in fiction are taken as conventions by which authors and cultures as well as societies aim at defining girls' roles in society"(110). By examining how female friendships have been written in literature and that too, overwhelmingly by men, we have seen that this concept has been explored by writers in the form that is most conveniently accessible to them: mother-daughter relationships. The emphasis on adolescence as a separate category has meant that over time, the role of the female friend has become a means to interpret girl culture and vice versa. In the case of children's fiction; it is not necessary for the girl to grow up into a woman and the emphasis on pre-teen or teenage characters is aided by the rigorous absence or marginalization of adults within the narrative. However, in all the texts that will be examined in this thesis except *The Secret Place*, the girls of these novels mature into women and the narrative is written from the latter's point of view which Morgado calls "autobiographical treatment" to define the life-writing as depicted in fiction and in the lives of fictional characters(110). Such portrayal of life-writing as represented in the chosen texts are clearly engaged with the concept of female friendship as a complex, life changing and challenging relationship and the biggest question associated with it is the role of female friendship in the formation of identity for the female subject. Who are we without our female friends? Ferrante, Cline, Thorpe and French place this question at the center of their texts for their female readers in particular. The answer to this question for these authors requires sweeping personal histories of the girls/friends and hence we are treated to multiple examples of the bildungsroman whereas French chooses to portray female adolescence as a microcosm housing the dark secrets that will influence the kind of women these girls might one day become. Fiction in the nineteenth century portrayed girls who are naive and chase after fantasies which are discarded once they reach adulthood and with it, as commonly believed, maturity. This idea has been challenged by fiction from the twentieth century onwards where girls freely reinvent themselves and express themselves through a multiplicity of selves. Consequently, the focus has shifted from writing about girlhood as a means to recover memories and resurrect forgotten or misunderstood relations in search of a bigger, better endeavour of self-growth. Now, as in the

case of the contemporary fiction selected for this thesis, the emphasis is on observing the experience of girlhood as the site of identity formation which is linked to the performance of femininity that is demanded of all girls.

I will first examine Ferrante's treatment of the friendship and girlhood primarily through the first book which explores their lives from the ages of six to sixteen. For Elena and Lila, their friendship is immediately marked by the spaces they share- their neighbourhood and then school. But it all began the day they decided to climb up the dark stairs to the door of Don Achille's apartment, the notorious figure that all children and adults of the neighbourhood were afraid of; in order to retrieve Elena's doll (Tina) that Lila had thrown down the cellar of Don Achille's apartment. The girls enjoyed playing on the two sides of a barred basement window of Don Achille's house and relished the darkness and cold air that came from the cellar. They played with their dolls, Tina and Nu and threw rocks into the cellar through the grating; enjoying the sound as they hit bottom. This space belonged to only them as well as the terror and uncertainty it invoked in them. As Elena says in *My Brilliant Friend*, "We didn't trust the light on the stones, on the buildings, on the scrubland beyond the neighbourhood, on the people inside and outside their houses. We imagined the dark corners, the feelings repressed but always close to exploding. And to those shadowy mouths, the caverns that opened beyond them under the buildings, we attributed everything that frightened us in the light of day. Don Achille, for example, was not only in his apartment on the top floor but also down below, a spider among spiders, a rat among rats, a shape that assumed all shapes"(31). The dolls also symbolize the idea even though the girls are experiencing their childhood, they create terrifying stories about the people and places around them, because of the environment they live in. It was easier for the girls, who were growing up amidst the everyday violence of their village, to transfer the unpleasantness of their surroundings into their imagination where Don Achille was a monster with fangs; ready to devour rocks and young girls alike. Though Don Achille turned out to be human, he became a small part of the girls' scheme to test each other's courage and resolve. Elena and Lila would play this game all their lives. When Lila drops Elena's doll into the cellar and when the latter responds in kind, it presents how what happens to one will always affect the fortunes of the other. Through the act of play, Ferrante foreshadows the risks that these girls would take in their future where they continuously challenged each other and supported and sabotaged each other's dreams and ambitions in equal measure. They develop an intense mutual dependency and also resent each

other for it. This begins their process of finding out who they are as people but it seems that it cannot be accomplished without the active presence of the other.

An example of this is provided in the incident that led to their very first physical contact and in the process, their first introduction outside of their shared first grade classroom. Lila had immediately impressed Elena, as the latter recounts their school days in *My Brilliant Friend*, "because she was very bad"(31). What astonished Elena was not that Lila was disobedient towards the teacher or that she threw inky pieces of paper at her classmates but that she was defiant and was not frightened of punishment. It was as if the effect of Lila's alluring defiance even consumed the threats of the adults around her and nullified them as Maestra Oliviero, their teacher, injured herself in the process of threatening Lila with punishment for her mischief. To Elena, she offered a strange sense of protection and also possessed something else that Elena lacked - a strong will. The fact that Lila was "always bad" and that she could do anything without hesitation made her appealing to Elena and perplexed everyone else(32). Thus, when a gang of boys threw rocks at the girls, angry as Elena says, "because we were smarter than them"(33), Lila not only dodged the rocks with an elegance that awed Elena but also fought back which bewildered the boys and Elena joins in to help Lila. Eventually, in order to force her to retreat, Elena grabbed Lila's arm and it was an "abrupt, frightened contact" which nevertheless changed everything between them(35). This dramatic introduction of the girls to each other would set the tone for the war of words that would continue between them for decades. The girls had already begun to realize that they were a cut above the rest in school and as they identified each other as intellectual rivals; for each of them, the actions of the other became a yardstick to measure their own success and also happiness. Their eerie yet intense and unspoken mutual dependency is often destructive but is always intimate. Both found allies as well as rivals in each other. For Elena, her desire for love and attention was satisfied by most people around her but the most notable exception was her mother. Her mother's crude dialect and limping gait embarrassed and frightened Elena. As she narrates in the first book, the repulsion gradually became mutual : "At home I was my father's favourite, and my brothers and sister, too, loved me. 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."(44). Her mother became in Elena's mind, the

extension of the gruesome, barren landscape of the neighbourhood which was empty of promise and opportunity.

The only way for these girls to escape the bleak neighbourhood was to study diligently but that opportunity too, was dictated by the decisions and presumptions of the adults. However, their drive to be the best and their fierce ambition to out perform each other in class distinguish Elena and Lila from most characters that in girls' fiction where ordinariness and under development is a vehicle to promote the idea that girls can grow into the desirable role of what a woman is supposed to be if given the proper attention and care. Hence, the average nature of Jane Eyre becomes an asset in a way that is not seen in male characters because her plainness allows her to be patient and caring towards others. However, Ferrante's characters ignite the feelings of subordination and rebellion as a response to no one else but each other. Lila's fierce intellect becomes the fuel that powers Elena's own aspirations and prompts her to confront her compliance when faced with the strong determination of Lila's character. Lila's arrival at school makes her the best student, demoting Elena to second place in tests as well as in the affections of Maestra Oliviero, their teacher. As Elena narrates in the first book, the effect of such a development was heightened by the fact that it was took place at her safe haven, the school, where until now, as the best student, her confidence was nourished with praise. She says this about Maestra Oliviero, "She urged me on with encouraging words, she praised my blonde girls, and thus reinforced in me a wish to do well: completely the opposite of my mother, who, at home, so often rebuked me, sometimes abusively"(45). Elena adds, "What that demotion caused inside me I don't know, I find it difficult to say, today, faithfully and clearly what I felt. Perhaps nothing at first, some jealousy, like everyone else. But surely it was then that a worry began to take shape."(46). This worry would cause Elena to identify Lila as her double/nemesis but also as her friend, so that the spectre of failure and rebuke that Elena saw in her mother's life, could be eliminated by the challenge and inspiration that Lila provided. As Elena narrates, "I decided that I had to model myself on that girl, never let her out of my sight, even if she got annoyed and chased me away."(46).

Ferrante here uses the rivalry of the girls to assert the hybrid identities that come to the forefront in their girlhood. The girlhood of Elena is also Lila's and vice versa but it also belongs to Carmela and the other girls they have grown up with in the neighbourhood. The performance of

femininity is presented by Ferrante in the often conscious but in also the unconscious relating of the girls to each other. The unique bonding between Elena and Lila requires a female psyche that helps the other to be each other's creative strength and can also make them feel as one entity to the reader. This is seen in the twist at the end of the first book, where it is Elena and not Lila who takes the title of the 'brilliant friend' instead of Lila as anticipated by the reader according to the narrative build up provided by the narrator, Elena, herself. Ferrante like the other writers chosen for this thesis, vividly present that girlhood is the site that showcases the rich interiority of women's lives. They present femininity as a set of symptoms - the recipients of brutal violence, the reduced autonomy and lack of visibility or systemic marginalization. In these novels, femininity is a condition that these girls must endure to simply survive in a world that is consistently harmful for their identity formation. Here, their girlhood is the space where the recognition of such harm takes place and is then confronted with the desire to rebel against it. It is important to note here that even as Elena and Lila shined in the classroom; the intense competition propels the idea that these two girls would always be tethered to each other. As Elena narrates in the first book, "I devoted myself to studying and to many things that were difficult, alien to me, just so I could keep pace with that terrible, dazzling girl. Dazzling to me. To our classmates Lila was only terrible. From first grade to fifth, she was, because of the principal and partly also because of Maestra Oliviero, the most hated child in the school and the neighbourhood."(47). The class competitions that were held to determine the best student and therefore by extension, the best teacher, pitted Elena and Lila against each other and the other students where Elena felt that it was important for her to win but to feel joy or satisfaction at the result was not given importance. As girls, Elena in particular, felt the need to downplay her joy at her competence because pride is an undesirable quality that makes one unfeminine. This is one of the lessons of girlhood that Elena had to indirectly learn where she can only show her talent "without overdoing it, without humiliating either teachers or students"(47). In Lila's case, her volatile nature led to unpredictable behaviour where she oscillated between mischief making and effortless excellence. This worsened her reputation in school just because of how easily she bested everyone else while showing none of the discipline and diligence that was demanded by the teachers and enforced on her fellow students. "Lila was too much for anyone."(48). She had none of the consideration that Elena possessed nor did she have the desire to appeal to anyone. As Elena says, "To recognize her virtuosity was for us children to admit that we would never win

and so there was no point in competing, and for the teachers to confess to themselves that they had been mediocre children. 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."(48) However, as soon Elena realized, the hatred for Lila was shown more openly by the boys. The class contests became a medium for Maestra Oliviero to specifically flaunt the girls' skills before boys and she particularly relished their defeat at the hands of her two best students. Maestra Oliviero was perhaps teaching the girls that unless they strive to be better than the boys from the very beginning; they will be tormented forever. In the Neapolitan village that they inhabit, this becomes figuratively and literally true. The codes of Italian machismo were already well imbibed by the older boys who were crushed by Lila's performance in a class competition and therefore decided to punish her by throwing rocks at her and Elena, who also did better than them. The effect of male violence as well as the emotional violence that girls inflict upon each other will be fully examined in Chapter six.

Catherine Driscoll in her essay *Nowhere to Go, Nothing to Do: Place, Desire and Country Girlhood* discusses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the habitus which is a personal orientation in the world carried through later experiences and produced in the experience of particular conditions"(55). They add that education "although significant, reinforces and gives additional meaning to differences already learned, while offering minute variations on them. But there is room within this idea for wanting something other than what one has been offered. Education serves to legitimize what will count as desirable aspirations (or pretensions) at a level imagined beyond the local"(55). Girlhood for Elena and Lila is the stage where they must perform according to the rules of femininity amid the constant threat of violence that is present in their neighbourhood. The feuds between children included more or less the same brutality as the conflicts between the adults featuring obscenities, insults, fist fights and spilling of blood. Here, through Lila's wildness and aggression, Ferrante presents the idea that women and girls are also capable of brutal violence but that at its heart, it is both the cause and consequence of gender inequality. Elena, on the other hand, is at first the keen observer who notes that it is the fury of women can be more dangerous and unsettling. As she narrates in the first book, "while men were always getting furious, they calmed down in the end; women, who appeared to be silent, acquiescent, when they were angry flew into a rage that had no end."(38)

The academic duel between the second graders Elena and Lila and the fourth graders, Nino Sarratore(Elena's first love), Enzo Scanno and Don Achille's son, Alfonso Caracci is presented as symptomatic of the larger conflicts of the neighbourhood. Of these three boys, only Nino and Alfonso were considered by the girls themselves as their intellectual enemies. Enzo, the son of a fruit and vegetable seller, was the class dunce and a delinquent and hence, not counted as a opponent for the girls until he unexpectedly showed sparks of brilliance during the duel. Over multiple rounds of arithmetic questions, Elena was defeated by Alfonso whereas Lila, to her friend's astonishment was holding back her skills when up against Alfonso. Elena would later attribute this to the unwritten rule of the neighbourhood which is to not offend Don Achille or his family in any way. The fear was the result of the neighbourhood being governed by criminals and loan sharks like Don Achille. Ultimately, Elena would outsmart Alfonso and Enzo and the latter, already unpopular with the girls for his aggression, sought a solution through physical violence leaving her with a bleeding head. This cycle would continue with Alfonso's older brother Stefano threatening Lila and her brother Rino, providing a retaliation. Enzo, as the son of a fruit and vegetable seller whose parents sold their produce from a cart, is also punished by Stefano for daring to compete with Alfonso which shows that rampant class inequality fostered a culture of male violence. An important effect of this duel is Elena's realization in the first book that Lila's mercurial nature contributed to her beauty even though "she was skinny, like a salted anchovy" and "she gave off an odor of wildness"(52). However, something changed in her when her abilities were challenged. As Elena narrates, "when she decided to vanquish both Alfonso and Enzo, she had lighted up like a holy warrior" with "cheeks flushed, the sign of a flame released by every corner of her body, and for the first time I thought: Lila is prettier than I am. So I was second in everything. I hoped no one would ever recognize it"(52).

Ferrante's treatment of the female body presents how when caught between violence and economic privation; the female body wears the aftermath of that conflict. When Lila was attacked by Enzo and left with a gash on her head; it was Enzo who, to the surprise of the girls, began to cry and left the scene. However, Lila would parade her bandaged head as a badge of honour. Her determination to be the best student had given her a scar as a reward. However, this incident would spur Lila to test Elena's courage such as the case with the incident of them attempting to retrieve their dolls from Don Achille's cellar. Ferrante presents the two girls as not just the victims of violence but also as its the participants. They would not perpetrate the same

kind of violence done to them but they would engage in warfare that would inform the nature of their girlhood and later womanhood. In their girlhood, even before they understand the changes occurring in their bodies, the corporeality of their mothers is distasteful to them. This is apparent in the hate and fear that Elena feels towards her mother. Her mother's crude dialect, wandering eye and her limp contain a cruelty that is directed towards Elena which presents a conflict ridden portrayal of motherhood. This would be further explored when Elena and Lila experience motherhood themselves where the idea of mothering is linked to animosity and violence. This theme will be examined in detail in Chapter five. However, Elena's mother is not the nurturing, caring stereotypical figure and therefore, her body wears this truth as her physical deficiency. During conflicts regarding school expenses and when the girls play truant and Elena is caught by her mother; she beats Elena brutally and compels her husband to do the same, questioning his masculinity, if he hesitates to do so. Lila's parents on the other hand, did not even notice that she had been gone for hours. In the grim neighbourhood, the body mirrors the changes taking over the lives and reality of its inhabitants. Here, the beauty of girls is a marker of class and an increase in wealth is portrayed in the swollen, ruddy cheeks of the adults. The poor have weathered hands like that of Lila's shoemaker father and her mother's face carries acne scars. Elena's tidy appearance masks her dissatisfaction with her circumstances whereas the dirty, skinny and bruised Lila is the product of the tension and turmoil that fills the air of the neighbourhood. The girlhood of these girls also provides lessons as to how power and influence, no matter how small, when flaunted before those who have none, will always be uncontested. An example is provided in the way the neighbourhood changes during the middle school years of the girls when Italy was, in the mid 1950s, undergoing industrialization which would transform the suburbs. As Elena narrates in the first book, Marcello Solara, the wealthiest bachelor and his brother Michele, "bought a blue and white Fiat 1100 and on Sundays paraded around the streets of the neighbourhood"(107). The car of the Solara brothers is a symbol of the prosperity being sought by the younger generation even as the older generation clings to old-fashioned values such as when Lila's father rejects her idea of expanding her father's business by making handmade shoes instead of simply repairing them. The murder of Don Achille lifted his poisonous shadow from the neighbourhood as pastry shops flourished and grocery stores appeared "filled with good things that spilled onto the sidewalk too" run by Don Achille's widow and her son, Stefano who was "no longer the wild boy who had threatened to pierce Lila's tongue

but a self-possessed young man, his gaze charming, his smile gentle"(108). As Elena adds, "everything was quivering, arching upward as if to change its characteristics, not to be known by the accumulated hatreds, tensions, ugliness but, rather to show a new face"(109).

The new developments around the two girls would coincide with the tumultuous changes happening to their bodies. When Elena gets her period, she is terrified of getting scolded by her mother, washes her stained underwear and puts them back on wet. Here, the onset of puberty itself and menstruation is presented as an example of how terrible the humiliation of being a female can be. Confused and dazed by her predicament, Elena runs into Carmela and Lila and it is the former who reassures Elena that she is not dying. Lila had not yet gotten her period unlike the other two and this knowledge seemed to make Elena accept her new condition more firmly. "Suddenly she seemed small, smaller than I had ever seen her. She was three or four inches shorter, all skin and bones, very pale in spite of the days spent outside. And she had failed. And she didn't know what the blood was. And no boy had ever made a declaration to her."(94) For these girls, their bodies become weapons to wage battles against one another. Here, for Elena, the milestones of their girlhood was handled like a shameful inconvenience without enthusiasm or any clarification from the adults. Here, femininity is presented as a burden - the curse of the first period for Elena and the deafening absence of it, for Lila. Another example of this burden is seen in the unease that Elena feels about her own maturing body. She feels guilty about her ample bosom which was exacerbated by her mother's disdain for her daughter's changing body. As Elena says in the first book, she worked harder than ever at her studies but struggled to produce the expected results and the her crisis of insecurity took root through its most basic form for girls - her teenage body.

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

She further describes the way girls are made to feel ashamed of their own bodies and their ownership of it is negated by its links to family, community and especially in Elena's Italian neighbourhood, to religion. "My mother said was indecent 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 questions before she turned her back and walked away with her lopsided gait. The bra made my chest even more noticeable."(102). The treatment of femininity in Ferrante's novels is done with a surgical precision that presents the urgency of emotion felt by these girls as they come to the terrible realization that their bodies and their sexuality does not solely belong to them. When Gino, the son of the local pharmacist, pays Elena to get a glimpse of her chest, she adopts a Lila-like bravado to feel, she says, "for the first time the magnetic force that my body exercised over men, but above all I realized that Lila acted not only on Carmela but also on me like a demanding ghost"(97). Mimicking Lila's behaviour was a way for Elena to deal with conflict because at this point, Elena clung to Lila like her life source while also hating the control she was giving up. "I had made a place for in me"; Elena's life in middle school lacked the thrilling yet toxic presence of Lila, who eventually dropped out of school to repair and design shoes at her father's shop.(97) If Lila was needed to lend her light to Elena, Lila's work at the shoe shop confused Elena about the path her friend had been forced to take and made her envious too. Elena feel that her getting an education paled before Lila's devotion to and rapture about her trade as if Elena was "excluded from a rare privilege"(99). Here, Lila in Elena's eyes, was basking in her own bubble as a creator of things whereas Elena was trying hard to excel in studies to prove to herself and to Lila, that she can remain visible even if separated from Lila. She finds common ground with Carmela over their first period and the latter responds with how she is madly in love with Alfonso, Don Achille's son, which shows how these different young women create bonds with another with the sharing of whispered secrets and intimate knowledge even though the entire ordeal of their ordeal of their girlhood is fraught with nuisances.

One such significant fallout of the burden of femininity that these girls have to face, is the attention of boys. Like the incident with Gino, another incident presents the bitter truth of being a girl, where even if a girl has no control over how boys respond to her body, she is solely responsible for the consequences of that response. Ada Cappuccio, who at fourteen put on her mother's lipstick in secret and went out was dragged into their new car by the Solara brothers who returned her an hour later to the same spot they had had taken her from; "and Ada was little angry, but also laughing"(113). Ferrante's sharp yet compressed writing style has the effect of

revealing that a monstrous assault has taken place but at the same time, there is uncertainty surrounding its full impact. Though Ada was assaulted, her laugh says to the onlooker, that she enjoyed something about the ride. This chilling example presents how violence and sex are inextricably linked in its most extreme form and in other cases, is defined by the "pleasure-fear" of male attention that grips girlhood (114). Elena was drawn to this "pleasure-fear" which enabled her to forget her disgust at her own body. The attention of handsome men made her body seem more real, her curves made visible by their covetous gaze and herein, according to Ferrante, lies the biggest tragedy of girlhood and the performance of femininity.

Elena had earlier politely declined, against her desire to appeal herself towards the Solara brothers, the same offer of getting a ride in a car in fear of being seen by someone, of her father finding out the facts or worse, of rumours embellishing the facts. Elena already knew that these were the unwritten rules of her community governing her body and her self but she hadn't yet learnt to hate these unfair expectations imposed upon her gender. The car is presented as a site of sexual transgression for Elena and of violence in Ada's case; but in both cases, only the girls are meant to be punished by the destruction of their reputation. The girls were divided over what had happened to Ada with Elena's understanding that the Solaras were at fault heavily affected by the "fact that they were very handsome and it was impossible not to imagine the impression we would make sitting next to one of them in the car"(114). Only Lila seemed to comprehend the full horror of sexual assault and its link to class inequality. To Lila, it was evident that Ada was attacked because she was poor while no man bothered Don Achille's daughter, whose family possessed wealth and had ties to the mob. However, according to Elena, Lila had rejected the "pleasure-fear" of experiencing the gaze of the Solaras because "she wasn't as developed" as the other girls including herself; meaning that Lila's flat chest and scrawny figure made her an outsider, the undesirable one. However, the first book ends with the irony of Lila at sixteen, finally maturing in her appearance and wielding her sexuality as a weapon. As Elena moves onto high school, the now extremely beautiful Lila focuses her energy in achieving her independence. She comes up with the idea of designing shoes and setting up a shoe factory which is vehemently opposed by her father. Her only support is her brother who also understood the nature of the power that comes with financial success, albeit differently than his sister who wanted the protection of wealth to substitute the knife she kept with her as a shield against men like the Solara brothers. Lila's iron clad determination even when she had so much to despair about,

made her magnetic not only to Elena but also to the men of her neighbourhood. The shoes represent Lila's desire to create something amazing and the Cerullo shoes, not unlike Lila's first attempt at a novel, is a means to express herself to the world. She devotes herself to painstakingly crafting dress shoes for men with Rino while being courted by two men - Marcello Solara, the local loan shark and mobster whom she despises and Stefano Carracci, the wealthy owner of the local grocery store and Don Achille's son. The need for investors to support Lila's business venture puts both her and her family under the sway of Marcello and later Stefano. The latter endeavours to produce Lila's designs and purchases the first pair of Cerullo shoes which leads Lila to marry him, despite her doubts that he is using her talent for his own personal gain. However, Stefano breaks his promise to Lila on the eve of their wedding and betrays his participation in the social and political violence of the neighbourhood by inviting Marcello to the wedding, against her explicit request. She also discovers that the man she most hates, the one who used his mob connections to threaten her into marrying him is wearing the pair of shoes that Lila spent years making and the ones that were purchased by Stefano. This last image of the first book presents how in a bid to achieve her dreams, Lila ends up losing everything. Her defeat puts her in a position, she always wanted to avoid - under the control of men. By giving Marcello Lila's prized shoes; Stefano had also thrown her away at him - to be possessed and to be contained. Through Stefano's betrayal, Ferrante presents the idea that exposing one's true self such as when Lila falls in love, renders the female subject vulnerable in a way that allows society to savour her allure and her gifts before destroying their value.

This vulnerability resurfaces again when in the third book, Lila must risk it all and leave Stefano due to his abusive nature and his infidelity. The codes of Italian masculinity determine that Lila is the one who must be judged harshly because her courage is only going to be the origin of more trouble for herself. As Elena narrates in the third book, Lila is not spared judgment even by Nino, her former lover.

"Then out of the blue he asked me: "Are you living in Naples again?" "For now, yes." "In the neighborhood?" "Yes." "I've broken conclusively with my father, and I don't see anyone in my family." "Too bad." "It's better that way. I'm just sorry not to have any news of Lina." For a moment I thought I'd been wrong, that Lila had never gone out of his life, that he had come to the bookstore not for me but only to find out about her. Then I said to myself: if he had really

wanted to find out about Lila, in so many years he would have found a way, and I reacted violently, in the sharp tone of someone who wants to end the subject quickly: “She left her husband and lives with someone else.” “Did she have a boy or a girl?” “A boy.” He made a grimace of displeasure and said: “Lina is brave, even too brave. But she doesn’t know how to submit to reality, she’s incapable of accepting others and herself. Loving her was a difficult experience.” “In what sense?” “She doesn’t know what dedication is.”(18)

Elena and Nino continue, ““Maybe you’re exaggerating.” “No, she’s really made badly: in her mind and in everything, even when it comes to sex.” Those last words— even when it comes to sex —struck me more than the others. So Nino’s judgment on his relationship with Lila was negative? So he had just said to me, disturbingly, that that opinion included even the sexual arena? I stared for some seconds at the dark outlines of Adele and her friend walking ahead of us. The disturbance became anxiety, I sensed that even when it comes to sex was a preamble, that he wished to become still more explicit. Years earlier, Stefano, after his marriage, had confided in me, had told me about his problems with Lila, but he had done so without ever mentioning sex—no one in the neighborhood would have in speaking of the woman he loved. It was unthinkable, for example, that Pasquale would talk to me about Ada’s sexuality, or, worse, that Antonio would speak to Carmen or Gigliola about my sexuality. Boys might talk among themselves—and in a vulgar way, when they didn’t like us girls or no longer liked us—but among boys and girls no. I guessed instead that Nino, the new Nino, considered it completely normal to discuss with me his sexual relations with my friend. I was embarrassed, I pulled back. Of this, too, I thought, I must never speak to Lila, and meanwhile I said with feigned indifference: water under the bridge, let’s not be sad, let’s go back to you, what are you working on, what are your prospects at the university, where do you live, by yourself? But I certainly overdid it; he must have felt that I had made a quick escape. He smiled ironically, and was about to answer. But we had arrived at the restaurant, and we went in.”(19)

Here, Elena is burdened with the possibilities of sexual awakening that open up to her because of Nino's boldness. In Elena's mind, Lila could certainly speak up like this. Perhaps she had boldly told Nino of her desires when they were together. For Lila, who did not let the stares of others penetrate through her shield of defiant selfhood; it could have been nothing new. But not for Elena, the one who nurtured her crush on Nino for years and let it simmer on a low flame. The

arrogance and hypocrisy that lies behind Nino's statement about Lila is unmistakable. That she is made badly denigrates Lila to an object of sexual gratification. She is being perceived through the lens of male desire which then finds her unsatisfactory. This makes Elena recollect her time with Donato, Nino's father at the beach at Ischia. Was she meant to be satisfactory then? Why do the men get to decide? These questions are not sufficiently answered for Elena who looks at Nino with the peculiar sentiment of longing and criticality. If women are judged by the men they desire, then what does this say about Elena? As Elena narrates in the third book,

"I realized the offensiveness of those words; I should have rebuked him. From that mistaken sex, I should have said to him, from an experience of which you now express a negative opinion, came a child, little Gennaro, who is very intelligent: it's not nice for you to talk like that, you can't reduce the question to who is made badly and who is made well. Lila ruined herself for you. And I made up my mind: when I get rid of Adele and her friend, when he walks me to the hotel, I'll return to the subject and tell him."(23)

Elena's decision to marry Pietro reveals the ardent desire to reach such lofty heights where the likes may not be able to reach her and attempt to her. She linked the vulgarity of her words with the stench of Naples that she wanted to leave behind. She says in the third book,

"Time, as in all things, was decisive. Nino would last a single night, he would leave me in the morning. Even though I had known him forever, he was made of dreams, and holding on to him forever would have been impossible: he came from childhood, he was constructed out of childish desires, he had no concreteness, he didn't face the future. Pietro, on the other hand, was of the present, massive, a boundary stone. He marked a land new to me, a land of good reasons, governed by rules that originated in his family and endowed everything with meaning."(25)

Elena adds, "No, I did not want to lose him. Never mind if my nature, coarse in spite of the education I had had, was far from his rigor, if I honestly didn't know how I would stand up to all that geometry. He gave me the certainty that I was escaping the opportunistic malleability of my father and the crudeness of my mother. So I forced myself to repress the thought of Nino, I took Pietro by the arm, I murmured, yes, let's get married as soon as possible, I want to leave home, I want to get a driver's license, I want to travel, I want to have a telephone, a television, I've never

had anything. And he at that point became cheerful, he laughed, he said yes to everything I randomly asked for."(26)

Here, Elena is setting aside passion for something more manageable; an intellectual challenge. She is more comfortable viewing her marriage as an intellectual problem which has given her rewards for her effort. Ferrante, here, presents a female subject who is actively seeking spaces for her self-narrative. And in doing so, Elena, finds resistance from the corner she has always received hatred from--her mother. As opposed to Elena's quest for individuality, her mother's survival depends on her relational status to others. No matter how far Elena may aspire to flee, she will always be her mother's daughter. As Elena narrates in the third book,

"She attacked me in very low but shrill tones, hissing with reddened eyes: We are nothing to you, you tell us nothing until the last minute, the young lady thinks she's somebody because she has an education, because she writes books, because she's marrying a professor, but my dear, you came out of this belly and you are made of this substance, so don't act superior and don't ever forget that if you are intelligent, I who carried you in here am just as intelligent, if not more, and if I had had the chance I would have done the same as you, understand? Then, on the crest of her rage, she first reproached me saying that because I had left, and thought only of myself, my siblings hadn't done well in school, and then asked me for money, or, rather, demanded it: she needed it to buy a decent dress for Elisa and to fix up the house a bit, since I was forcing her to receive my fiancé. I passed over my siblings' lack of success in school. The money, on the other hand, I gave her right away, even if it wasn't true that she needed it for the house—she continually asked for money, any excuse would do. Although she had never said so explicitly, she still couldn't accept the fact that I kept my money in a post-office savings account, that I hadn't handed it over to her as I always had, ever since I first took the stationer's daughters to the beach, or worked in the bookstore on Via Mezzocannone. Maybe, I thought, by acting as if my money belonged to her she wants to convince me that I myself belong to her, and that, even if I get married, I will belong to her forever."(27)

This concluding sentiment is however, not without its share of irony. Elena's as a daughter is only because she is someone to be controlled; not trusted and definitely not listened to. Elena's decision to eschew a religious ceremony and marry in a civil ceremony is something that Pietro, her fiance, is adamant about and it is precisely because of that reason that Elena's family

reluctantly agrees. A wedding officiated by a priest can also come to naught says her father amidst the raging fury of his wife. The culprit here is Lila, who in their eyes, could not capitalize on the blessings that come with a proper wedding and a party. As Elena narrates in the third book,

"Although she wasn't religious, my mother lost control and, leaning toward me, red in the face, began yelling insults at me. She shouted that the marriage was worthless if the priest didn't say that it was valid. She shouted that if I didn't get married before God I would never be a wife but only a whore, and, despite her lame leg, she almost flew as she went to wake my father, my siblings, to let them know what she had always feared, that too much education had ruined my brain, that I had had all the luck and yet I was treated like a whore, that she would never be able to go out of the house because of the shame of having a godless daughter. My father, stunned, in his underwear, and my siblings sought to understand what other trouble they had to deal with because of me, and tried to calm her, but in vain. She shouted that she wanted to throw me out of the house immediately, before I exposed her, too, her, too, to the shame of having a concubine daughter like Lila and Ada."(28)

Elena's parents trust Pietro's intentions because he is a professor and educated even though their daughter has the same intellectual faculties but in their eyes, can never be trusted to use them. It is alright if he chose her; Elena's choice was not asked for and did not matter. This usurpation and negation of the female subject's choices would be further explored by Ferrante in the third and fourth books which becomes essential to understand the inscrutable choices that each of the friends make for themselves and for each other.

Emma Cline's novel presents the stagnating environment of the suburban Petaluma City in California in 1969 to demonstrate the protagonist, Evie Boyd's desperation to do and experience something outside of what is expected of her - by her mother and by society. Before Evie embarks on her summer adventure of recklessness where she is drawn into a cult loosely based on the Charles Manson family; Evie has already come to understand that femininity is a marker of weakness. Cline's writing presents how the objectification of girls begins early and patriarchal society and pop culture aided by the media are the culprits. However, Cline introduces the reader to Evie as a middle-aged woman who decades after that summer is out of a job and crashing at her old friend Dan's deserted house. Her solitary existence is disrupted by the arrival of Dan's

twenty year old son, Julian and his much younger teenage girlfriend, Sasha, who recognize her name in relation to a murderous cult led by the Manson like figure of Russell Hadrick and their headline-making killing spree in 1969. As Evie answers questions to satisfy their morbid curiosity, she observes Julian and Sasha's unequal relationship which makes her reflect on her own life and the abusive control of male power that shaped her girlhood. Evie's frustration with her colourless, bland girlhood is matched by her disappointment in her mother's neglect of her only child. Evie's mother, Jean, in an effort to deal with the pain of having being left by her husband for a younger woman, tries to fix herself and Evie so that the same fate doesn't befall her daughter. Jean's self-improvement was disguised self-policing and this female gaze is presented by Cline to demonstrate and examine the intangible forces that reinforce sexist gender roles. As Evie narrates her mother's search for newness, the reinvention that was meant to erase the shock of divorce instead alienated Jean from Evie. She says of her mother, "The ailment was vague, but the cure was specific. Her new friends massage. They suggested the briny waters of sensory deprivation tanks. They suggested E-meters, Gestalt, eating only high-mineral foods that had been planted during a full moon. I couldn't believe my mother took their advice, but she listened to everyone. Eager for an aim, a plan, believing the answer could come from any direction at any time, if only she tried hard enough."(29) Jean would attempt to transfer her rituals of self-management onto her already insecure daughter through suggestions of covering her hair with bangs to cover an unsightly pimple and educating her that her face only has one flattering side. Here, Cline, like Ferrante, presents the mother as the figure who indoctrinates the girl to accept gender norms and the figure who directly polices the young girl's performance of her gender.

Evie as a fourteen year old is painfully self-conscious, desperate for attention and approval, especially from the opposite sex and is envious of girls that look and act nothing like her. Her disdain at her mother's parody of femininity nevertheless leads her to do the same in order to flourish with the limits of patriarchy approved girlhood. Evie and her childhood friend Connie religiously follow the advice given in beauty magazines while Evie flirts and fantasizes about Connie's older brother, Peter. Like her mother, Evie too "waited to be told what was good about me"(28). Cline presents this affliction as being passed down from mother to daughter and will continue forever until women are liberated from the idea of happiness that lies in following the steps to apply face masks and waste hours at a writer's suggestion making smoothies to

strengthen hair. Cline demonstrates how women perpetuate the culture of self-policing which has been commercialized by mass media to erode the sense of self of young girls. Therefore, in this novel too, girlhood becomes the site of a prescribed femininity that girls must perform in order to seem, if not fully considered, to be acceptable. Evie is supposed to attend her mother's alma mater boarding school after the summer which in her eyes, is another strategy by the world, to transform her into another version of her needy and weak mother. The resentment towards such a future makes Evie seek thrills outside the confines of "the net of family, the purity of habit and home" where she felt that perhaps she was "confusing familiarity with happiness"(31).

An important aspect of Evie's reality that contributes to her desire to escape, literally, from her surroundings is her sense of spatial entrapment in the confines of her suburban neighbourhood. Even as a white, privileged young girl, Evie realizes that girlhood is going to be a game of difficult negotiations between desires and expectations and Evie sees her mother as a failure in this regard who remained too long in a space that was meant to only advance opportunities for men and consign women as the persistent presence in the home as caregiver and discipliner. This is seen in her father's "encouragements to eat more protein, to read Dickens or breathe more deeply"(37). The detachment and formality of her father did not stop Evie from pandering to his likes but it was her mother who paid the obvious price for being too good a follower. The suburb suited her so well that traces of her autonomy and of her daughter's began to be erased from their home. Jean became too malleable by packing lunches and as Evie says, the "times she stood at the window when my father was late coming home, trying to decode new meaning out of the empty driveway"(81). She adds, "I knew I should hate my father. But I only felt foolish. Embarrassed-not for him, but for my mother"(81). A teenage Evie provides a superficial assessment of her mother's predicament when her father begins an affair with his twenty something assistant(Tamar) but Cline's writing also exposes how even though dating a woman only a few years older than your daughter is textbook sexism; it is Evie's mother who should shoulder the shame and guilt of her husband's infidelity. In Evie's eyes, her mother's post-divorce deviation from parenting and love for bleached hair and yoga make her a pathetic figure parodying a kind of femininity that is meant to attract another man who will mend her self-worth. Cline presents how Jean when removed from marriage also ceases to be a mother and by not adequately fulfilling the role of motherhood, she ceases to exist as a person in Evie's eyes. It would only be years later that Evie would recognize that her mother was struggling to sustain

herself under the weight of criticality that adolescent Evie was experiencing in its nascent form in her girlhood. The seamless, protected and dull contours of her life make Evie mistake disruption for originality and by the time she meets Russell and Suzanne; this naiveté leads her to consider them as the people who will break the tedious rhythm of her monotonous life. When her mother gets a new boyfriend and she is rejected by Connie due to her attempts to attract Peter, Evie's desperation to be known, to be made visible in ways other than through her mother's nitpicking of her hair and skin care or through the sudden jolt of male attention. Both of these things made her feel unmoored from what her adult self later realizes as her sense of self-worth.

Evie's constant objectification of herself such as when she tucks in her shirt to show off her breasts to Peter and of other girls and women such as her description of Tamar, her father's girlfriend and Suzanne reveals that she constantly judges women on their appearance like a misogynistic man would and Cline has introduced a female speaker for language that is definitive of the 'male gaze'. As Evie narrates, "I looked at women with brutal and emotionless judgment. Assessing the slope of their breasts, imagining how they would look in various crude positions"(34). By making this oppressive gaze the possession of women and girls, Cline is arguing like the adult Evie that it is a tool of systematic repression that renders every female as a thing to be looked at and then judged. Evie compares herself to every other woman and girl but when it comes to Tamar, the intense physical scrutiny is accompanied with respect in the way because her mother or Suzanne, she is not in awe of the man in her life. Evie's bond with Tamar would later replace the one with Suzanne when she would be sent to live with her father as punishment for her escapades. But even before that, Evie subjected Tamar to her female gaze and found her pretty and therefore superior. Evie says, "Girls are the only ones who can really give each other close attention, the kind we equate with being loved. They noticed what we want noticed. And that's what I did for Tamar-I responded to her symbols, to the style of her hair and clothes and the smell of her L'Air du Temps perfume, like this was data that mattered, signs that reflected something of her inner self. I took her beauty personally."(34) Evie first meets Suzanne or as she only knew her then as the girl with the black hair, as the latter and a group of girls were rummaging through a dumpster for scraps of food before eventually stealing a chicken from a restaurant. Evie had been struck by Suzanne gaze, "frank, unapologetic" as though there had been a "subtle rearranging of air" between them(40). Suzanne was unlike the polished girls that Evie had seen in the magazines. She was dirty and wild with her own unsettling, magnetic gaze

which did not automatically make her an object for male consumption though Evie does succeed in sexualizing Suzanne as she notes the "cherry of the girl's single nipple" as she playfully exposed her breast in broad daylight.(40)

Evie's girlhood and her awakening sexuality are expressed with the idea that a girl has to constantly respond to male attention and accept the consequences for doing so. When Evie and Connie grow distant due to Evie's failure to act with the mix of desperation and nonchalance that is expected of young girls. As Evie was coming to grips with her sexuality, she had a harder time understanding the unsaid invitations of the opposite sex which were meant to make her happy or make her feel whatever she was supposed to feel. Cline presents how Evie and countless other girls undergo feelings of vulnerability, inadequacy and objectification under patriarchy enforced gender norms but the core of the tragedy lies in the idea that even if Evie is aware of her hypersensitivity under the male gaze; she cannot make the mistake of letting it show. One night Evie waits and follows Peter to his room half thrilled and half in anticipation of a sexual experience. She says, "Peter acted like he was going to sleep, the casual sigh and shuffle, but that kept the whole thing together. You had to act as if nothing strange were happening."(53) Evie's perplexing path towards understanding her own sexuality will be revealed again when she meets Russell and as she gives herself to this man, it becomes part of the plan to appeal herself to Suzanne who is the only object of her fascination. Both Ferrante and Cline represent girlhood as the site of femininity which is performed by girls as per the gendered norms sanctioned by patriarchy. The adulthood of the protagonists as shown in the novels by Ferrante, Cline and Thorpe will reveal how the narrators of the texts reflect on the idea that the process of erosion of their sense of self began early and was fully active during their girlhood.

In the case of Thorpe's novel, the dynamics between the two friends shape their approach towards self-identity and femininity. Mia, the narrator, has always seen her best friend Lorrie Ann as the quintessential good girl who always did the right thing whereas she in her own words possessed a "black heart" and was therefore unable to love as well as destined to be unloved.(10) However, it is Lorrie Ann whose moral centeredness made her stand out from her peers, who gets caught up in intangible forces that exist outside of her and shocks Mia with her life decisions. At fifteen, Lorrie Ann shows her loyalty and drives Mia to an abortion clinic but refuses to smash Mia's toe in order to provide her with an excuse to miss a softball game so Mia

does it herself. While Lorrie Ann cannot bear to see her friend in pain, Mia has collected unpleasant experiences like a shield against something unforeseen, something much worse. For Mia, the abortion itself is an addition to a series of bad decisions which left her mortified for being unprepared rather than being angry that the boy she had slept with could have deceived her. For these two girls, their girlhood in the surf community of the nineties is marked by the "distinctly unreal place " that they called home but no one had "any intention of staying"(19). Before the girls are separated from one another, Mia says, "Corona Del Mar was half empty, somewhat decayed and beautifully perfumed"(19). But the breezy facade of the neighbourhood paralleled the lives of the friends; they expected to leave this place eventually but till then some things could never change - like the fact that Lorrie Ann is the carrier of warmth and good fortune whereas Mia as the daughter of an absent father and an alcoholic mother only allows herself to feel responsible towards raising her two young step-brothers but never extends the same sentiment towards herself. The crucial divergence in their paths arises when Lorrie Ann too, finds herself accidentally pregnant, but has a different response to it as compared to Mia. Mia watches on in horror as Lorrie Ann becomes a wife and mother and a symbol of matrydom while she decides to leave Corona Del Mar to study Classics. Lorrie Ann is no longer the person she once was and this is deeply resented by Mia and the concept of female friendship is explored through the idea of what change can do to deep relationships refined in the fire of girlhood and the measures taken to restore them in adulthood.

Thorpe represents the question of the girls' identity formation by channeling it through the emotion of love. How the girls respond to this amorphous sentiment ends up defining the trajectory of their lives in a significant way. Lorrie Ann is not only beloved by her family but the entire community sees her family as occupying a sacred realm of happiness that it looks effortless to them. As Mia narrates, "Yes, we were jealous of her, and yet we did not hate her. She was never so much as teased by us, we roaming and bratty girls of Corona Del Mar, thieves of corn nuts and orange soda, abusers of lip gloss and of foul language, daughters to sham psychics and newly certified phlebotomists"(6). Lorrie Ann seemingly represented what the other girls could have been if only they had brothers who didn't bully them or had fathers who were decent men who wrote songs for their daughters. Mia's love for Lorrie Ann is a corrective for her own reduced sense of self which by default places Lorrie Ann on a pedestal aided by the fact that Mia is also the narrator. Like Ferrante and Cline, Thorpe introduces the idea of

relational self-definition where one character feels drawn in by the other's virtues till a crucial reversal allows for separation. Thorpe uses the theme of motherhood to illustrate what seem to be the fundamental differences in character and priorities that set the two friends apart. As Mia gets accepted to university and falls in love, Lorrie Ann finds herself as the widowed mother of a son with cerebral palsy. The tragic loss of her father spurs Lorrie Ann to attempt to do the right thing when faced with impossible choices. Mia was in part thankful that she didn't love the boy who had got her pregnant as if helped to add another layer of toughness to harden her resolve to not care. But the process of abortion itself had left a mark on her that she did not want acknowledged and the bits that did reveal were reserved for Lorrie Ann. As Mia says, "But I didn't want to admit that I needed coddling. I wanted to be tough, even violently blasé, about what had just happened, because maybe if I acted like it didn't matter, then it would actually matter less."(7) In contrast, Lorrie Ann replies that "I think I'd rather do it with someone I love"(10). However, three years later, when deciding to marry Jim, Lorrie Ann is unsure if she loves him and asks "But don't you learn to love someone?"(26). Here, one of the lessons that girlhood provides for Lorrie Ann is that love does not constitute of overbearing feelings but is instead an emotion that requires sane thought and compassion. She believed that her father's early, mindless death was a result of her not being a good enough person or for not taking her blessings seriously which meant that she was afraid to do anything that might bring senseless bad luck into her life again and therefore she accepts marriage and motherhood at eighteen and this changes the trajectory of her life and Mia's as well. The implications of this decision as seen by the adult narrator Mia will be examined in Chapter three.

Tana French's novel presents an intimate portrait of the formation and borderline dissolution of female friendship that is impregnable while providing the suspense of a murder mystery. The characters of Holly, Julia, Rebecca and Selena are a formidable group and the novel shifts between the dual timelines of their sophomore year at St. Kilda's all girls boarding school leading up to the autumn after the murder of Chris Harper and the other timeline focuses on the present day interview of the girls by the Detectives Moran and Conway a year after the murder took place. The girls are shown to have murderous motivations as they go to great lengths to keep their friendship from falling apart due to the presence of their greatest obstacle : boys. French demonstrates the feelings of cruelty and joy that govern the interactions with the opposite sex. Even though the male characters are generalized as attractive, rich, mean spirited

and obsessed with sex; French demonstrates the crisis of masculinity they face as young men attempting to fit in with their peers while struggling within to stay different. The girls are confronted with tough choices and the negotiation with questions surrounding sexuality and consent occur within a cesspool of drama and teenage angst. Chris Harper, the popular and attractive student from a neighbouring and equally exclusive all boys school called Colm's becomes the object of desire and contention among the friends which costs a life and possibly friendships. However, French's novel is not simply a tale of jealous schoolgirls fighting for the attention of one boy but it is a deeper reflection on female anger and how it is undermined in the context of femininity and girlhood. French's reveal of the identity of Chris Harper's killer is fulfilling and serves to highlight the intricacies that inform the dynamics between girls enclosed in the tight knit space of a private boarding school. Ultimately, it is revealed that Rebecca from Holly's group is the one who killed Chris as a kind of necessary sacrifice for protecting her friendship and specifically her friend Selena from controlling behaviour and an erosion of dignity.

French's treatment of girlhood and femininity is done by using the 'secret place' as a means of unleashing teenage angst and a site of psychological warfare. The secret place is a noticeboard where the girls can freely express their innermost thoughts under the cloak of anonymity and the murder investigation picks up steam when a student (later revealed to be Holly) posts a photograph of Chris on it along with the words "I know who killed him"(10) as if the manner of a ransom note with the words cut from a book. The novel is set in contemporary Dublin and French makes use of teenage slang which is authentic and grating to the ears with the excessive exploitation of "oh my god" and "totes amazeballs"(20). The secret place like the hidden meeting places on the school grounds that the girls have kept secret from the prying eyes of the nuns is symbolic of the complex interiority of the girls amidst the manufactured attitudes and back-biting that surrounds them at the school. It is a means to let off steam, letting the girls relieve themselves of emotions that are always dangerously close to bubbling over and made apparent. At the very least, by putting it into words, the girls make their secrets and ideas tangible and also open to things that haunt the girlhood of every protagonist in the chosen texts - criticism and casual humiliation. Here, the group psychology of the two rival cliques become important to understand the treatment of female identity and femininity as presented in the novel. Some of the characters like Rebecca and Joanne function as anti-heroines with a kind of Machiavellian

attitude to the themes of loyalty and self-preservation. Like Cline and Thorpe, French too, associates and indicts pop culture and mass media for creating an artifice of prescribed femininity that the privileged students of St. Kilda's are enthusiastic to consume and conform to. This is seen the way Joanne pours over *Elle* magazine and chides the members of her gang when they do not sufficiently understand the benefits of exfoliation. Even though the narrator of the novel is a male detective, he is partnered with a tougher female detective whose abrasiveness and brilliance is reflected in the lead character of Holly Mackay, herself the daughter of Moran's senior colleague. Nancy G. Rosoff and Stephanie Spencer in the Introduction to their book *British and American School Stories, 1910-1960* suggest that in the case of "authors of teen fiction, their presentation of femininity both teaches the reader how they *should* behave *and* reflects their contemporary society's expectations of what is 'natural' female behaviour"(16). Unlike the other novels chosen for this thesis, French's novels deals with the claustrophobic environment of the boarding school and the novel ends with the identity of the killer unmasked and the plot does not progress beyond the girlhood of the characters and this enables French to portray with intensity how the girls are always testing their emerging sexual authority or lack there of during their girlhood and how fiercely imperative it has become in contemporary times to not just physically but also virtually claim authority over the boy one desires. Here, raunchy text messages and nude pictures invoke the same conflicted feelings that Ferrante's Elena was left with while accepting ten lire for exposing her bosom to a boy.

The chosen texts reveal that the underlying themes in the construction of femininity and female identity can transcend spatial and temporal boundaries and the importance of girlhood as the site of anxiety, angst and gender clashes means that their impact is continued throughout the adulthood of these characters but the nature of female identity as fleeting but intriguingly permanent at the same time can only be found in girlhood.

Chapter Three: The Friendship Experience

The friendship experience as a violently personal concept is the glue that holds the opinions of the narrator in each of the chosen texts in their presentation of their dear friend to the reader and therefore in the process, attempt to paint a cohesive picture of themselves through this relationship between two girls. Ferrante, Cline and Thorpe extend this aspect by introducing an adult narrator retrospectively recounting events in the form of a female bildungsroman where the narrator is recreating memories with a mix of affection and vengeance. This chapter will examine the experience of friendship as told by the adult narrator and how the themes of memory and trauma become integral to that process. This is especially true in the case of Ferrante's Elena who as the first book opens is in her sixties living as a successful writer in Turin when she is suddenly informed of the disappearance of Lila, who was confined to Naples all her life, decides to write the story of their lives. Elena shows for patience for the fear and desperation shown by Lila's son Rino who informs Elena of her friend's disappearance because she knew it was an inevitable outcome one day. As Elena says in the first book,

"It's been at least three decades since she told me that she wanted to disappear without leaving a trace, and I'm the only one who knows what she means. She never had in mind any sort of flight, a change of identity, the dream of making a new life somewhere else. And she never thought of suicide, repulsed by the idea that Rino would have anything to do with her body, and be forced to attend to the details. She meant something different: she wanted to vanish; she wanted every one of her cells to disappear, nothing of her ever to be found. And since I know her well, or at least I think I know her, I take it for granted that she has found a way to disappear, to leave not so much as a hair anywhere in this world."(20)

The chronicling of their friendship is an act of revenge by Elena who challenges Lila's endeavour to remove all traces of her existence in order to ascertain who "wins this time"(23). Therefore, she does not welcome Lila's act and therefore vigorously embraces the subject that Lila had vetoed- their friendship. The tetralogy that that has been produced is hence, an act of emotional violence that Elena inflicts upon her friend who wants to erase her existence entirely and in response, an angry Elena proceeds to write on her computer the epic of their friendship with every minor detail exposing the emotional rawness of their friendship along with its

psychological depth. Lila's decision to vanish includes a complete erasure of anything and everything about her lived reality. "Her shoes were gone. The few books: gone. All the photographs: gone. The movies: gone. Her computer had disappeared, including the old-fashioned diskettes and everything, everything to do with her experience as an electronics wizard who had begun to operate computers in the late sixties, in the days of punch cards"(22). Not even a single hairpin was found in her home by Lila's son Rino which baffles him but has stark clarity for Elena who proceeds to use the unique currency of female friendship which is intense emotional intimacy to eviscerate the final ambition of her rival and friend. This sets the tone for the four books where Elena and Lila are constantly in each other's orbit and throughout a lifetime of terminal rivalry and jealousy, phases of betrayal and reconciliation; they both serve as each other's muse, challenger, champion and harshest critic.

After the events of the first book, the second book *The Story of a New Name* opens with Lila entrusting Elena with a box of her eight notebooks in the year 1966 so that they are not possessed by her husband, Stefano. This might be part of her way to publicly renounce learning but it ends up establishing Lila's superiority over Elena a little bit more. The notebooks are filled with her efforts to keep up with her education, with writing exercises while also producing the meticulous account of her life events and her friendship with Elena. Therefore, Lila has in her own way produced a version of the first book and beaten Elena to the task who is the narrator of the book that we are reading. Elena does not hesitate to read the notebooks despite her solemn promise to Lila to not do so which she regrets immediately as Lila's talent once again shines through in her writing and Elena is once again thwarted by it. As Elena recounts in the second book,

"It wasn't a diary, although there were detailed accounts of the events of her life, starting with the end of elementary school. Rather, it seemed evidence of a stubborn self-discipline in writing. The pages were full of descriptions: the branch of a tree, the ponds, a stone, a leaf with its white veining's, the pots in the kitchen, the various parts of a coffeemaker, the brazier, the coal and bits of coal, a highly detailed map of the courtyard, the broad avenue of stradone, the rusting iron structure beyond the ponds, the gardens and the church, the cut of the vegetation alongside the railway, the new buildings, her parents' house, the tools her father and her brother used to repair shoes, their gestures when they worked, and above all colors, the colors of every object at different times of the day. But there were not only pages of description. Isolated words appeared,

in dialect and in Italian, sometimes circled, without comment. And Latin and Greek translation exercises. And entire passages in English on the neighborhood shops and their wares, on the cart loaded with fruit and vegetables that Enzo Scanno took through the streets every day, leading the mule by the halter. And many observations on the books she read, the films she saw in the church hall. And many of the ideas that she had asserted in the discussions with Pasquale, in the talks she and I used to have. Of course, the progress was sporadic, but whatever Lila captured in writing assumed importance, so that even in the pages written when she was eleven or twelve there was not a single line that sounded childish."(8)

The aspect of writing is immensely important to both the girls. While still in school, Elena is jealous of how fearless Lila's writing is and the accuracy with which she has dissected her family, friends and her neighbourhood. However, as narrated in the second book, it will be the diligent Elena who goes to university in Pisa, marries Nino Sarratore, the self absorbed member of a prominent socialist family and publishes a novel at 22 but is helped by her mother-in law's connections. Ferrante by using the ability girls to write constantly juggles with the question as to who is the more gifted one. Elena herself seems like a narrator who constantly undermines herself and in the third book, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, she tries to impress highly unimpressive men and commits the gross mistake of judging herself by their standards. For example, Elena's first boyfriend in university takes upon himself to provide her with a political education: "I learned from him terrible things about Stalinism and he urged me to read Trotsky." It is important to note that Elena's idealized object of affection since she was a girl is both a hypocrite and a pedant. It's a sign of how intellectually abandoned Lila found herself as a married woman that when she also falls for Nino, she decides to read *Ulysses* only because he has. In Pisa, Elena throws out Lila's notebooks into the Arno river "as if it were her" rejecting her voice, her point of view as a writer which both thrilled and terrified Elena with its lack of artifice(9). The aspect of writing highlights more than just its purpose as a narrative device but speaks to Ferrante's concerns as a writer herself. That she writes under a pseudonym is well known but nothing else about the writer is public knowledge which has fueled speculation in Italy that only a man could have written such great novels. This shows not only why Ferrante's writing is important for the contemporary reader but also explains the similar negotiation with authorship and the pageantry of the literary market that Elena Greco must undertake as she tastes

fame and moves up the social ladder with an aim to please, just like she did in her classroom in Naples.

However, the adult Elena in the role of the narrator presents a narrative which subverts the stereotypical idea of female friendship as largely consistent and uncomplicated because the push and pull dynamics that is seen between Elena and Lila is mostly reserved for conventional heterosexual relationships in fiction. As Elena and Lila intellectually and emotionally nourish each other and often reject each other too; it is clear that they are a team but struggle to work out healthy boundaries and negotiate what it means to expect too much of each other. There are no precise boundaries between them as children and even as adults because of the constant flow of feelings between them that are ambivalent and as a result the perception that the girls have of each other keeps shifting. The blurring of boundaries in the friendship of the two girls is extended to the possible blurring of the self that Lila experiences in her girlhood and reaches a culmination in her adulthood with her vanishing act. Elena describes Lila's experience as episodes in the first book, "On December 31st of 1958 Lila had her first episode of dissolving margins. The term isn't mine, she always used it. She said that on those occasions the outlines of people and things suddenly dissolved, disappeared"(89). Here, Ferrante is further elevating the character of Lila to that of a mythical figure with the intermingling of the fantastical and the psychological. Elena says in the first book that Lila "often had the sensation of moving for a few fractions of a second into a person or a thing or a number or a syllable, violating its edges"(91). Lila is already more closer to a myth than to a real person because of how volatile and audacious she is. As an autodidact who taught herself how to read and write at age 6, Lila appears so versatile and peerless that she always finds outlets for her energy and talents. She writes the novel *The Blue Fairy* while still in school at age 10, designs a pair of highly ornate and original shoes; she runs a grocery store and becomes a computer programming whiz kid. Lila's novel though dismissed by Maestra Oliviero as a plebian effort due to her disappointment that Lila has to discontinue her education; it becomes the skeletal frame for Elena's debut novel which does not impress the grown up Lila. *The Blue Fairy* could be a reference to the magical being who gives life to Pinocchio and also has the ability to vanish at will. Ferrante's *Blue Fairy* is Lila who breathes vigour into Elena's competitive drive and whose creativity in shoe design makes the people around her wealthy. Elena suspects that her success as a writer has come at the price of Lila's incomplete education and sometimes, Lila seems to agree with that sentiment. As the

narrator, the adult Elena presents her literary career as something that could have belonged to Lila easily if only for the dark twist of destiny. This oscillation in their friendship between illuminating confidence and crippling self-doubt provides a spectacular intensity to their friendship that does not seem fictional and has therefore resonated with readers around the world. Thus, the friendship experience for both these girls is so extremely intertwined with the force of their personalities that neither one of them can have blazing glory without the other's shadow looming over it or pride without the other's resentment behind it. However, Lila's episodes of blurring of the self and of people and things exposes a profound existential instability bubbling between the surface of her girlhood where she is questioning reality around her. It serves as a physical manifestation of her failure to thrive in an environment that tries to contain her. In the end, Lila's vanishing act can be seen as an autonomous decision to thwart the forces of destiny to not turn her into another version of her mother or reject the fate of being defined by things that happened to her - marriage and motherhood. Lila did not want to leave as the world as Rino's mother nor Stefano's wife nor Nino's lover but instead she wanted to cease to be.

The extremely private Ferrante has said in an interview given to *The Paris Review* and others via correspondence that her narratives are built from "fragments of memory" which add to the metafictional framework provided by the author as she matches her pseudonymous first name with that of the narrator of her novels. The theme of memory, which has informed the novels with Ferrante's possibly autobiographical experiences and through the role of the reminiscent narrator, is also important to understand the theme of trauma. The rejection of their mothers by both Elena and Lila was a rejection of their bodies and of the subjugation of the self that they represented or performed with their bodies. By making the maternal corporeality as sexless and shapeless; Ferrante introduces the origin of the trauma that informs the ambition of both the girls to be liberated from marriage, children, poverty and violence that has ravaged the women of their neighbourhood. Aided by formal education and street smarts alike, the girls prepare themselves to not have their dreams and ideas dismissed in the same way as the other young girls and women around them. However, Lila's hopes are dashed on her wedding day due to Stefano's annihilation of Lila's talent, feeling and imagination through his act of presenting Marcello Solara with her prized self designed shoes. Only Elena understood what this meant for her friend and that Lila, her majestic friend, understood it too that she was doomed to accept an aspect of submission that would not be restricted to her conjugal rites. As Elena narrates in the second

book, "In other words, no one except me seemed to realize that the marriage that had just been celebrated—and that would probably last until the death of the spouses, among the births of many children, many more grandchildren, joys and sorrows, silver and gold wedding anniversaries—that for Lila, no matter what her husband did in his attempt to be forgiven, that marriage was already over"(11).

Throughout the course of their friendship, both Elena and Lila would come to grapple with the discomfiture of being slotted into roles by the men and women in their lives and how they must constantly reinvent themselves intellectually, sexually and socially in order to rise above the debilitating male gaze that revels in their exposure. The effects of such exposure can be seen in the unhappy marriage that both Elena and Lila have to endure and the trauma of motherhood. Stefano dismisses Lila's anger at his actions on the eve of their wedding by remarking to his brother-in-law Rino who considers Lila to have been "born twisted" by replying thus, "Twisted things get straightened out"(12). Friendship in general is prone to a consistent state of ebullition but female friendship is a landmine of emotions because unlike the codes of male friendship which have been celebrated and depicted in fiction and pop culture; female friendship does not have fixed internal rules nor is the consensus clear as to what consequences may befall a transgressor. The emotional and intellectual landscape of female friendship is chiefly determined by the participants themselves and this is the case with Ferrante's protagonists and therefore anything can happen to them and as a result, Ferrante steers clear of themes and ideologies that exalt sisterhood in an unrealistic way without acknowledging that paradoxically with strong affection and trust comes jealousy, resentment and betrayal.

The aspect of trauma becomes instrumental in understanding the mystery of Lila's vanishing act as well as the adult Elena's response to it. Two decades after leaving their suburb, Elena and Lila, now girls no more, return to it and confront a more nefarious fate than that of losing their dolls. When they had first climbed up the stairs to Don Achille's house to retrieve their dolls and face the ogre of their imagination, he turned out to be a man made of flesh and bone. As Elena says in the first book, "When you haven't been in the world long, it's hard to comprehend what disasters are at the origin of the sense of disaster: maybe you don't feel the need to."(29) However, the dangers become more real and tangible for the two friends as adults when they find that childhood friends have become the enforcers of the Neapolitan crime syndicate or the

Camorra and with it comes the realization that people or ordinary men and women are far more dangerous than any imaginary monster with fangs. The pervasive violence that both girls grew up with during their childhood and girlhood informs their understanding of borders that can and cannot be crossed. An example is provided in the first attempt by both the girls during middle school (in the first book) to leave the physical boundary of the neighbourhood. It is Lila who organizes everything and proposes skipping school to go to the sea. As Elena says, "Trained by our schoolbooks to speak with great skill about what we had never seen, we were excited by the invisible"(74). However, unlike the experience of retrieving their dolls where Lila was the fearless one and Elena had simply followed her friend; in this case, it is Lila who seemed fearful of the unfamiliar surroundings and drenched in the rain, she forces Elena to abandon their plan and head back home where Elena is promptly beaten by her mother for her absence. Elena in hindsight wonders that if this was an effort by Lila to get Elena's education discontinued by her incensed parents although Lila is unsuccessful in her endeavour or if Lila had hurried back to avoid punishment. Lila's inability to see her plan through mystifies Elena as well the unfairness of the punishment that was meted out to her. She hadn't succeeded in going to the sea, so why was she punished? Elena says in the first book,

"A mysterious inversion of attitudes had occurred: I, despite the rain, would have continued on the road, I felt far from everything and everyone, and distance-I discovered for the first time-extinguished in me every tie and every worry; Lila had abruptly repented of her own plan, she had given up the sea, she had wanted to return to the confines of the neighbourhood. I couldn't figure it out."(78)

This incident is prophetic in the way it foreshadows Elena's success in leaving her neighbourhood whereas Lila attempts to live with the best that the neighbourhood has to offer. However, Elena's education and ambition makes her the object of reverence as well as derision. For example, her closeness to Nino Sarratore enrages her boyfriend Antonio Carracci whose sense of inferiority in relation to the more educated Elena was only matched by his mostly good-natured and overprotective condescension of her. As Elena recounts in the second book, he uses the threat of violence to subdue her but engages in the time honoured male tactic of making her believe that aggression is simply disguised affection. "I had a confused need for that aggression. The vise on my wrist, the fear that he would hit me, that river of painful words ended by

consoling me: it seemed to me that at least he valued me."(14) Elena's guilt at craving the push and pull of male aggression is coupled with her guilt at her desire to explore her sexuality without judgment. While in the throes of passion with Antonio, Elena doesn't hesitate to question and compare the legitimacy of her sinful desire with the lawful violation of Lila at the hands of Stefano, for whom Elena has no respect. As Elena says in the second book, "My heart began to beat hard, I was afraid of the place, of myself, of the craving that possessed me to obliterate from my manners and from my voice the sense of alienation that I had discovered a few hours earlier. I wanted to return, and sink into that neighborhood, to be as I had been. I wanted to throw away studying, the notebooks full of exercises. Exercising for what, after all. What I could become outside of Lila's shadow counted for nothing. What was I compared with her in her wedding dress, with her in the convertible, the blue hat and the pastel suit?"(16). She adds, "I wanted to tell Lila when she returned: I'm not a virgin, either, what you do I do, you can't leave me behind"(16). Here, the experience of friendship shared by Elena and Lila turn them into rivals as well as collaborators where in a fundamental way, the joy or misery of one seemed to require the joy or misery of another.

The response of the two girls towards violence demonstrates the familiarity and troubling ordinariness of the malice that surrounds them and how despite their efforts to leave their neighbourhood behind, the gender equality as exemplified by their neighbourhood as well as the city of Naples is always ready to undermine their autonomy. An example of this is presented when Elena is cornered by the Solara brothers in the aftermath of Ada's assault and an incensed Lila threatens to return violence and violence with a menace that bewilders both the Solara and Elena. In the scuffle with the Solaras, the precious silver bracelet gifted to Elena by her mother is broken by Michelle which symbolizes that male dominance which renders the girls as only sexual objects are a constant threat to their ambitions unless they persevere and persist. As Elena narrates in the first book, "He was smiling, friendly, he tried again to take my wrist as if to establish a familiarity that would soothe me. It was an instant. Lila, half the size of him, pushed him against the car and whipped the shoemaker's knife under his throat."(135) Ferrante here presents the necessity of constantly protecting oneself which every female individual understands beginning from their girlhood because it is then that another truth is revealed to them - the simultaneous sexualization, objectification and shaming of their adolescent bodies. This incident also confirmed for Elena that Lila contained a fury and danger within her which

both confused and enthralled the boys and men around her. This incident would serve as the beginning of the Solaras' obsession with Lila; her impudence had made her a target, an object to be possessed in the eyes of the Solaras who collected every new thing that excited them just like their flashy cars.

As Elena narrates in the first book, "Lila was malicious: this, in some secret place in myself, I still thought. She had shown me not only that she knew how to wound with words but that she would kill without hesitation, and yet those capacities now seemed to me of little importance. I said to myself: she will release something more vicious, and I resorted to the word "evil", an exaggerated word that came to me from childhood tales. But it was a childish self that unleashed these thoughts in me, they had a foundation of truth. And in fact, it slowly became clear not only to me, who had been observing her since elementary school, but to everyone, that an essence not only seductive but dangerous emanated from Lila."(143)

Therefore, despite the trauma of violence and sexual assault that characterizes each of their lives and marriage; their survival and resistance takes shape because of the rage that leaches into both their identities. Lila's sensation of "dissolving margins" as described in the first book where "she had perceived for the first time unknown entities that broke down the outline of the world and demonstrated its terrifying nature" demonstrates the outbreak of her internalized rage at the forces that keep her spirit and intellect restrained - her family, her marriage and the neighbourhood(90). Elena's liberation from her suffocating surroundings are not straightforward despite always believing that education would provide answers. Kristine Moruzi and Michelle J. Smith suggest that although "girlhood can have an important signifying function linked to freedom, independence, novelty and modernity, it may also represent an idea that needs to be controlled to serve the needs of the nation"(3). Here, Moruzi and Smith are talking explicitly about colonial girlhood but Ferrante's Neapolitan neighbourhood demonstrates that crime has permeated life at every level and no one is immune to its effects. Criminal behaviour is part of the culture and legacy of the Neapolitan neighbourhood. The Camorra or the local mafia dictates the relationship between the girls and their classmates, it affects the jobs their boyfriends are allowed to have such as working as gas attendants on the streets; who gets to excel at school such as the violent backlash faced by Lila when she outperformed the son of Don Achille in a class competition and what the girls wear such as the fashionable sunglasses that hides Lila's black eye

when she comes back from her honeymoon. The initiation of Elena and Lila into the world dominated by male violence begins early when they are children and attempt to retrieve their dolls from Don Achille's cellar. Their meeting with Don Achille is not an innocent affair as he hands them money to buy new dolls; the entire exchange demonstrates that children, who represent the most vulnerable demographic of society, literally come face to face with the brutal forces that they should be shielded from. Therefore, both Elena and Lila unmistakably learn that such fleeting encounters can haunt them for the rest of their lives. In the third book, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, Lila separates from Stefano and works a brutal job at a factory as her son sinks deeper into the mire of violence and aggression that Lila grew up with.

After Lila's wedding, Elena is in part envious of her friend's widening social circle and in part horrified at what it has cost her, starting with her name. She is now Signora Carracci who wears expensive scarves and is driven around in a convertible but hides her bruises, given by Stefano, behind dark fashionable glasses. Both the characters as girls and as women struggle against the family first ethos and gender inequality that the entire city of Naples represents. As Italy forged ahead with post war industrialization efforts, the deficit of social justice was added to the mix which Ferrante would have lived through in the late 1960s and 1970s and the hypocrisy of the socialists and the communists is exposed in the third book where the crusaders against capitalism such as Elena's husband pontificate about revolution but burden Elena with all of the housework and childcare. Elena's fury is fierce against men such as her husband Pietro and therefore, must choose a path which offers emancipation but is radically different from the path of bold defiance pursued by Lila. Elena aims for the intellectual authority and respectability that comes with the life of a writer but is stonewalled by the opaque dynamics of the literary market which commodifies intellectual labour and will not easily let her conduct personal battles through her intellectual creations. However, Elena's success in establishing a credibility in a field not easily welcoming of women is mirrored in Ferrante's outrageous achievement - her writing.

If Elena's aim is to liberate herself from her origins, then Lila chooses to defy subjugation in any form. She had embraced marriage as an opportunity to be independent but realizes as most women do, that it is also a trap. On her wedding day, Stefano's gift of Lila's shoes to Marcello Solara means that now the Carracci family is beholden to the mafia. This realization is coupled with the brutal truth that she too, is now Stefano's possession as he rapes her on their

honeymoon. Her resistance which began with murderous thoughts as narrated in the second book, "she suddenly had the idea of stealing a knife from the table to stick in his throat when, in the room, he tried to deflower her" ends with a cold indifference which shocks and confuses Elena(23). However, even as their paths run parallel to each other and their struggles often intermingle and they seem to be living lives that could be the other's; Lila's path is not meant to be definitive because the shifting of directions allows Lila to be her volatile and vital self even though at times she admires, envies and belittles her friend's intellectual authority. Through their friendship, this thesis argues that Ferrante has presented the female subject that rejects constant configuration and accepts non-compliance as essential to self-identity. Ferrante's writing champions the idea of the personal as the political and Elena Greco's recording of her history and of Lila's history is extremely important in documenting the impact of autonomous choices and the lack there of on women's lives especially when the crucial factor in determining that impact is male violence. By choosing to consciously erase every remnant of her life, Lila is choosing to use absence to highlight the fluidity of the self that she embodied but that which is taken away from women who desire to be independent and unbound by an external gaze. It is important to note that the story of the lives of Elena and Lila only begins after her loss has occurred. Lila's reconstructed presence and by extension that of Elena, fills the void left behind by her absence. Elena's practical realism attempts to capture through words, the Romantic rage and rebellion of Lila because in Ferrante's treatment of friendship, both are needed for girls and women to master the world around them even as it attempts to stifle their identity at every turn.

The collaboration of friends is a significant aspect of identity formation that is also explored by Thorpe, Cline and French. However, the role of the adult female narrator can be seen only in the novels of Thorpe and Cline. In Thorpe's novel, the adult Mia who serves as the narrator is able to recognize the intermingling of affection and brutality in her friendship with Lorrie Ann. As young girls, reckless and believing in the power of being carefree; both girls tumble towards the great unknown of womanhood and the themes of trauma and violence are a pervasive presence in that journey. Mia's experience of abortion at fifteen which appears in the first chapter is part of the larger negative self-identity that she constructs in contrast to Lorrie Ann's moral demeanor. Mia's brattiness is not just informed by a fierceness of character but it is implied that this ferocity is the result of years of accumulated unhappiness which amplifies her potential otherness. Thorpe never moves away from the themes of procreation and choice and provides the reader with

multiple perspectives of the same issue that drastically affects the lives of the two friends. Lorrie Ann becomes pregnant soon after her high school graduation and decides to forgo a scholarship to Berkeley to marry her boyfriend and father of her child but she undergoes a traumatic birth which results in a severely traumatic outcome - a hysterectomy and a son with cerebral palsy. She then becomes a widowed mother when her husband is killed while serving in the military. On the other hand, Mia does not get accepted to Berkeley but attends Yale and then goes to graduate school at the University of Michigan and pursues fully funded academic studies at Istanbul as a Classics scholar. It is Lorrie Ann's unexpected arrival in Istanbul, with an heroin addiction that makes Mia attempt to salvage a friendship after years of estrangement. Thorpe's deft prose probes themes of abortion, motherhood, neglect of children, addiction and female creativity and education but the intertwining lives of the two friends are the point of origin for all of them.

The theme of memory is extremely important in understand the complex dance of friendship that the two friends engage in for two decades but it also explores how women choose to remember and to forget parts of themselves and of others close to them. Memory and trauma are also intertwined through the maternal figure especially in the case of Mia. Living with an alcoholic mother educated Mia that people will always find ways to disappoint you; becoming a little less of what they were meant to be. This sentiment has a lasting psychological impact on Mia and her confusion and anger towards Lorrie Ann's life choices is rooted in it. She describes Lorrie Ann's decision to keep the baby and marry Jim, her boyfriend as "such a patently stupid thing to do" and the aspect that added to her alarm was the conviction that "Lorrie Ann was not a stupid girl"(27). Intermingled with her rage is the kernel of guilt that Mia's application to Yale, which she told no one about including Lorrie Ann, may have sown the seed of distrust between them; a secret kept between friends who knew each other better than anyone. Mia says,

"Maybe if I had been going to Berkeley with her, Lorrie Ann would have chosen differently; Berkeley would have seemed more real, had a stronger gravitational pull. Or maybe it was the shock of hearing I was going to Yale, the betrayal that kept her from going. I still remember the afternoon I told her, breathless, having run all the way to her house and then, straight up those wooden steps and into the circle of gnomes, the admissions letter clenched in my hand. I had profoundly misunderstood how hurt Lorrie Ann would be that I had kept a secret from her, and

such an important one. The look on her face when I told her gave me a sudden jolt of stepping off a curb without meaning to. But applying to Yale had been as private for me as masturbating. In a weird way, it had never occurred to me to tell Lorrie Ann at all. But I was leaving her. Was it insane to think that my betrayal was at least part of what made her think it was such a good idea to partner up with Jim?"(35)

Thorpe dissects the emotional landscape of female friendship through such experiences that detail what it feels like to be a young girl and what it costs young girls to march towards womanhood. An important aspect of Thorpe's examination of the female psyche is the response to pain, both physical and emotional. Mia after returning from Planned Parenthood, discusses with Lorrie Ann the effects of what she had done but most importantly, of what had been done to her. The vacuous indifference of the nurse at the clinic was unsettling for a teenager even as it may have subconsciously added to the understanding that the act about to happen is inconsequential after all. Mia says, "The expression in her eyes was hard to parse; it was not pity, but it was not judgment either"(7). The terrifying ordinariness with which female pain is dealt with and often dismissed is an issue that has resonance in contemporary times as well. Mia adds, "Maybe she was bored during my abortion. That's weird isn't it? That it can be the biggest, scariest, worst thing that's ever happened to me, and for her it's just another day at work?"(7). Meanwhile, Lorrie Ann's confrontation with trauma as intersects with one of the most arduous experiences of being a female - childbirth. She undergoes an emergency C-section and the baby's life hung in the balance for a few days before it was established that he, Zachary, would live. Thorpe presents a picture of medical malpractice in the way Lorrie Ann is left without a doctor for almost the entirety of her labour which had then stalled because she had passed out from the pain, only to be cut up for the baby to be born. It is important to note that all over the world and not excluding the USA, the ineptitude of medical staff and the tendency to exclude female patients from the details of their own procedure such as the case with Mia and Lorrie Ann, is a widespread problem. However, beneath Jim's joy at the miracle that his son had survived, Mia saw reality for what it was for her friend, a trauma that left her with lank hair and wearing a nightgown flecked with blood. As Mia says, the arrival of the child negated the suffering that made it happen in the first place, "That Lorrie Ann couldn't yet pee on her own, or even stand up, that there was a seven-inch incision in her abdominal wall, that she hadn't gotten to hold her baby for longer than twenty minutes, all of this was doomed inconsequential."(39) Here, Thorpe

demonstrates how both Mia and Lorrie Ann were turned into meat by being treated like meat. In contrast, the one who gets to exercise dominance over reality in relation to this incident is the only male in this equation and the only one who did not have to undergo physical trauma - Jim.

Mia and Lorrie would continue the complex dance of renunciation and reconciliation for years which would inform their symmetry as friends. Talking to Lorrie Ann about her impending motherhood and then briefly witnessing her friend's life as a mother made Mia realize that she was an intruder; a bad person who had no right looking in at the life of a good person. The binaries created by Mia in relation to herself and Lorrie Ann hinges on ideas about rights, entitlement and the naturalness of some things over others. The pristine image of Lorrie Ann that Mia had in her mind is ruptured when Lorrie Ann breaks free of her constraints to create new, immediate and personal experiences of her own that has is not dictated by norms about who owns women's bodies and challenges the authority of society to determine and regulate the relationship between a mother and her child. Thorpe underscores the hypocrisy of a society that values women for their youth and their beauty but renders them invisible as young mothers. When their son was two, Lorrie Ann's husband joined the army in order to afford the medical insurance required to help treat Zachary's illness. Lorrie Ann considered Jim's sacrifice for their family to be beyond reproach but it was Mia who could see that her friend was left alone in a desolate army base while her husband could be away "from their claustrophobic little house, where Zach was refusing more and more to live up to Jim's hopes for him, and where Lorrie Ann was slowly transforming into some kind of dim-witted saint."(51). The link between motherhood and invisibility is essential to understand the later transformation of Lorrie Ann from martyr to rebel because despite the prevalence of websites and blogs that cater to young mothers and present the intricacies of their experiences; the expectation of society that every women will naturally be a self-sacrificial mother is absolute. It is important to note that the heartfelt conversations about motherhood and trauma that occurs between the two friends is when Lorrie Ann is strung out on heroin. Here, Thorpe demonstrates how far Lorrie Ann is willing to go to break out of the crude idealization that Mia and the world around her had subjected her to. Lorrie Ann bears the burden of this same expectation of always being good mother of which Mia too, is guilty, until she selfishly pursues her desire for freedom and relief. In the end, Lorrie Ann makes the decision to leave the care of her child to an institution and pursues her love of music, travelling the world and singing. Mia's disappointment with her friend's transformation is

essential in enabling Lorrie Ann to transcend the stubborn confines of sainthood that Mia created for her and become a more real, unlikable yet fierce female subject with an urgent sense of agency. Hence, Thorpe's novel presents the friendship experience as an exercise in memory and trauma where even if we do not like to condone aspects of our friend's lives that we cannot control; the more unsettling feeling comes with the doubt that we might not really know our friends as we claim to.

Moruzi and Smith argue that the figure of the girl "represents a disturbing figure who is potentially beyond the control of family and unconstrained by societal norms"(4). They point out that for scholars like Catherine Driscoll "girlhood articulates notions of transition, process and transformation; this transition needs to be disciplined and controlled"(4). This aspect of control is keenly felt in the narrative provided by Cline's Evie Boyd in the present looks back at her at her fourteen year old self is desperately resisting the urge that she was "confusing familiarity with happiness"(31). The seamless, known purity of her home in California offered no solace to her teenage self that wanted the unfamiliar taste of rebellion, adventure and unsparing attention. However, by the time she meets Suzanne and then Russell at a rundown ranch, she is as yet unaware about how the liberties of free love and drugs can be imprisoning. In the present day, Evie struggles to explain whether the spiral into violence was inevitable or if it was part of the confused ardour for excitement which in the 1960s could open doors towards savagery and lunacy. Evie's account of her time spent at the ranch/commune is balanced between a remembered report and a vivid hallucination. The themes of memory and violence are examined by Cline through the lens of Evie's hunger for adult experiences. Her burgeoning sexuality is attempting to come to grasps with the power play that governs all interactions with the opposite sex at her age. As Evie says, "I didn't really believe that friendship could be an end in itself, not just the background fuzz to the dramatics of boys loving you or not loving you"(40). This attitude takes shape because of the fractious relationship she shares with her childhood friend Connie, who is more adept at playing the part that boys and society demands of her. It was as if Evie understood the practiced need for attention that drove her every gesture but could not bear to see it manifested so garishly in Connie's conduct. Evie considered herself to be mediocre in looks and in academics which left in her a vacuum that was filled by eccentricity. This would contribute to her falling out with Connie and left her seeking comradeship elsewhere. As Evie narrates, "A space opened up between us as soon as I started to notice these things, to catalog her

shortcomings the way a boy would. I regret how ungenerous I was. As if by putting distance between us, I could cure myself of the same disease."(54)

It can be argued that Evie's listlessness comes as a side effect of privilege; she is white, her grandmother was a well-known Hollywood actress who left her daughter and granddaughter with enough money to live a life of experimentation and controlled chaos. She is set to attend the same boarding school her mother attended which she does at the end of the novel but as a thoroughly changed individual; heavy with the maddening knowledge of the events that shook her world in the summer of 1969. In her girlhood, Evie is also at the mercy of misogynistic forces that distort her first fumbled attempts at sex and that amplify her embarrassment at her mother's misplaced reinvention of her self. As Evie narrates, "That was part of being a girl-you were resigned to whatever feedback you'd get. If you got mad, you were crazy, and if you didn't react, you were a bitch."(55) She adds, "The only thing you could do was smile from the corner they'd backed you into. Implicate yourself in the joke even if the joke was always on you."(56) Cline highlights the role of mass media and pop culture in brainwashing young girls to believe that careful, painful grooming and that achieving the balance between earnestness and indifference was key to attaining their reward - penetrating male gaze which was enough to make young girls visible, the necessary filling for their ready contours. An older Evie realizes how plainly and dangerously this message was encoded in her during her girlhood; the persistent need to be seen. As Evie narrates,

"That was our mistake, I think. One of many mistakes. To believe that boys were acting with a logic that we could someday understand. To believe that their actions had any meaning beyond thoughtless impulse. We are like conspiracy theorists, seeing portent and intention in every detail, wishing desperately that we mattered enough to be object of planning and speculation. But they were just boys. Silly and young and straightforward; they weren't hiding anything."(56)

Evie's long journey to finally arrive at this conclusion led her away from the pruned gardens and clean sidewalks into the dusty, grubby ranch populated by wafer-thin girls and children too old to be in diapers. Suzanne and the girls who welcomed Evie in their black painted school bus oscillate between being protective and indifferent. Evie soon realizes that they are all sleeping with Russell, the leader who tries and ultimately fails to achieve his dream of being a musician. Evie, who wanted to escape her status of average sadly makes her way into the trap of bland

mediocrity that Russell represents. She sleeps with Russell, is taught to despise her mother even more, she steals money from her mother in service of the cult also breaks into the home of a family friend. Beneath the haze of admiration that his groupies manufacture for him, Russell is an average musician whose real insidious talent lies in collecting damaged and vulnerable young women and using their minds and bodies as currency in his bid to become rich and famous. Evie allows herself to be treated unfairly mostly because she feels it will bring her closer to Suzanne who was second-in-command after Russell at the ranch and whose strange allure was "better than beauty" in the eyes of Evie(69). Evie longed to be part of a group that was so insularly knit together like Suzanne and the girls. Their utopian fervour would later boil down to the bitter resentment reserved for every outsider who does not believe in the values that they are trying to peddle to others. As Evie narrates, "Mashing up the wealthy and the media and the government into an indistinct vessel of evil, perpetrators of the grand hoax"(73). Cline introduces another male antagonist in the character of Mitch Lewis, a well known rock musician who has promised to secure Russell a record deal in return for an invitation to the hippie culture practiced by the cult members. Russell offers Suzanne and Evie to him as part of the deal but when Mitch loses interest in them all and the record deal comes to naught, Suzanne and a few girls are sent to teach Mitch a bloody lesson which leads to the infamous massacre that Evie almost became a part of but must carry the psychological weight of it, all the same. In the end, on the day of the murders, Evie is abandoned by Suzanne on the street as they leave her to commit the crimes that she would read about from the papers; having returned hurt and confused, back to her mother.

Cline demonstrates the way gender norms have structured the life of Evie and of the young girls at the ranch that they do not have the confidence to seize the freedom that the feminist movement is actualising for them. Evie's father is a philandering, absent parent whereas her mother is liberal but is never free of the destructive sexist norms that confine her liberation to the embrace of another man. Both Russell and Mitch are sexual predators who distort the ideologies of the 1960s to their own advantage and are assisted by their white male privilege. Cline delves in to the helter-skelter world of one of the gruesome stories of American history and just like many women who were enthralled by Charles Manson but did not participate in the murders of actress Sharon Tate and her friends; Evie and many other girls escaped direct involvement in the bloodbath at Hollywood Hills and their most significant mistake was to believe the people at the ranch that they were special and worthy to be loved. Cline examines through the role of the adult

Evie as narrator if this is the real tragedy depicted in the book- the calculative manner in which the female subject is chosen by violence.

The treatment of female friendship by Cline explores how intense feelings have intense consequences. Attracted to the mysterious beauty and freedom that Suzanne represents, Evie is willing to do anything to curry her favour. Like the characters of Elena and Mia, Evie too, considers herself as the lesser mortal, a nobody to their incomparable friend. By focusing on the psychological conflicts of girlhood, Cline demonstrates the level of self-destruction Evie is willing to perform in order to surrender her life to the cult members because she is convinced at that point, that nothing else will ensure her happiness. If one removes a murderous cult from this equation, this willingness of women beginning from their girlhood to humiliate, censure and erase parts of themselves so that the object of their affection might look upon them favourably once again and that the desire in their features and actions can be added up to love. The communal living arrangements, the massive clothing pool ready to be shared by all and the blurry sexual dynamics that existed within the cult was the antithesis of the sheltered, prim upbringing known to Evie and therefore she feels comfortable at the presumed lack of rules. However, in retrospect she realizes that her vulnerability was the only thing that qualified her for those attentions; her subservience exposed and cultivated just like it was in the known surroundings of her Petaluma home. The bond between Evie and Suzanne examines the paradox of raw feminine power and girlish helplessness which is the biggest obstacle in the gang of girls truly attaining the solidarity that was within their reach. The friendship between extremely insecure and malleable girls exposes the tension between the selves that girls must perform and the selves that they truly are and this hazy, indistinct self-understanding is highlighted as the malaise that patriarchy infects the female subject that female friendships have the potential to cure.

Though French's novel is not told from the perspective of an adult female narrator who also happens to be one of the central characters, it is evident that the themes of memory and trauma are important in understanding the tensions informing the experience of female friendship and girlhood. The novel is narrated by a male detective but he is never the central character of the story; Holly, Becca, Selena and Julia take the spotlight and present the picture of an unbreakable bond. As Detective Moran narrates, "Nothing could hurt them, not in any way that mattered, not

while they had each other."(218) The emotional intensity of girlhood and female friendship clashes with the claustrophobia of boarding schools because as teenagers when these girls are attempting to take the arduous path towards self-understanding; they are surrounded by a multitude of students all doing the same with minimal privacy and constant surveillance. For example, at the Valentine's Day dance, Julia complains about the generic music she has to endure. "That's just *insulting*. They're teenagers, so they must love shitty chart crap. It never occurs to them that some of us might have taste"(221). The tight-knit bond between the girls help them endure the fish bowl like existence but even here, French's writing makes it clear that gender norms are inescapable and that the cruelty of young girls can function separately and with the aid of patriarchal forces. Rebecca O' Mara or Becca, who is revealed as the killer at the end of the novel, is stupefied by the hunger of her peers to aggressively seek attention at any cost. Her disdain for the local shopping centre known as the Court is because of what it represents- a microcosm of the larger world outside the walls of St. Kilda's where her girlhood and of her peers is objectified and the most eager participants in this endeavour are the young girls themselves. "She hates the way you're watched every second from every angle, eyes swarming over you like bugs, digging and gnawing, always a clutch of girls checking out your top or a huddle of guys checking out your whatever"(48). Becca does not understand why her friends enjoy hanging out at the Court but follows her friends nevertheless. Here, French explores the psychology of girls where their friendship and secrets are connected because the girls share knowledge as much as they hide it. Holly and her friends are not portrayed as innocent but they are not one-dimensional femme fatales despite their faithful renditions of magazine prescribed experiments in seducing boys.

"The Court is where you bring your bewildering new curves and walk and self so people can tell you what they're worth, and you can't risk the answer being *Nothing zero nothing*. You like so totally *have* to have your hair either straightened to death or else brushed into a careful tangle, and fake tan all over and an inch of foundation on your face and half a pack of smoky eye shadow around each eye, and super soft super skinny jeans and Uggs or Converse, because otherwise someone might actually be able to tell you apart from everyone else and obviously that would make you a total loser."(49)

By exploring the world of secret phones containing secret texts leading to secret trysts, French is presenting how the chosen motley group of friends can help each other find a sense of order amidst the tumultuous emotional landscape that characterizes girlhood but they can also prove to be strangers despite the shared rooms and that the task of redefining oneself can be a arduous, lonely task.

Chapter Four: Education Among Friends

The texts chosen for this thesis have provided the perspective of the individual and the specificity of the female experience where perhaps the fate of the protagonists would have been different if they had not been products of that family, of that time. The female characters realize the importance of letting down your guard even in the face of love or empathy because it would lead to a compromising of their autonomy. However, these characters do frequently risk forgetting their agency. This is because often due to their gender, they require the approval of others rather than the strength and applied intelligence of their individual selves. Here, education becomes a medium to apply that strength and intellect. This is not just the education imparted in classrooms but also includes the street smarts and the knowledge that is gained from powers of observation. Education is also tied to the manner the friends communicate with each other—directly or indirectly—through language.

In Ferrante's novels, Lila's disappearance and her experience of blurring of boundaries is meant to be an act of resistance against the male monolith of agency. Despite their efforts to differentiate themselves, most men and women in their lives do not want them to center themselves at their expense. It begins with Lila's father who would not educate his daughter beyond elementary school; Maestra Oliviero dismisses *The Blue Fairy*; Stefano gives Lila's shoes to Marcello Solara and Nino Sarratore leaves Lila because he finds her intellectually intimidating. Both Lila and Elena use the violence of language to carry the burden that is life itself. They write letters to each other throughout the years but Lila burns the novel she had written and Elena throws Lila's notebooks into the Arno in an attempt to be free from her shadow; to stop comparing herself to Lila's magnificence. If Lila chooses a literal disappearance or effacement, then Elena's attempt to write her existence is to counter that disappearance and therefore, deal with the disquiet of her mind. The friendship between Lila and Elena is tightly wound by the vein of intellectual rivalry that defines their relationship to each other and the world. However, their keen intellect also makes them avid observers of human behaviour which serves as an education in itself. They knew that the malaise of internal corruption that consumed the people of their neighbourhood would affect them too if they didn't leave or protect themselves with the only thing they could trust - their thoughts. In the third book, when an

elderly Elena sees Lila for the last time in the winter of 2005, she thinks back to the state of her neighbourhood whose state of inefficiency was threatening to take over her life if she let it. As Elena narrates in *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*,

"During that period I was convinced that there was no great difference between the neighborhood and Naples, the malaise slid from one to the other without interruption. Whenever I returned I found a city that was spineless, that couldn't stand up to changes of season, heat, cold, and, especially, storms. Look how the station on Piazza Garibaldi was flooded, look how the Galleria opposite the museum had collapsed; there was a landslide, and the electricity didn't come back on. Lodged in my memory were dark streets full of dangers, unregulated traffic, broken pavements, giant puddles. The clogged sewers splattered, dribbled over. Lavas of water and sewage and garbage and bacteria spilled into the sea from the hills that were burdened with new, fragile structures, or eroded the world from below. People died of carelessness, of corruption, of abuse, and yet, in every round of voting, gave their enthusiastic approval to the politicians who made their life unbearable. As soon as I got off the train, I moved cautiously in the places where I had grown up, always careful to speak in dialect, as if to indicate I am one of yours, don't hurt me."(11)

Therefore she felt safe during her university years in Pisa but "upon every return to my own city I feared that some unexpected event would keep me from escaping, that the things I had gained would be taken away from me"(11). Elena, however, in later years sees the folly of trusting such clear cut divisions because in reality, they never existed. When Elena sees Lila living in deplorable conditions and working at a sausage factory, she laments that her friend has been trapped in the same conditions that she has endured since childhood. As Elena in the third book, "Leave, instead. Get away for good, far from the life we've lived since birth. Settle in well-organized lands where everything really is possible. I had fled, in fact. Only to discover, in the decades to come, that I had been wrong, that it was a chain with larger and larger links: the neighborhood was connected to the city, the city to Italy, Italy to Europe, Europe to the whole planet. And this is how I see it today: it's not the neighborhood that's sick, it's not Naples, it's the entire earth, it's the universe, or universes. And shrewdness means hiding and hiding from oneself the true state of things."(12)

Elena though suffering unease at university due to the class barrier between herself and her fellow classmates; perseveres and publishes a novel. It was both celebrated and dismissed but the novel becomes a vehicle to exorcise personal demons such as her degradation at the hands of Donato Sarratore, the father of Nino. Elena puts into writing the episode that had occurred one summer at Ischia and had transformed Elena. When Maestra Oliviero persuades Elena's family to send her to the beaches of Ischia, it is an attempt to shield her from the harmful influence of her neighbourhood. The more promise that is shown by Elena, the more prejudiced Maestra Oliviero becomes about the toxicity that lives in Elena's home that can ruin her star pupil. Ischia becomes the setting for a couple of teenagers to leave behind the poverty and filth of their neighbourhood and sets the stage for an awakening of sexualities. The summer at Ischia gives Elena a chance to get closer to Nino but her admiration for Donato's status as a published author puts her at the mercy of an older man. Elena's molestation by Donato runs parallel to Lila's being aggressively pursued by Marcello. Both the friends are preyed upon by men who underneath a mask of respectability are revealed to philanderers and despicably unkind. Here, Ferrante presents the truth that the girls had to learn the way-to be wary of weak men who can turn from romantics to manipulators in the blink of an eye. Donato Sarratore, poet and womanizer, represents the kind of hollow progressive attitude performed by men who hide behind repute and respectable families. Donato's affair with Melina, a relative of Lila's mother, drove her mad which led to Nino and his family moving away from the neighbourhood. Elena's reunion with Nino at Ischia is also soured by Lila and Nino falling in love and having a secret affair which results in a son Gennaro, also called Rino. Elena's includes her time spent at Ischia in her debut novel but to her disappointment, the people of her neighbourhood do not understand the larger themes of her writing and seem excited to only read the sexually explicit bits. On the other hand, Elena comes to realize that her novel is a derivative of Lila's *The Blue Fairy*. These developments demonstrate Elena's struggle to be taken seriously as a writer but also reveals the difficult path Elena must take from her education to her actual self-realization.

Elena attempts to cultivate in herself the refinement that would scrub away the signs of her neighbourhood and replace them with the opposite of clumsiness and fear. In the third book, Elena recollects her mistake of losing an argument with the teacher who taught religion and how her ready sense of logical lucidity left her when she unexpectedly encounters Nino at her book reading session in Pisa. She says,

"In high school I had reacted to my disadvantages by trying to become like Professor Galiani, I had adopted her tones and her language. In Pisa that model of a woman hadn't been enough; I had had to deal with highly experienced people. Franco, Pietro, all the best students, and of course the renowned teachers at the Normale expressed themselves in a complex manner: they wrote with deliberate artifice, they had an ability to classify, a logical lucidity, that Professor Galiani didn't possess. But I had trained myself to be like them. And often I succeeded: it seemed to me that I had mastered words to the point of sweeping away forever the contradictions of being in the world, the surge of emotions, and breathless speech. In short, I now knew a method of speaking and writing that—by means of a refined vocabulary, stately and thoughtful pacing, a determined arrangement of arguments, and a formal orderliness that wasn't supposed to fail—sought to annihilate the interlocutor to the point where he lost the will to object. But that evening things didn't go as they should have."(14)

Here, Elena is flustered not only because an elderly academic has just disparaged her debut novel but also because the presence of Nino has taken away her self-control and confidence. This reveals the frustration of a young writer who is let down by the fundamental identity she carries with herself- a woman. This is seen in the critical response to Elena's novel in the third book. Elena narrates,

"There was a photograph of me, set amid four dense columns of type. In the background was a view of the neighborhood, with the tunnel. The headline said: Salacious Memoirs of an Ambitious Girl: Elena Greco's Début Novel . The byline was that of the man with the thick eyeglasses. I was covered in a cold sweat while I read; I had the impression that I was close to fainting. My book was treated as an occasion to assert that in the past decade, in all areas of productive, social, and cultural life, from factories to offices, to the university, publishing, and cinema, an entire world had collapsed under the pressure of a spoiled youth, without values. Occasionally he cited some phrase of mine, in quotation marks, to demonstrate that I was a fitting exponent of my badly brought-up generation. In conclusion he called me "a girl concerned with hiding her lack of talent behind titillating pages of mediocre triviality.""(32)

In the second book, during Lila's wealthy years before leaving Stefano, Lila bought books for Elena and let her study at her luxurious apartment because in Lila's eyes, Elena's success was meant to be a symbolic success for all women like them; many of whom are languishing in brutal neighbourhoods like their own. Elena's success among the intelligentsia and Lila's struggle with her dreams reveal how Ferrante has framed power and their friendship in the context of writing and storytelling. Writing becomes ammunition in the hands of Ferrante herself and the characters she has created because both Elena and Lila's education puts them at odds with the reality of the world they are living in. Despite the brilliance of her husband Pietro, Elena realizes that he is pedantic and regressive whereas Lila's marriage to Stefano is abusive and violent in the most literal sense. In the third book, after Stefano has an affair, Lila confronts him and delivers the truth that Rino is not her son, which leads to more restrictions on her freedom until Enzo Scanno takes her away and they live together as platonic friends. Here, Ferrante provides another avenue for Lila to pursue her versatility as she and Enzo study together to become computer technicians while Lila also works at a sausage factory. Lila is once again revealing her incomparable skill in taking charge of her own education just like she did since childhood. The foremost affect that education has had in the lives of the two girls is that years later as grown women, they understand the way violence corrodes life at all levels. It distorts the relationship between a father and a daughter, a mother and a daughter and between married couples. It destroys the nature of parental authority and sullies the sanctity of marital ties and hence, corrupts the family which is the basic unit of society. Ferrante draws a link between the domestic and the political when Elena, dissatisfied with the mind numbing duties of wife and mother, she turns to politics during the 1970s violent clashes between the Communists and the Socialists in Italy. However, she finds that the political rallies are controlled by criminals. The physical and emotional aggression displayed all around her goes hand in hand with the persistent introspection that Elena undertakes as the narrator of the four novels. On the other hand, while working at the factory, Lila faces horrific sexual harassment and the deterioration of her health and is introduced to the radical political beliefs of her childhood friend, Pasquale. The collision of the personal and the political is further enhanced in the way Lila's speech about to the workers about the deplorable conditions of the factory, without her permission, is published by Pasquale. This turns Lila into a reluctant leader and to her shock, reveals that the factory is owned by the Solaras which in turn made Lila their employee. This is enough reason for Lila to quit working at

the factory. Elena and Lila took different paths towards reinvention but their genuine bond brings them together as Elena goes to Naples to take care of Lila and exposes the conditions of the factory through her writing which could endanger the safety of both of them. The looming presence of the Solaras serves to manifest the pro-capitalist fascism that would influence the Italian political landscape for most of the twentieth century. Their well groomed looks and lavish lifestyle enables them to accomplish the things that have most informed traditional standards of male power - dominion over territory such as their neighbourhood and beyond and in that process, dominion over the women inhabiting those spaces. For example, by the end of the third book, Lila has joined IBM as an assistant and later accepts a position at Michele Solara's data processing center en route to achieving a sense of financial security that had eluded her so far.

As young girls in the first book, Elena and Lila read a copy of *Little Women* together until it becomes tattered. Here, Ferrante probes the idea of whether it is possible to be a writer and be happy? Like Jo March who provides an authorial approach in Alcott's novel, the relevance of the art of writing in the lives of the two girls is used to explore their intersubjectivity as well the search for self-assertion. Most men in Ferrante's novels are infected with a malignancy that robs them of their discriminatory ability and makes them think that all women are the same. Their absence of critical reasoning which is however, found in the girls, reflects the absence of values in the society that they live in. In the second book, Lila turns to feminist readings to educate herself once again and seek the intellectual nourishment that truly sustains her. Meanwhile, Elena after feverishly writing a second novel without Pietro's help finds it rejected by both Adele, her mother-in-law and Lila. Her new attempt results in feminist writing that argues against women shaping their intelligence after men, which Elena realizes she has done it herself and it leaves her ashamed. Soon after, Elena begins an affair with Nino and as the third book concludes, she has decided to leave Pietro and informs Lila of her decision. Education provides a medium for the girls to distinguish themselves from the rigid and prejudiced inhabitants of their neighbourhood and their friendship enables each other to seek individual personhood while weaving their interdependence and solidarity of souls into its fulfillment. However, Lila's derision of Elena's decision to leave with Nino and her belief that it stems from jealousy demonstrates that their solidarity at times comes at the long end of a cycle of ruptures and reconciliations.

In Thorpe's novel too, education plays a crucial role in solidifying the fates of the two friends. For Mia, when life got in the way of her aspirations of leaving her decaying beach town; she terminates a pregnancy while struggling to deal with the emotional weight of her decision. As Mia narrates in the novel, she needed to pay a price for her dogged desires but a way out of her current existence would, in her eyes, prove to be the ultimate enchantment against her being continually being dealt a bad hand in life. She says,

"Did I feel the wrongness, the terrible violation of an ancient edict, when I lost that quickening inside me? Did I cry over the death of the child, whom I imagined would have been a girl, a daughter of the moon, like me, like Inanna? Of course I did. Did I spend my time at Yale, yes, at fucking Yale, getting As in all my coursework, falling in love with dead languages, learning to become myself and the woman I had every right to be, did I spend this time mourning and regretting my decision? Of course not."(27)

She adds, "They took me and I became who I became and the cost of it was a baby that never got to be born. That was the price and I paid it"(27). Mia contrasts her decision with the effortless righteousness that informs Lorrie Ann's decision to keep her baby. Having suffered the sudden loss of her father, Lorrie Ann seemingly attributes that tragedy to her reckless abandon and henceforth vows to lead her life with the moral centeredness that is expected from the daughter of a Christian rock musician. Only Mia realizes the folly of such an attitude, that simply being and acting like a teenage girl should not be cause for heaven's wrath. As Mia narrates, "She felt instinctively that if she killed an unborn child in order to go have fun in San Francisco, horrible, horrible things might happen to her in retribution. After all, her father had been taken from her just because she had eaten pepperoni and laughed at poor Brittany Slane's downy hair."(28)Here, Thorpe is exploring the nature of the guilt and shame that is cultivated early on in the minds of women where their individuality is usurped by their families leaving nothing in between for personal assertion other than compliance like Lorrie Ann or become a rebel as a response like Mia. At this stage, both the girls remain as reactionaries to the circumstances of their life rather than in command of them.

As Lorrie Ann's life begins to unravel, Mia flourishes with her talent for the Classics and falls in love with Franklin, a fellow scholar who introduces her to the cuneiform poetry about the Sumerian goddess, Inanna. The story of this Sumerian goddess that Mia is co-translating with

Franklin becomes the point where Mia weaves her friendship with Lorrie Ann with the mythical and poetic elements of the life of the goddess. Young Mia was sentimental and opinionated which allowed her to built up Lorrie Ann as the bastion of purity, goodness and also of misfortune. The cracks that appear in that idea progressively get bigger as Lorrie Ann's life is watched from the outside by Mia who both physically and emotionally puts more distance between them. For example, when Mia's dog dies, she calls Lorrie Ann to vent but the latter, already neck-deep in chores and child care, doesn't or does not want to relate to Mia's petty concerns. She was suddenly the cold dispenser of truth, having gained wisdom from the various blows life had gifted her. As Mia narrates, "Lorrie Ann sighed. "Mia", she said. I know you really don't want to hear this, but... it's just a dog. I know it feels like this profound thing right now, the nature of mortality and all that, but it only feels big and profound because it just happened, like just now. It won't feel like such a big deal tomorrow, and in a couple of months it won't seem like a big deal at all. So just, you know, like have a drink and rent a movie or something"(52). As Lorrie Ann increasingly became a martyr of sacrifice in Mia's eyes, the more her own life was contrasted with happiness which according to Mia was because she was too selfish to make poor decisions. By viewing herself as the force opposing everything Lorrie Ann represents, Mia herself makes the mistake that Lorrie Ann commits, of belatedly acknowledging the fluidity of their personalities.

Throughout the novel, Lorrie Ann is constructed as a contemporary parallel to Inanna and because Mia adores Inanna like she loves Lorrie Ann, she is able to view her friend's choices with more clarity than she did before. When Mia finds Lorrie Ann shoeless, emaciated and bleeding in the streets of Istanbul, she thinks to herself, "this must be what Inanna looked like when she came back from the underworld: beautiful but mad"(90). Mia equates Inanna rising from the dead to Lorrie Ann's regeneration and survival even if that survival means questioning the cultural understanding of motherhood as nothing but sacrifice. Mia and Lorrie Ann's conversations about the exclusive female experiences of abortion and motherhood would transform the way they have viewed their own friendship and demonstrate that as challenging and rewarding as their relationship has been; she must ultimately give up the rigid way in which she has remembered Lorrie Ann.

In the case of Cline's Evie, her education in sentimentality is intensified when she meets Suzanne and the other girls and it comes full circle when she meets Sasha who is struggling with the same insecurities that haunted Evie's own girlhood. Cline makes a generational leap once more and explores the contemporary expectations of girlhood and femininity and identifies similar traces of self-destruction and patriarchal control. Sasha, teenage girlfriend to Evie's ex-lover David's son Julian, is in thrall of a man who does not respect her or even fully see her. Her invisibility has not yet become a trap because "just talking about Julian was a source of sustenance" and as Evie says, "Girls were good at coloring in those disappointing blank spots"(139). Evie's fear of living a prim, ordered life by attending the same boarding school as her mother was a rejection of the mass produced individuality that would emerge from such spaces, inevitably leading to in her mind, the same kind of unhappiness that had afflicted her mother. So instead she sought adventure in the way inexperienced teenagers do; in rebellion and small acts of transgression. The scope of that transgressive nature is dangerously widened by the existence of Russell and Suzanne and their promise of happiness. The allure of the cultists in Cline's novel demonstrates their ability to take advantage of the fault lines that crack open a girl's sense of dignity. At best, they are meant to be used in bed and at worst, they are meant to be humiliated or even killed. Evie's thirst for mutiny as an antidote to emotional vacuum becomes a means to accelerate her tumult into adulthood as well as to punish her mother. The ultimate triumph of Cline's novel is to enable Evie to seek visibility by first unmasking the aura of self-importance that men such as the likes of Russell Hadrick wear in the most extreme sense whereas men like Evie's absent father occupy the other end of the spectrum. Here, Evie and Suzanne's friendship and Evie's easy existence with the other girls revealed the same catastrophic lack of direction that made them seek strength and assurance elsewhere. At the end of the novel, when Russell and the girls are arrested, it was the result of the need for attention that afflicted Helen, one of the girls involved in the murders. As Evie narrates, "Helen had been picked up in Bakersfield for using a stolen credit card. Just a week in county jail and they would have let her go, but she couldn't help bragging to her cellmate"(352). Evie adds, "Helen was probably flattered by the attention, unspooling the whole mess. Maybe even exaggerating, drawing out the haunted spaces between words, as in the incantation of a ghost story at a sleepover. We all want to be seen."(352)

In the end, Evie was left feeling like a "fugitive without a crime" but she manages to cease giving power to men who make her a participant in her self-abasement and then to detach any meaning from the ghost of the black bus that haunted her for years(352). As the novel concludes, Evie sees a man walking towards her on the beach and conjures up many scenarios including violent assault in which this encounter may end. However, she then adjusts her sense of self and decides to figuratively, leave the ranch and get off the black bus. By doing so, she sees the man for who he is, a stranger and "Just a man"(355).

In Tana French's novel, the exclusivity of an all girls boarding school provides the setting for the values that encompass girlhood in contemporary Dublin. Nancy G. Rosoff and Stephanie Spencer in their work detailing the development of friendship and femininity in school stories suggest that "female friendships be viewed 'within a cultural and social setting' to consider the role of sociability in the experiences of fictional schoolgirls and college women."(19) French highlights the claustrophobia of the boarding school along with the modern viciousness of schoolgirls to gain attention by any means such as the cruelty of Joanne Heffernan in making a fool out of one of her friends, Orla Burgess, to show off in front of a group of approving boys. Here, French raises the question if Joanne is simply a bully who enjoys the public humiliation of others or is her performance for the benefit of the opposite sex who consider the self-destructive tendencies of girls as desirable or entertainment. Rosoff and Spencer emphasize the influence of vague emotional vectors in directing the course of friendships which either be disastrous or life affirming. They add that,

"Central to the plots of all the stories in the school and college school genre is the notion of friendship. Readers quickly learn of the different groups of friends who provide the main characters in the stories and they are introduced to the values that bind these friendships together. The anti-heroes in the stories, the girls who challenge authority or exhibit unwonted snobbery, also have their friendship groups demonstrating how malign, as well as benign, influence can be exerted by girls, who lead the transient groups that fall apart once the leaders' lack of sincerity is apparent. Authors provide plenty of examples in the stories when misplaced superficial friendships lead to misunderstandings and upset the equilibrium of the friendship group and, consequently, the stability of the whole school community. Yet, friendship can be exclusive as well as inclusive and characters who fail to be accepted or do not 'fit' with the prevailing ethos

are portrayed as unhappy rather than independent souls. True independence arises from having a firm support network, not by ploughing a lone furrow."(20)

The competitive nature of rival cliques to demonstrate who showcases the right values is seen in the exchanges between Joanne's clique and Holly's clique. Joanne, Gemma and Alison roar with laughter as Orla, encouraged by them, asks out one of the Colm's boys, and naively falls into their trap despite being warned by Holly and her group that this is a joke at her expense. This scene is witnessed by Holly and her group including Becca who find it an example of yet another awful teenage ritual to score the attention of the opposite sex. As the narrator says, 'Because if you trust them more than us, ' Joanne says, cold enough to freeze Orla's face off, 'maybe they should be your best friends from now on'(54). Becca has the most sentimental understanding of this situation but cannot fully vocalize it. As the narrator says, "Orla's mouth is hanging open. For a second her eyes meet Becca's, stupid and desperate. Becca knows she has to say something-*Don't do it, he'll rip you to pieces in front of everyone..*"(54). The fear of being left without a network is still the scariest scenario for a teenage girl. Like the protagonists of Ferrante, Cline and Thorpe; the idea of enduring girlhood in isolation is a terrifying prospect for the girls at St. Kilda's and this pervasive ideology could turn every attempt at independence as a test of loyalty.

Another aspect of girlhood that informs French's novel is the tense negotiation of the girls with their burgeoning sexuality. As seen in the other texts chosen for this thesis, the search of adolescent girls for adult bodies and experiences remains unabated till they find a satisfying outcome to dull their curiosity. Rosoff and Spencer argue that the "role of sexuality as linked to femininity is complex. Most of the girls leave school and quickly enter marriage and motherhood, inferring to the reader that this is their destiny as adults. The homosocial world of the all female, close knit community can also be seen as a safe imaginative space for exploring relationships between women. Attitudes to the performance of femininity are closely linked to the informal policing of socially acceptable forms of female friendship linked to sexuality in the wider society."(17) Here, French's novel does not explore the sexual nature of female friendships, but she firmly situates sexuality and the performance of femininity within the realm of heterosexual relationships and their impact on the homosocial friendships. This is seen in the speculations surrounding the murder of Chris Harper and his involvement with numerous girls at

St. Kilda's. The noticeboard at St. Kilda's, also called The Secret Place, was the site where queries and declarations about the pressures of girlhood could be seen and addressed and was meant to provide a balance to the more darker, meaner instincts of young girls such as bullying their peers on the internet. The noticeboard existed to advertise the unspeakable in order to quell whatever disastrous results unsupervised internet access and adolescent emotions can conjure up together. The Headmistress at the school firmly believed it was a satisfying venting mechanism for young girls. She says, "The students pin cards on it, using images and captions to convey their messages anonymously-many of the cards are very creative. It gives the students a place to express emotions that they don't feel comfortable expressing elsewhere"(60). However, when a student, later revealed to be Holly, posts a card which to the reader could have been either a promise or threat to reveal Chris Harper's killer; the moderation and balance that was required in the halls of St. Kilda's is lost and opens up the school and its inhabitants to wider scrutiny.

It is important to note here that despite the efforts of the adults at the school to advertise the noticeboard as a safe space to express emotions, it can nevertheless provide a cloak of anonymity to anyone wishing to start a rumour without the fear of getting caught for the offence of harassment or intimidation. Here, in the words of the Headmistress, "We felt that it was the lesser of two evils. Last autumn, a group of girls set up a website that fulfilled the same function. The kind of behaviour you describe was rife. We have one student whose father took his own life a few years ago. The site was brought to our attention by her mother. Someone had posted a photo of the girl in question, with the caption 'If my daughter was this ugly I'd kill myself too.'"(60) This episode sets the tone for the mire of teenage angst and hate that the two detectives, Moran and Conway, must confront within the course of their murder investigation. Despite the elite status of the school, French demonstrates that the aspect of psychological violence is thriving within the privileged bubble of St. Kilda's. By delving into the slippery and fluid psyche of young girls, the novel undermines stereotypical assumptions about notions of femininity as performed in a all female environment. The myriad traits and impulses of the girls at the school question the notion of the adults at the school that some feminine traits are more controllable than the others. Rosoff and Spencer argue that "characters can present what are seen as 'natural' female traits - on the one hand, dissembling and calculating; on the other, caring and collaborative. Learning to negotiate these apparent contradictions, and to overcome the less

desirable aspects of their character, enables girls to be redeemed, to change, and provides a degree of autonomy over their lives."(19)

St. Kilda's as an educational institution while superficially providing an opportunity for its students to express themselves in the name of precaution, also perpetuates essentialist notions of femininity that foster an environment where anonymity becomes the veil to say anything and do anything. As the Headmistress says, "Girls like to reveal their secrets, and they like to be secretive."(63) She considers this tendency to be an exercise that matches the real world without understanding what compels the girls under her care to keep and guard secrets. Becca's affection for her friends that becomes the drive for her murderous intent in the novel is the same sentiment that drives Holly to post the card on the noticeboard and invite renewed focus on the school. Selena, the beautiful and thoughtful friend that both Becca and Holly want to protect and who was romantically involved with Chris Harper, keeps a copy of *Alice in Wonderland* by her bedside which could serve as a device by French to identify St. Kilda's as the ultimate rabbit hole for the young schoolgirls. They pour over fashion magazines, desperate to stand out and to please but fall into the trap of the tailored, mass produced homogeneity that pop culture has prepared for them. As the narrator says, "The make up hall in the Court is pimping a new line, so all the girls have had their make up done. Their faces are stiff and heavy-they're afraid to smile, in case something cracks or slips-but the new way they feel is worth it. Even before they got a first swig of cider or breath of smoke, they were sashaying bold, their new careful head-high walk turning them haughty and inscrutable, powerful. Next to them the boys look bare and young. To make up for it, they've gone louder and they're calling each other gay more often."(72) Holly's group is presented as the group that rejects homogenous categorization and Becca and Holly are especially presented as possessing a rich interiority and maturity that their peers find unexpected and mostly do not appreciate.

Rosoff and Spencer highlight the reflections of Janice Raymond about the nature of female affection to present the wider implications of networks or groups that foster solidarity among women. They state that "Aristotle's assertion that 'the friend is another self' was taken up by Raymond as she explored how women's friendships are vital to their creation of a sense of Self that is not assessed in relation to men as the dominant gender in society. She argued that women have been friends for a millennia. Women have been each other's best friends, relatives, stable

companions, emotional and economic supporters, and faithful lovers. But this tradition of female friendship has been distorted, dismantled, destroyed."(21) Rosoff Spencer point out Raymond's engagement with the political power of female friendship. They state that,

"She claimed that friendship is a social trust. It is an understanding that is constantly renewed, revitalized, and entered into not only by two or more women but by two or more political beings who claim social and political status for their Selves and others like their Selves. In setting out her vision for female friendship, Raymond identified a number of characteristics that can be seen as implicit in the stories of the female worlds of school and college in the novels. Thoughtfulness is one characteristic that Raymond defines as 'the ability to reason' that is combined with 'considerateness and caring'. Raymond also characterized friendship as a passion. Raymond described passion not as a sentimental emotion but one that has thoughtful integrity. Passion, she explained, is not restricted to those who are lovers but describes an intensity of feeling and attachment that may or may not be physical."(21)

The figure of Becca in French's novel demonstrates passion, as mentioned by Raymond, towards her group of friends and especially towards Selena whose involvement with Chris Harper was interpreted as a gross mistake that her friend needed to be rescued from. In the world of St. Kilda's where thoughtfulness is not necessarily rewarded and forward behaviour is used as currency to negotiate adolescent thrills and girlish anticipation of adult experiences. For example, Becca is confused and horrified when a terse exchange between Julia and one of the Colm's boys suddenly changes gears into flirtation and implied physical intimacy. As the narrator says, "So Julia not liking James Gillen is beside the point. The point out here is the hard handsome curve of his lips, the flecks of stubble along his jaw; the tingle sparking down her wrist veins when their fingers touch on the bottle. She holds his eye and licks a leftover drop off the rim of the bottle, with the tip of her tongue, and grins when his eyes widen."(74) The "here" refers to a patch of earth covered with tall weeds behind the local shopping center/the Court that the girls and boys from local schools have appropriated as their private space for drinking and sexual activities. They call this place, the Field. If the Court was a playground for mild flirtation and suggestive banter, the Field is where the natural outcome of such exchanges takes place. For the girls of St. Kilda's and the boys of Colm's; the separation between the figurative meanings of these two spaces represents their fear of falling behind in the rat race. Anyone who doesn't have a

story about the Field is a "total frigid freak"(76). This where the actual secrets lie and not in the cards put up on the noticeboard. The clearing in the school grounds where Holly and her group and countless other girls celebrate the rites of friendship in their own private niches; that is where the real secrets lie. The young girls and boys that populate French's novel exist in an environment where the term choice is just another product of boring prudishness and adult restrictions that hinders them from doing what everyone else is already doing. For Becca, such attitudes are revolting because it violates her sense of self and her pride. Hence, upon seeing Julia walk away with James Gillen to the Field, she is devastated. As the narrator adds, "Something between loss and pure panic hoots through Becca. She almost screams after them to come back, before its too late."(75)

It is these breathless anticipations that make the school a not so innocent space for equally not so innocent girls to give release to their desires. French demonstrates that the girlish antics and parlance of these adolescents do not hide the dangers that lurk beneath it such as bullying, peer pressure and depression. The girls are sometimes so cruel to each other that the actual horror affecting their lives is not the murder or the possibility that a killer is among them but it is the school itself. Becca represents the shy adolescent who is struggling to hold on to the idea that the ultimate possession of her mind and body must lie with her; not with peers who are desperate to please or with boys who are desperate to take advantage or are caught in a parallel trap of their desires clashing with peer pressure. When a much younger boy approaches Becca realizes once again how her value as a person has been determined by the quality of her performance of femininity. As the narrator says,

"It hits Becca: he thinks he's the only girl out here who might be desperate enough to snog him. He's decided she's the only one on his level. She wants to leap up and do a handstand, or get someone to race her fast and far enough to wreck them both: anything that will turn her body back into something that's about what it can do, not all about how it looks. She's fast, she's always been fast, she can cartwheel and backflip and climb anything; that used to be good, but now all that matters is that she has no tits. Her legs stretched out in front of her look limp and meaningless, made out of a bunch of lines that add up to exactly nothing."(77)

Within this unequal environment of an educational institution, French has attempted to portray female friendship as a catalyst to create safe spaces for the formation of a female subject that

does not depend on unequal gender relations for validation or individual assertion. The school story provides a space for girls to exercise their autonomy with a focus on aspects of sociability and the learning of a femininity through that sociability which is potentially fluid and strong. However, as French's novel demonstrates, aspects of their autonomy can be influenced by the boundaries that are set by an enclosed educational institution which is largely unchanging as opposed to the boundaries of girlhood and female friendship which are constantly involving.

French's representation of Holly and Becca also confront the idea that girlishness is not compatible with feminist identity. Scholars of girlhood studies have studied the implications of traces of feminist resistance in the experiences of adolescents even if they do not explicitly identify themselves as feminists. Jessica Ringrose and Emma Renold in their essay "Teen Feminist Killjoys? Mapping Girls' Affective Encounters with Femininity, Sexuality and Feminism at School" examine the potential of adolescent feminist identity to emerge in the context of "school-based teen peer cultures"(105). Now, even though the research undertaken by Ringrose and Renold is the result of data collected from a UK Welsh secondary school; their concerns when seen in the context of contemporary fictional girlhood as explored by French reveal similar questions about the contradictory negotiation of teen sexuality and feminist identity. This contradiction is most potently presented in the characters of Becca and her friends. The capacity of girls to deal with everyday sexism as examined by Ringrose and Renold do not look out place when seen in the context of how the girls at St. Kilda's are engaging with experiences of sexual harassment passed off as flirtation or mild sexual interest. For example, French presents the encounter between Julia and James Gilligen at the Field,

"He flicks her phone. 'You look good. You don't need a photo to tell you that.'

'No shit, Sherlock. I don't need you, either.'

"James ignores that. 'I know what I'd like a few pics of,' he says, and grins at Julia's boobs."

"He obviously expects her to blush and zip up her hoodie, or squeal and get outraged-either one would be a win for him. Becca is blushing for her, but Julia isn't about to give him the satisfaction. 'Believe me buddy,' she says. 'You can't handle these'."(73)

Ringrose and Renold argue that "mainstream postfeminist media representations tend to produce a projective figure of the abject feminist as a man-hating, anti-sex, prudish, butch, ugly, defeminized, and almost always adult or older women. Attempting to occupy the position of young feminist brings contradictions to the fore for girls, since postfeminist versions of sexy femininity are constructed in opposition to feminism. These contradictions maybe intensified for the young teen feminist trying on this identity. If feminism is represented as an abject identity that produces an undesirable and unsexy (hetero)femininity, then how do girls manage or contradictions? What is the energetic and emotional toll of these contradictory affective processes on young teen feminists?"(105). Within the world of *St. Kilda's*, the title of "total frigid freak"(76) replaces the term "feminist killjoy"(106) discussed by Sara Ahmed and highlighted by Ringrose and Renold in their essay. Ringrose and Renold state that "Ahmed theorizes the 'figure of the feminist killjoy', whose negativity is felt to kill joy insisting on the unpleasant truths of sexism and by challenging taken-for-granted, normal, and desired gendered and sexual power dynamics"(106). This conflict is presented by French in the exchange between Holly and her friends, "Selena says, 'At least we've got the choice. If you want to be with someone, you can. If you don't want to, you don't have to.'

"Yeah,' Holly says. She doesn't sound convinced. 'I guess'.

'You don't.'

"Right. Except if you don't, hello, you're a total frigid freak.'

"Becca says, 'I'm not a total frigid freak.'

"I know you're not. I didn't say that.' Holly clarifies and continues, "Just...why not do it, you know? When it's hassle if you don't, and there's no reason why not?"(76).

The perceived race against time for the young girls and boys in French's novel to hurtle towards adulthood sets the tone of the novel where the adolescent characters have yet to understand that the cost of self-assertion is high and that the negation of the female self should not be confused with popularity or increased visibility. Here, I would like to argue that the concept of female friendship would act as the stabilizing factor in the girlhood of these characters in order to identify the paradoxes that problematize their femininity and identity formation.

Chapter Five: The Rebel Mothers

The significance of mother-daughter relationships in demonstrating the emergence of a female subject has been explored in fiction where the maternal figure is usually engaged in directly influencing their daughter's identity formation. In the chosen texts by Ferrante, Cline, and Thorpe; the corporeality of the maternal figure as well the cultural veneration of motherhood in the context of sacrifice and selflessness is examined by the authors. Katrin Georgi-Wehling in her essay "Playing with the Maternal Body: Violence, Mutilation, and the Emergence of the Female Subject in Ferrante's Novels" suggests that Ferrante's novels "explore new notions of feminine identity and rethink fundamental aspects of gender relations and social constructs, most prominently of motherhood. These reflections, however, remain profoundly tinged by the patriarchal structures that she set out to expose and subvert."⁽¹⁾ She adds that, "the maternal body- which appears as violating or violated in its inaccessibility, repulsive appearance, or crippled status- stands at the very center of the author's reflections on the troubled and discontinuous emergence of the female subject."⁽¹⁾ Elena's rejection of her mother is presented to us through the unforgiving disdain on the part of Elena's mother (who is unnamed but can be called as Signora Greco) and fear and loathing on the part of her daughter. As Elena says, in the first book,

"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 the damaged leg. She limped and her step agitated me, especially at night, when she couldn't sleep and walked along the hall to the kitchen, returned, started again. Sometimes I heard her angrily crushing with her heel the cockroaches that came through the front door, and I imagined her with furious eyes, as when she got mad at me."⁽⁴⁴⁾

As the adult Elena narrates her fear and shame that her mother invoked in her; those emotions are also tinged with the understanding that crushing poverty, a violent marriage and the burden of motherhood has taken a toll on her mother's life and most tellingly, on her body. In this regard, Signora Greco is not alone because in her Neapolitan neighbourhood or *rioni*, the crushing circumstances of the lives of its residents is imprinted on their faces. Their faces are

clothed with a weariness that comes with the mixture of crime, violence and conflict that informs the texture of their existence. In contrast it is the crime lords and mobsters who are obscenely abundant in proportions and cruelty. For example, Signor Peluso, Carmen's father and the accused killer of Don Achille, is described by Elena as "the image of despair"(36) whereas the Don himself is subjected to the imagination of Elena and produced as "an evil being of uncertain animal-mineral physiognomy, who-it seemed-sucked blood from others while never losing any himself, maybe it wasn't even possible to scratch him"(36). The unequal distribution of wealth and the power that comes with it cemented the social hierarchy of the neighbourhood and the sets of families such as the carpenter(Peluso), the porter (Elena's father) and the shoemaker(Lila's father) among others had to abide by the unwritten rules that tightly controlled their existence. It will be much later that the girls would start to make connections between the destitution, violence, animosity that together made their life difficult. Early hints were provided in the warnings given to children about never speaking to or talking about Don Achille. Their curiosity about Carmen's father accusing Don Achille of ruining his business would be satiated years later when Signor Peluso's son Pasquale, a staunch Communist, angered by the sight of fourteen year old Lila dancing with Marcello Solara, launched into an angry tirade about the Solaras' Fascist connections and their accumulation of dirty money at the expense of the neighbourhood. Hence, Lila would be first among the girls to read and think, as Elena narrates, "about the terrible world we had been born into"(155). Pasquale's angry tirade would stir in Lila the desire to understand the political upheaving around her. As Elena narrates,

"He was shouting insults, shouting at the top of his lungs, his eyes like a madman's, and there was no way to calm him. He was angry with Michele, of course, but above all with Marcello and Stefano. He said things that weren't capable of understanding. He said that the Bar Solara had always been a place for loan sharks from the Camorra, that it was the base for smuggling and for collecting votes for the monarchists. He said that Don Achille had been a spy for the Nazi Fascists, he said that the money Stefano was using to expand the grocery store his father had made on the black market."(152)

In the midst of the actions of the other boys, Antonio -who wanted to confront the Solaras for what they did to Ada and Enzo -who wanted to get them all off the street; Lila's response was to shed tears, for the first time, in front of Elena and a host of other girls who were also weeping

and then question Pasquale about who were the Nazis and what he meant by the black market. Pasquale's answers stimulated Lila's thirst to seek more answers but ultimately, being true to her self, she decided to educate herself without any interventions by Pasquale. As Elena narrates,

"Soon she became dissatisfied with Pasquale. It was as if he had set in motion a mechanism in her head and now her job was to put order into a chaotic mass of impressions. Increasingly intent, increasingly obsessed, probably overcome herself by an urgent need to find a solid vision, without cracks, she complicated his meager information with some book she got from the library. So she gave concrete motives, ordinary faces to the air of abstract apprehension that as children we had breathed in the neighbourhood. Fascism, Nazism, the war, the Allies, the monarchy, the republic- the turned them into streets, houses, faces, Don Achille and the black market, Alfredo Peluso the Communist, the Camorrist grandfather of the Solaras, the father, Silvio, a worse Fascist than Marcello and Michele, and her father, Fernando the shoemaker, and my father, all--all--in her eyes stained to the marrow by shadowy crimes, all hardened criminals or acquiescent accomplices, all bought for practically nothing. She and Pasquale enclosed me in a terrible world that left no escape."(154)

Here, I would like to argue that Ferrante presents the effect of the use of female gaze over the history of the neighbourhood which can be seen as extension of the fraught history of the nation. Through Lila's critical lens, Ferrante is demonstrating how Lila and Elena have separated themselves in the manner in which they deal with the aspects of violence and trauma in their lives. Unlike their mothers, they would choose to critically and intellectually dissect the events around them and this highlights the difficult path for women who want to see and know rather than be looked at and be known; women who have had to fight for the right to think and observe, just the author does herself through her writing.

Georgi-Wehling has linked Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject of the maternal figure to the formation of the female subject where the subject must break away from the mother in order to be autonomous but is present as "both the other that threatens the boundaries of the self and an intrinsic yet unstable part of the self"(3). The notion of the abject here, is "that refers to the human reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning, caused by the loss of distinction between subject and object, self and other."(3) Hence, Georgi-Wehling argues that the "linkages between the processes of individuation and the maternal figure, the contrasting feelings that afflict

Ferrante's female protagonists as they attempt to negotiate a new form of subjectivity that is separate from the mother, as well as the author's textual constructions of the repulsive maternal body, can be productively argued in light of Kristeva's notion of abjection."⁽³⁾ The maternal figures who inhabit the Neapolitan neighbourhood of 1950s Italy are both violent and violated. They move and act with a dark menace that surpasses the brute force of the men, and even in the eyes of their children, this female rage is more destructive; a rage that has been simmering over many years.

Even though Elena's father is capable of being threatening towards her and beats up her mother; it is with her mother that Elena associates shame and hatred - a symbol of all the things she cannot allow herself to be. As Elena narrates in the first book, "I felt a double humiliation: I was shamed because I hadn't done as well as I had in elementary school, and I was ashamed of the difference between the harmonious, modestly dressed figure of the teacher. between her Italian that resembled that of the Iliad, and the misshapen figure of my mother, her old shoes, her dull hair, the dialect bent into an ungrammatical Italian."⁽⁹²⁾ Here, in the course of their lives, as both Lila and Elena would struggle with motherhood, their condition would reveal their status as women who were not sufficiently mothered and women who cannot adequately mother their children. This is a trap that women especially in the contemporary times cannot free themselves of where the expectations and respect that come from adherence to the traditional image of the mother signify a heavy burden. Ferrante has associated the use of the dialect as an exercise in crudeness and unpleasantness throughout the four novels where the characters reserve their speech in dialect to when they are most furious, under duress and expressing violence. Elena's mother becomes an obvious example and so do the men of the neighbourhood but during a confrontation with Marcello Solara, Lila too uses the dialect to unreservedly convey her contempt for him. As Elena narrates in the first book, "As we left I heard Lila saying indignantly to Enzo, in the thickest dialect, "He touched me, did you see: me, that shit. Luckily Rino wasn't there. If he does it again, he's dead."⁽¹⁵²⁾ Elena's aspirations for sophistication and refinement in her life are mirrored in her drive to excel in Greek and Latin. Elena's desire to distance herself from her mother and her crude language also denote class-based stigma where the Greco family's poverty puts them at the bottom of the social ladder.

Georgi-Wehling has also pointed out that the trope of the dolls in Ferrante's tetralogy is important to understand the desire for the mother's affection and also the confrontation with its inaccessibility. In the first book, when Lila pushes Elena's doll Tina into the dark cellar of Don Achille's house, the doll is wearing a "blue dress that her mother had made for her in a rare moment of happiness"(30) and this event according to Georgi-Wehling suggests a "metaphorical severance of the bond between mother and daughter"(7). She adds that the "associations between the doll and the notion of loss are further reinforced by the fact that Lila gives her daughter- who disappears in the last volume of the Neapolitan novels -the same name as Elena's doll, Tina" and the "final, mysterious reappearance of the dolls, which seem to act as placeholders in the various dynamics of reversal, doubling, and mirroring that accompany the two women's often duplicitous friendship coincides with Lila's disappearance"(8). The disappearance of Lila's daughter Tina also demonstrates the ugly thread of violence that keeps circling back into the lives of the two women where the culprit has consistently been the Camorra crime syndicate. The fear and guilt that Elena carries with herself about hating her own mother and not becoming like her, comes to the fore in the third and fourth books, when dissatisfied with her marriage, Elena begins an affair with Nino and decides to leave Florence with him. Her husband, Pietro challenges her to explain the reasons of her departure to their daughters, Dede and Elsa, in a bid to shame her into staying. This pains Elena immensely but she nevertheless, decides to separate from Pietro for good. This decision which would be deemed selfish by society was essential for happiness and the exercise of her autonomy but it is precisely that very reason that condemns Elena in the eyes of others. What follows is her fallout with Lila over her decision to choose Nino over her family where Lila perhaps understands the risk of Elena giving herself fully to a man who is ill-equipped to handle the independence of women. As Elena narrates in the fourth book, *The Story of the Lost Child*,

"Today I think that if it had been only the insult that wounded me—You're an idiot, she had shouted on the telephone when I told her about Nino, and she had never, ever spoken to me like that before—I would have soon calmed down. In reality, what mattered more than that offense was the mention of Dede and Elsa. Think of the harm you're doing to your daughters, she had warned me, and at the moment I had paid no attention. But over time those words acquired greater weight, and I returned to them often. Lila had never displayed the slightest interest in Dede and Elsa; almost certainly she didn't even remember their names. If, on the phone, I

mentioned some intelligent remark they had made, she cut me off, changed the subject. And when she met them for the first time, at the house of Marcello Solara, she had confined herself to an absentminded glance and a few pat phrases—she hadn't paid the least attention to how nicely they were dressed, how neatly their hair was combed, how well both were able to express themselves, although they were still small. And yet I had given birth to them, I had brought them up, they were part of me, who had been her friend forever: she should have taken this into account—I won't say out of affection but at least out of politeness—for my maternal pride. Yet she hadn't even attempted a little good-natured sarcasm; she had displayed indifference and nothing more. Only now—out of jealousy, surely, because I had taken Nino—did she remember the girls, and wanted to emphasize that I was a terrible mother, that although I was happy, I was causing them unhappiness. The minute I thought about it I became anxious. Had Lila worried about Gennaro when she left Stefano, when she abandoned the child to the neighbor because of her work in the factory, when she sent him to me as if to get him out of the way? Ah, I had my faults, but I was certainly more a mother than she was."(14)

Ferrante in an interview with *Hazlitt* magazine cautioned against women lowering their guard because of love along with expectations to completely trust the object of their affection. She said that "It seems to me risky to forget that no one gave us the freedoms we have today—we took them. For that very reason they can at any moment be taken away again. So just that, we mustn't ever lower our guard. It's wonderful to give oneself fully to another, we women know how to do it. And we should continue. It's a serious mistake to retreat, giving up the marvelous feelings we're capable of. Yet it's indispensable to keep alive the sense of self. In Naples, certain girls who showed the marks of beatings would say, even with pleased half smiles, He hits me because he loves me. No one can dare to hurt us because he loves us, not a lover, not a friend, not even children." And yet, this is what Elena and Lila do to each other to present a highly complex portrait of female friendship that is brutally honest in its simultaneous search for female identity and hence, they end up judging each other with the same yardstick that they used for their own mothers. Their inability to provide stability for their children goes against the conventional image of the mother who has a natural ability to nurture and care. Ferrante through the dilemma of Elena reveals how women are taught to internalize the erasure of their identity at the cost of so called stability and continuity that is not rooted in their own desires.

However, the nature of the friendship between Elena and Lila dictates that ill feeling will eventually give way to reconciliation and introspection. Their reflection and examination of their lives is the medium to demonstrate the complexity of the female experience. As the women age, they not only wrestle with their unfilled desires but also how that inadequacy has impacted their friendship. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"I let myself be carried away by the events of my life, only because it's easier to write them. But I have to avoid this choice. I mustn't take the first path, on which, if I set myself aside, I would end up finding ever fewer traces of Lila—since the very nature of our relationship dictates that I can reach her only by passing through myself. But I shouldn't take the second, either. That, in fact, I speak of my experience in increasingly greater detail is just what she would certainly favor. Come on—she would say—tell us what turn your life took, who cares about mine, admit that it doesn't even interest you. And she would conclude: I'm a scribble on a scribble, completely unsuitable for one of your books; forget it, Lenù, one doesn't tell the story of an erasure. What to do, then? Admit yet again that she's right? Accept that to be adult is to disappear, is to learn to hide to the point of vanishing? Admit that, as the years pass, the less I know of Lila?"(15).

Elena's endeavour to write an incredibly detailed account of Lila's life and hers is a means to counteract Lila's desire for erasure but also reveals Elena's desire to interrogate herself and her choices in life. In Ferrante's interview with *Hazlitt* magazine, she answers the question regarding the accusations of narcissism that contemporary female writing has had to deal with and why she considers the women who "practice a conscious surveillance on themselves who before were watched over by parents, by brothers, by husbands, by the community." Ferrante considers the "women who practise surveillance on themselves are the heroines of our time". She says,

"I've never felt narcissism to be a sin. It seems, rather, a cognitive tool that, like all cognitive tools, can be used in a distorted way. No, I think it's necessary to be absolutely in love with ourselves. It's only by reflecting on myself with attention and care that I can reflect on the world. It's only by turning my gaze on myself that I can understand others, feel them as my kin. On the other hand it's only by assiduously watching myself that I can take control and train myself to give the best of myself. The woman who practices surveillance on herself without letting herself be the object of surveillance is the great innovation of our times."

This charge of narcissism reveals the deep prejudice against the female gaze and against women who refuse to be viewed with the male gaze. Ferrante's insistence on introspection and reflection allows her characters to wield it as a weapon whenever they find their agency under threat, not from the obvious male violence that wounds but from the far greater danger that threatens to make them invisible - love. In the fourth book, when Elena flies to Montpellier with Nino for a conference she is at first overjoyed to be with him while leaving her family suspended in the corner of her mind. She befriends a French scholarly couple, Augustin and Colombe, and bonds with them through their similar predicament of separated families. However, crippling doubts about Nino's fidelity, in a moment of separation from the ardour of her feelings, allows her to see clearly the perspective that had produced her second piece of writing - a feminist critique of the "male invention of woman"(21). As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"Until that moment I hadn't talked about myself to anyone, even Nino. I had been the smiling but nearly mute woman who slept with the brilliant professor from Naples, the woman always pasted to him, attentive to his needs, to his thoughts. But now I said with false cheer: It's Nino who has to return, I have an engagement in Nanterre; a work of mine is about to come out—or maybe it's already out—a half essay, half story; I just might leave with you, and stop in at the publisher's. The two looked at me as if only at that moment had I actually begun to exist, and they went on to ask me about my work. I told them, and it turned out that Colombe knew well the woman who was the head of the small but—as I discovered at that moment—prestigious publishing house. I let myself go, I talked with too much vivacity and maybe I exaggerated a little about my literary career. I did it not for the two French people but, rather, for Nino. I wanted to remind him that I had a rewarding life of my own, that if I had been capable of leaving my children and Pietro, then I could also do without him, and not in a week, not in ten days: immediately."(21)

The contradictory emotions of feeling wanted by Nino and yet being able to assert herself independent of him wrecks any thoughts of stability that Elena nurtured when she left Pietro. In many ways, her new relationship is mirroring her past one. Elena's emotional oscillation begins to affect her reaction to the reviews of her writing that had earlier been integral to dissipate Nino's control over her. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"They were written by women—I had never heard of them, but Colombe and the two women had—and they praised the book enthusiastically. I should have been pleased; the day before, I

had been compelled to sing my own praises, and now I no longer needed to. Yet I found that I couldn't feel excited. It was as if, since I loved Nino and he loved me, that love made everything good that happened to me and would happen to me nothing but a pleasant secondary effect."(23)

It is important to note here that Ferrante also presents the perspectives of the mothers who intervene in the lives of their children whereas the changed dynamics between Elena and her daughters -Dede and Elsa- reflect the possessive demands made by children on their mother's bodies. Their cries as she left them repeatedly to go to Montpellier and then for her book tours are described without any emotional overtures as if to denote Elena's difficult yet steady decision-making. Through the perspective of Pietro's mother, Adele and of Elena's mother, the fate of the two young daughters is foregrounded but in the case of Adele, she recognizes Elena's status as someone who has fallen out of love with one person and is in love with another. Above all, she was mindful of Elena's ambition. This would, however, later take a nasty turn when Elena tries to claim her daughters for good. On the other hand, her own mother's sudden intervention in her daughter's marital crisis reduced Elena to the helpless girl of her childhood who was beaten by her mother. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"It took a few days for Adele to manifest her opinion plainly: she wanted me to return to myself and to my husband. But it took several weeks to convince her that I really didn't want either of those things. In that time she never raised her voice, never lost her temper, didn't even comment sarcastically about my frequent long phone calls to Nino. She was more interested in the phone calls from the two women in Nanterre, who were keeping me informed of the progress of the book and of a calendar of engagements that would lead to a tour in France. She wasn't surprised at the positive reviews in the French papers; she was sure that the book would soon get the same attention in Italy, she said that in our papers she would have been able to obtain better. Above all she insistently praised my intelligence, my education, my courage, and on no account did she defend her son, who, besides, was never around."(24)

Elena's mother's arrival in Florence to convince her daughter to repair her relationship with Pietro leads to an extraordinarily violent scene where Elena against her wishes but pushed to provocation by her mother; turns into her for a brief moment. The confrontation between Elena and her mother showed how deeply the latter had internalized the violent patriarchal norms that defined Elena's childhood and here, against her adult daughter, she was using the same means to

shame her daughter's choices, her feelings and beat her into submission. Pointedly, for Elena, this was not just humiliation at a personal level but in front of Pietro, who symbolized the cultural elite, the bearer of effortless refinement and dignity that she had toiled to acquire and cultivate in herself; Elena experienced a double stripping of all value and merit as the malignant crudeness of her mother's body and language invaded her home. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"She made me a long speech, limping back and forth in the living room. She praised my husband in an exaggerated fashion, she ordered me to ask his forgiveness immediately. When I didn't, she began to beg him herself to forgive me and swore on Peppe, Gianni, and Elisa that she would not go home if the two of us did not make peace. At first, with all her hyperbole, she seemed to be making fun of both me and my husband. The list she made of Pietro's virtues appeared infinite, and—I have to admit—she didn't stint on mine, either. She emphasized endlessly that, when it came to intelligence and scholarship, we were made for each other. She urged us to think of Dede's good—Dede was her favorite granddaughter, she forgot to mention Elsa—the child understood everything and it wasn't right to make her suffer."(45)

Here, against her best efforts, the grime of the Neapolitan neighbourhood had finally sullied her Florentine life. Elena continues,

"But when she grabbed me for the hundredth time, insisting I admit that I had made a serious mistake, I couldn't take it anymore, her hands offended me and I pulled away. I said something like: Enough, Ma, it's pointless, I can't stay with Pietro anymore, I love someone else. It was a mistake. I knew her, she was just waiting for a small provocation. Her litany broke off, things changed in a flash. She slapped me violently, shouting nonstop: Shut up, you whore, shut up, shut up. And she tried to grab me by the hair, she cried that she couldn't stand it any longer, that it wasn't possible that I, I, should want to ruin my life, running after Sarratore's son, who was worse, much worse, than that man of shit who was his father. Once, she cried, I thought it was your friend Lina leading you on this evil course, but I was wrong, you, you, are the shameless one; without you, she's become a fine person. Damn me that I didn't break your legs when you were a child. You have a husband of gold who makes you a lady in this beautiful city, who loves you, who has given you two daughters, and you repay him like this, bitch? Come here, I gave birth to you and I'll kill you. She was on me, I felt as if she really wanted to kill me. In those

moments I felt all the truth of the disappointment that I was causing her, all the truth of the maternal love that despaired of subjecting me to what she considered my good—that is, what she had never had and what I instead had and what until the day before had made her the most fortunate mother in the neighborhood—and was ready to turn into hatred and destroy me to punish me for my waste of God's gifts. So I pushed her away, I pushed her shouting louder than she was. I pushed her involuntarily, instinctively, with such force that I made her lose her balance and she fell to the floor. Pietro was frightened. I saw it in his face, in his eyes: my world colliding with his. Certainly in all his life he had never witnessed a scene like that, words so aggressive, reactions so frenzied. My mother had overturned a chair, she had fallen heavily. Now she had trouble getting up, because of her bad leg, she was waving one arm in an effort to grab the edge of the table and pull herself up. But she didn't stop, she went on screaming threats and insults at me. She didn't stop even when Pietro, shocked, helped her up with his good arm. Her voice choked, angry and at the same time truly grieved, eyes staring, she gasped: You're not my child anymore, he's my child, him, not even your father wants you anymore, not even your siblings; Sarratore's son is bound to stick you with the clap and syphilis, what did I do wrong to come to a day like this, oh God, oh God, God, I want to die this minute, I want to die now. She was so overwhelmed by her suffering that—incredibly—she burst into tears. I ran away and locked myself in the bedroom. I didn't know what to do; never would I have expected that a separation would involve such torture. I was frightened, I was devastated. From what obscure depth, what presumption, had come the determination to push back my mother with her own physical violence? I became calmer only when, after a while, Pietro knocked and said softly, with an unexpected gentleness: Don't open the door, I'm not asking you to let me in; I just want to say that I didn't want this, it's too much, not even you deserve it."(46)

Here, Elena's mother has accepted the colonization of her mind through the enjoyment of her newfound riches; the respectability that comes with it and the contentment it brings her. Therefore, Elena becomes the destroyer of that satisfaction that has been made possible by the involvement of Elena's sister Elisha with the Solaras. Elena has now become the disappointment that her mother had thought her to be. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"I was ashamed of the shove I had given her, I was ashamed of her and of myself, I wanted to apologize, embrace her, but I was afraid that she would misunderstand and be convinced that I

had given in. If she had gone so far as to assert that I was the black soul of Lila, and not Lila mine, I must have been a truly intolerable disappointment to her. I said to myself, to excuse her: her unit of measure is the neighborhood; there everything, in her eyes, is arranged for the best; she feels related to the Solaras thanks to Elisa; her sons finally work for Marcello, whom she proudly calls her son-in-law; in those new clothes she wears the sign of the prosperity that has rained down on her; it's natural therefore that Lila, working for Michele Solara, in a stable home with Enzo, so rich she wants to bequeath her parents the small apartment they live in, appears to her much more successful than me. But arguments like that served only to further mark the distance between her and me; we no longer had any point of contact."(47)

Here, the reference to Lila touches upon Elena's fervent desire to escape the lineage of women like her mother who personify unwanted forms of selfhood and since childhood, Elena has wanted to join and stay abreast of Lila's frenzied pace of growth, despite the fact that it is Elena who has literally escaped the confines of her rough neighbourhood whereas Lila has not. This brings us to one of the biggest concerns in the nature of their friendship - who is the brilliant one? Elena's struggles in her personal life to assert herself which seems to be a victory for female autonomy and yet is concerned if she will always be inferior to Lila, who has not celebrated as an author but will remain as the superior of the two. She seems to be rewarded and simultaneously haunted by her ambition to leave Naples behind whereas Lila stays there, her dreams mostly unfulfilled. She is wrecked with guilt when she has to leave the care of her daughters to her in-laws but then must focus and work hard on her literary engagements so that she can earn enough to care for them on her own. Hence, she is troubled as a mother, by a very modern conundrum, that may separate her struggles from the harsher reality of her mother's life but has the similar root of being neglectful of their child's needs. As Adele says to Elena in the fourth book, convincing her to leave Dede and Elsa in her care, "Think about it. A woman separated, with two children and your ambitions, has to take account of reality and decide what she can give up and what she can't."(48) On the other hand, Lila's prodigious nature and relentless wildness stands for a kind of female expression that has to be created from the power of imagination to exist; she remains beaten but unbroken in the squalor of Naples. In the wake of her collapsed marriage, Elena eventually returns to live in Naples along with her daughters, at one point living in the apartment directly above Lila's and their relationship once again resumes robustly with Lila watching over Elena's children so that she can focus on her literary career. The

evolution of the mothers is repeated in the lives of their daughters when Lila's daughter vanishes from the streets one day whereas Elena's child takes on the same rough journey towards self-actualization and independence. Therefore, in the novels, the two friends were shaped by their relationship with their mothers whose unrealized, wasted lives led them to attempt to cure that inheritance with education and in the end, their journey tragically comes full circle.

Another important aspect that limits Elena's abilities to break free from conventional image of motherhood is due to the residue of another failure of hers -marriage to Pietro Ariota. Elena struggles to free herself from the weight of her husband's name that has been amplified because unlike herself, it is now attached to her children. In an intense game of power play, her in-laws, Guido and Adele, makes it clear to her that in severing her ties with Pietro, she must also give up *their son's* daughters. As Elena narrates in the fourth book, "When Dede and Elsa said good night, he asked his granddaughters in a sort of good-humored ritual: "What is the name of these two lovely young ladies?" "Dede." "Elsa." "And then? Grandfather wants to hear the whole name." "Dede Airota." "Elsa Airota." "Airota like who?" "Like Papa." "And also?" "Like Grandpa." "And what's Mamma's name?" "Elena Greco." "And is your name Greco or Airota?" "Airota." "Bravo. Good night, dear ones, sweet dreams."(52) Here, added to Elena's sins is the less than ideal image of the man she has left Pietro for, Nino who "is intelligence without traditions"(53). By choosing Nino, Elena joins him as another who is not worthy to be included in the grand traditions of Italian intelligentsia; because they are not established institutions like the Ariota family, resting on accumulated wealth and intellectual influence but are instead as Guido describes Nino, "fickle"(53) and as Adele describes them both, "unreliable"(53). Guido insults Nino latest writings and therefore his intellectual prowess which is then linked to his subsequent rank in the social hierarchy of the intellectual elite. "And in a suddenly contemptuous tone he relegated him to the heap of those who considered it more urgent to make the gears of neocapitalism function rather than to continue to demand transformations in social relations and in production"(53). By choosing Nino, Elena too, has therefore rescinded her exalted position as one of the intellectual elite according to her in-laws and this is seen in Guido's reception of Elena's latest work. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"At a mention of feminism Guido's composure suddenly shattered, an unexpected malice appeared in his eyes, and he began to hum sarcastically, red in the face—he who in general had

an anemic complexion—a couple of slogans he had heard: Sex, sex behind the wall, who has orgasms of us all? No one; and also: We're not machines for reproduction but women fighting for liberation . He sang in a low voice and laughed, all excited. When he realized that he had unpleasantly surprised me, he grabbed his glasses, cleaned them carefully, withdrew to his study."(52)

Here, both Elena's personal and intellectual assertion is ridiculed by the male power that controls the Italian literary landscape and that which considers itself the judge and jury of her personal choices. In short, Elena Greco as herself is worth nothing but her children who have Pietro's name are more valuable than she is; they are the fruit of the grand tree from which she has chosen to break free and therefore, will not and cannot be surrendered to rot with her in obscurity. As Adele says to Elena in the fourth book,

“What does it mean that Nino is intelligence without traditions?” She looked at me ironically. “That he’s no one. And for a person who is no one to become someone is more important than anything else. The result is that this Signor Sarratore is an unreliable person.” “I, too, am an intelligence without traditions.” She smiled. “Yes, you are, too, and in fact you are unreliable.” Silence. Adele had spoken serenely, as if the words had no emotional charge but were limited to recording the facts. Still, I felt offended. “What do you mean?” “That I trusted a son to you and you didn’t treat him honestly. If you wanted someone else, why did you marry him?” “I didn’t know I wanted someone else.” “You’re lying.” I hesitated, I admitted: “I’m lying, yes, but why do you force me to give you a linear explanation; linear explanations are almost always lies. You also spoke badly of Pietro, in fact you supported me against him. Were you lying?” “No. I was really on your side, but within a pact that you should have respected.” “What pact?” “Remaining with your husband and children. You were an Airota, your daughters were Airotas. I didn’t want you to feel unsatisfied and unhappy, I tried to help you be a good mother and a good wife. But if the pact is broken everything changes. From me and from my husband you’ll have nothing anymore, in fact I’ll take away everything I’ve given you.” I took a deep breath, I tried to keep my voice calm, just as she continued to do. “Adele,” I said, “I am Elena Greco and my daughters are my daughters. I don’t give a damn about you Airotas.” She nodded, pale, and her expression was now severe. “It’s obvious that you are Elena Greco, it’s now far too obvious. But the children are my son’s daughters and we will not allow you to ruin them.”(54)

Adele's character presents the image of a violent mother in the sense that even as a woman herself, she is inflexible and manipulative when it suits her and is driven by her desire to protect her son and her family's name at all costs. Eventually, after Elena refuses to be cowed by her mother-in-law, Pietro transforms into a much more collaborative co-parent which is a refreshing change in the way male characters have thought and acted throughout the novels. However, Nino learns that Adele has tried her best to derail Elena's career by sabotaging book sales and influencing reviews of her work in order to discredit her not only as a woman, mother but also most importantly as a public intellectual. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"According to him, my mother-in-law was also behind the meager number of reviews in the Italian press. As a result, if the book had nevertheless made a name for itself, certainly the credit should go not to kind second thoughts from Dottoressa Airota but to the force of my writing. Thus, I learned that this time I owed nothing to Adele, although she continued to tell me I did whenever I went to Genoa. That gave me confidence, made me proud, I was finally convinced that the period of my dependence was over."(58)

In her treatment of motherhood, Ferrante has explored the themes of sexuality, violence and intellectual agency. Elena's decision to leave her marriage and celebrate her sexuality outside of it goes against the culturally motivated monolith of meaning that has rendered mothers as sexless beings. Lila, too, struggles with the duties of motherhood and her ambition to distinguish herself amidst her insufferable circumstances. For both women, their children take the brunt of their decisions and are also hurt by them in turn. The disappearance of Tina, Lila's daughter being the biggest casualty. But Ferrante is also able to foreground the friendship of the two women who become each other's caretaker and champion when brought together once again by a mixture of affection and necessity. Through the depiction of violent and violating mothers, Ferrante presents not just the disturbing portrayals of maternity and selfhood but also focuses upon Elena relationship with her neighbourhood and the city of Naples that has contributed towards the creation of such corrupted relationships between parents and their children. By the fourth book, Elena has come to terms with the Neapolitan identity in her blood and though she is earnest in understanding that connection and its ramifications on her selfhood; she is eventually able to leave the ghost of Naples behind.

In Thorpe's novel, motherhood is an extremely divisive theme which is fraught with emotions and ethical dilemmas. Mia and Lorrie Ann's understanding of motherhood is influenced by their families where the neglect of Mia's alcoholic mother is contrasted with the stable home environment that nurtures Lorrie Ann until this sense of continuity is ruptured by the sudden death of Lorrie Ann's father. Mia's reluctance to have a child affects her relationship with her partner, Franklin as well as the nature of her friendship with Lorrie Ann. As a child, Mia recalls finding unsettling photographs of her mother that exacerbated an already existing sense of low self-worth coupled with the dread of inviting disappointment in all personal relations. As Mia narrates,

"I remember once finding several Polaroids of a naked woman in my mother's nightstand. I had no idea who the woman was; she was a stranger, someone I had never seen before, yet she was clearly posed on my mother's bed--I recognized the tiny rosebuds of the bedspread. The first two were of the woman alone, and then there was another one of her and my mother, both naked, and artfully kissing each other, in the watched, passionless way familiar to firmly heterosexual women participating in polite threesomes. The photographer, I guessed, had been my stepfather, Paddy. I must have been around eleven when I found these photos, and I remember, not feelings of shock or scandal, but a sickening recognition of something I had known all along, this awareness of my parents' base dirtiness."(77)

Mia's unhappiness at the absence of a trustworthy adult in her life meant that she took on the responsibilities of raising her two stepbrothers whereas her every effort at self-care or personal achievement is tinged with anxiety and insecurity that extends to her relationships. She adds, "This feeling of resigned disappointment, a kind of contained disgust, was present throughout the rest of my life in almost all of my human relationships. Always, people were turning out to be a bit less than they could have been, a bit more what you had uncharitably suspected."(78) The exception to this sentiment would be first, Lorrie Ann, and then Franklin in Mia's life. Their trustworthy goodness enabled Mia to manage and sustain positive relationships in her life which makes the later transformation of Lorrie Ann, all the more painful for Mia. As she narrates,

"And yet, no matter how many times I steeled myself, pitted my gut, prepared for Franklin to suddenly reveal himself as selfish, as small hearted, as foolish or puerile, he always failed to say what I expected him to say, or do what I expected him to do. I never stopped being surprised by

his goodness, just as I could not stop myself from being surprised by Lorrie Ann's goodness. I held both of them in a fierce irrational esteem that owed more to the veneration of the collector than the easy gratitude of a friend. They were my trophies, my prizes, my miniature gods. I did not pursue my relationship with either for personal reasons, but because I sincerely believed they were the two best specimens of humanity I had yet to run across on the planet."(82)

Mia's obsession with the idea of Lorrie Ann, though not unfounded, does not consider the possibility of the similar complex interiority that has shaped her own psyche, being a factor in her friend's transformation. The airtight boundaries that she had used to successfully separate herself from Lorrie Ann enabled her to describe and define herself in opposition to her but when those boundaries and neat categorizations collapsed; Mia was unable to recognize the friend that she had known for most of her life and therefore, by extension, was fearful of losing her clear sense of self too, in the process. As Mia narrates, "I knew too that I was not worthy of them, but then, I had not been worthy of Yale either, worthy of any of my accomplishments. I knew full well that I had stolen them, stolen all the beauty of my life, stolen scholarship itself, and I had resolved simply to be very careful that no one find out. Even in my most genuine moments there was a whiff of artificiality, a tremor that belied the force with which I was pretending to be myself."(83)

The biggest dilemma for Mia would be responding to the ethical dilemma of Lorrie Ann's choice to leave the care of her disabled in the hands of an institution and attempt to reclaim her life without the constraints of child care. Mia equates Lorrie Ann with the goddess Inanna, the who had desired to know death and so went to the Underworld, giving up her gifts in order to fulfill her purpose but she is not allowed to question the ways of the Underworld. She is killed by the other gods at the end of her deep descent before being resurrected by the queen of the Underworld at the behest of demons who follow Inanna out into the world of the living. However, they ask for a life to replace hers and refusing to give up her best friend and two sons, Inanna decides to give up her mortal lover, Dumuzi. As Mia narrates, "Inanna was turned into a corpse, a piece of rotting meat, and was hung from a hook on the wall"(100). Lorrie Ann decides to live self-destructively before arriving at her own moment of resurrection. Mia, being witness to her unraveling, judges her harshly before letting go of the presumptive way in which she wants to remember her friend and connect with her. When Lorrie Ann meets Mia in Instabul,

alone and high on heroin, it is also the day Mia nervously buys a pregnancy test for herself and attempts to convince herself, that is not her but Franklin, who doesn't want children. She says, "even considering keeping the child felt like a betrayal"(104). In this context, Mia considered Lorrie Ann's actions towards Zach, her son, a betrayal. Lorrie Ann was good and kind, she was capable of giving love and care unlike what Mia thought of herself, so why had she left Zach behind? These doubts would add to and amplify Mia's own concerns about betraying not just Franklin but even the possible life inside her- the "bean of life"(104). Mia fears this betrayal because of her fear of being a terrible mother; of " my mother's puffy eyes, the possibility that I would be like her, or worse, the hanger, the horrible hanger that I had used. It was complicated, it was unspeakably complicated."(104) The episode with the hanger refers to one of the incidents that Mia feels the most remorse for; the beating of her two step brothers at her hands which was unexpectedly witnessed by Lorrie Ann which added to her self-loathing of being an individual who is incapable of giving to or receiving love from children. However, Mia would only later realize upon meeting Lorrie Ann in Istanbul about how difficult it had become for Lorrie Ann to physically lift Zach or move him without causing him pain; that Dana, her mother, impaired by a brain injury had come to live with her and that she had sunk into depression as a result of these factors and unemployment, supported only by Arman. As Mia narrates,

"In other words, moving Zach also hurt him, and every time Lorrie Ann did it, she worried she might dislocate his legs, forcing a trip to the ER. Every time she had to change his diaper, she worried similarly. And so she changed his diaper less. He got a rash; she tried to treat the rash, but still, the rash persisted. Eventually, the rash turned into sores, perhaps also from sitting all day without being able to shift position. The worse the boy got, the guiltier Lorrie Ann felt, and the more, the very more she considered simply ending it, either by killing herself or else by killing Zach."(119)

Ultimately, Lorrie Ann would be accused of the same thing that she had undergone during labour-negligence. Her mother's social worker upon seeing Zach's state would report them to Child Protective Services, leading to Zach living in a group nursing home. Lorrie Ann couldn't bear to see him in pain but didn't want to go back to her old life. As she says to Mia, "I can't. I can't do it anymore. I can't go back to living that way."(126). At this point, Mia is stunned to hear of Lorrie Ann's subsequent decision to leave Zach at the nursing home and travel to India and then Dubai

before she eventually settles in Iceland, free of drugs and performing music. Lorrie Ann's decisions dismantle her idea of motherly love as a site of limitless sacrifice and martyrdom whereas Lorrie Ann saw her choices in the light of an endurance that was wearing thin. She didn't want to see her son suffering and so thought that it would have been better if she had been allowed to end his life; her fury at the needless protraction of her son's pain left Mia bewildered because Lorrie Ann was not making decisions that Mia wanted her to make, that she felt her kind and good friend would make. As she says to Mia, "Part of the reason I do drugs is because I can't handle any of this, and you want me to be able to handle it because you would feel better about that. But Mia, I don't make decisions in my life based on how it makes you feel."(175) This alters the nature of their friendship and Mia realizes that she had idealized her friend as a model of virtue against her will; had imagined her as a flawless being when in reality, she was as scared and damaged as Mia herself before finding her own path towards self-assertion. Both of them had to let go their past tenets of friendship for their ties in the present to evolve and mature.

Another aspect of Thorpe's treatment of the theme of motherhood is the aspect of medical malpractice which may have been inspired by Thorpe's own personal experience of negligence at the hands of doctors. In an interview with *Authorlink Writers and Readers Magazine*, she says, "What I learned most from the experience was that my birth was not seen as sacred by anyone but me. That in those moments, especially when I was in surgery, I was not a person to them at all. I was lucky to emerge from the experience with a healthy baby, and goodness did people ever want to remind me of that! People said nothing but that to me for weeks. "At least you had a healthy baby." She adds that a series of questionable interventions led to her C-section whereas before that her doctor "was giving me a vaginal exam with one hand and holding a Starbucks in the other". Thorpe has attempted to revive through language some of the same emotions that she experienced in her writing of Lorrie Ann's character. Mia learns belatedly, after Zach's birth, that Lorrie Ann had her uterus removed because it was damaged during childbirth. However, she was never told how that happened and why performing an hysterectomy was the only option. In a more sinister moment reminiscent of the practiced indifference of the nurse who was present for Mia's abortion; Lorrie Ann recollects the manner in which her uncharacteristic pain and discomfort was ignored by the medical staff until she passed out which led to the emergency C-section and Zach's condition. As Lorrie Ann says, "Everyone ignores a woman in labour"(107). Lorrie Ann's predicament is linked to the wider implications of ignoring female pain in that it

remains very much a contemporary issue. Thorpe goes on to highlight in excruciating how no one, except Mia and Arman, Lorrie Ann's boyfriend, had considered the possibility that she had been mistreated and ignored cruelly while in needless pain that she shouldn't have suffered in the first place. As Mia narrates, "And it's true: everyone ignores a woman in labour. This was just the way babies got born. This was just the way women were hung, like meat, from hooks upon the wall.(110)

Through the hardship and ethical dilemma faced by Lorrie Ann, Mia is able to examine her own aversion and then later positive consideration of motherhood. At the end of the novel, Mia is married with a son and briefly becomes a part of Zach's life, in the absence of his mother, until his death at thirteen. The lasting impacts of both abortion and bringing a child into the world are explored by Thorpe where the author has examined the aspect of loving someone; a friend who has made the difficult decision to choose herself over her child. Here, Ferrante's words of caution to women - to protect themselves from getting hurt, by men and even their children acquire a deadly and poignant resonance. Motherhood is presented as a cure and also as a means of redemption and in the end, Thorpe has chosen to situate it firmly in the latter where by becoming a mother herself, Mia understands the predicament of not just Lorrie Ann but also of her own mother and that these two women tried to make choices in the best way they could.

The theme of motherhood in the novel by Cline examine fraught mother-daughter relationships. Evie's damaged relationship with her mother is due to her direct influence on her daughter's performance of femininity and its implications for her identity formation. Evie's relationship with her mother and its breakdown influences her decision to ingratiate herself into Russell Hadrick's cult. In the novel, Evie's friendship with Suzanne is a means to rebel against her mother's prim and proper upbringing. However, French's novel does not explore the theme of motherhood in the same manner as the chosen texts and therefore it is not included in this chapter.

Chapter Six: Necessary Violence

This chapter will explore the theme of violence and its role in the treatment of female friendship as presented in the chosen texts. The interpersonal psychological violence as well the representation of male violence are important points of inquiry in the chosen texts. In Ferrante's tetralogy, the pervasiveness of male violence becomes immediately clear with the culture of brutality that rules over the Neapolitan neighbourhood. As Elena narrates in the first book, "Blood. In general it came from wounds only after horrible curses and disgusting obscenities had been exchanged. That was the standard procedure"(35). Husbands beat their wives and their children and women are most cruel to each other. The existence of aggression within the family home is then extended to the streets which are ruled by crime lords and loan sharks. As Elena and Lila grow up, another dimension would be added to the raw brutality of their childhood; power that is bought by money.

As young girls, both Elena and Lila are deeply affected by the monstrous presence of Don Achille and the power he held in the neighbourhood. However, the most immediate contributors to their understanding of violence were their parents and the other families of the neighbourhood. The figure of Melina Cappuccio, a relative of Lila's mother, is important in this context. She is a widowed mother of six children including Ada Cappuccio and her romantic attachment to Donato Sarratore led to bizarre scenes in the neighbourhood which had a deep impression on both the girls. The children, like the adults, took sides of the two women in the affair as Melina and Lidia Sarratore tried their best to hurt and insult each other. However, it was only Lila who favoured Melina whereas all the other children favoured the better looking Lidia with her handsome, and popular son, Nino. As Elena narrates in the first book,

"The widow preferred to think that, because of his gentle spirit, he was put upon by his wife, and so she decided to do battle against Lidia Sarratore to free him and let him join her permanently. The war that followed at first seemed funny; it was discussed in my house and elsewhere with malicious laughter. Lidia would hang out the sheets fresh from the laundry and Melina climbed up on the windowsill and dirtied them with a reed tip she had charred in the fire; Lidia passed under her windows and she spit on her head. or emptied buckets of dirty water on her; Lidia made noise during the day walking above her, with her unruly children, and she banged the floor

mop against the ceiling all night. Sarratore tried by every means to make peace, but he was too sensitive, too polite. As their vindictiveness increased, the two women began to insult each other if they met on the street or on the stairs: harsh, fierce sounds. It was then that they began to frighten me. One of the many terrible scenes of my childhood begins with the shouts of Melina and Lidia, with the insults they hurl from the windows and then on the stairs; it continues with our mother rushing to our door, opening it and looking out, followed by us children; and ends with the image, for me still unbearable, of the two neighbors rolling down the stairs, entwined, and Melina's head hitting the floor of the landing, a few inches from my shoes, like a white melon that has slipped from your hand."(39)

Melina's notoriety and her antics as a madwoman highlight the female rage that is presented in the novels; the kind that is lit and sustained by a lack of affection and festering pain. Due to her actions, the Sarratore family is forced to move out from the neighbourhood and it is only much later that the manipulative undercurrent beneath the kind and charismatic veneer of Donato is revealed during Elena's summer at Ischia. Nino's anger towards his father presents the picture of a man who was ridiculed in the neighbourhood for his inability to act the part of the aggressive, macho Italian man. As Elena narrates in the first book, "When he wasn't traveling on the Naples-Paola route he devoted himself to fixing this or that in the house, he did the shopping, took the youngest child out in the carriage. These things were very unusual in the neighborhood. It occurred to no one that Donato was generous in that way to lighten the burdens of his wife. No: all the neighborhood men, my father in the lead, considered him a womanish man, even more so because he wrote poems and read them willingly to anyone, It didn't even occur to Melina"(39) But as Elena would find out, his sensitive and kind reputation enhanced his abilities to ensnare fragile women such as Melina and a vulnerable minor like Elena. Here, Ferrante presents the not so obvious face of violence which is perhaps more dangerous as it strikes through the insidious way of corrupting confidences.

The codes of Italian masculinity and femininity inform the interaction between the genders and Ferrante's novels detail the everyday violence faced by girls and women and the inability of men and young boys to accept rejection or refusal. Lila and Elena being attacked with rocks for their superior intellect, Ada Cappuccio's assault by the Solaras, the threats to Elena and Lila from the Solaras; Lila's rape by Stefano, Elena's molestation by Donato etc and the usual, normalized

level of abuse and harassment that is the result of toxic masculinity and narcissism. The prime examples of such behaviour is shown through the characters of the Solaras - Michele and Marcello. They have a reputation of using their wealth to flaunt their power and get whatever they want by any means. Lila quickly becomes a target after she intrigues and infuriates the Solaras with her beauty and her defiance of their authority respectively. Elena narrates the impact of Lila's newfound feminine charms as a teenager in the first book,

"I realized that the males, watching as she danced with Rino, were seeing more than I was. Pasquale above all, but also Antonio, also Enzo. They kept their eyes on her as if we others had disappeared. And yet I had bigger breasts. And yet Gigliola was a dazzling blonde, with regular features and nice legs. And yet Carmela had beautiful eyes and, especially, provocative movements. But there was nothing to be done: something had begun to emanate from Lila's mobile body that the males sensed, an energy that dazed them, like the swelling sound of beauty arriving. The music had to stop before they returned to themselves, with uncertain smiles and extravagant applause."(142)

Jailene Vazquez in her thesis titled "Fictionalized Italian Gender Relations Through Ferrante and Ammaniti" suggests how male violence not only demonstrates the existence of rampant misogyny but that male aggression is an essential mediator of any interaction including attempts at upward social mobility.

"Both Marcello and Fernando succumb to Naples' culture of violence as a means of securing what they want and need. The poverty of Naples forces women and, particularly, men to survive by any means necessary, which is often translated into physical violence. The family unit is a guarded space against institutional problems in the city, which explains Fernando's need to maintain control over his daughter and Marcello's desire to start a family with a woman he believes will help him create a strong family and legacy. The issue is that the men, feeling privileged by Italy's patriarchy, feel entitled to Lila's future. Both attempt to make decisions for Lila without consulting her, and prioritize their own agendas over Lila's well being."(20)

In the first book, Lila's decision to reject a man she does not love is not accepted by her family and no one considers it unacceptable other than her that Marcello is trying to pressurize Lila through bribes and intimidation which her family perceives as a "future without anxieties"(234).

Lila's helplessness is highlighted by the fact that despite being the fierce young girl who stood to Don Achille, she is rendered powerless in the confrontation with the Solaras which makes the reality of other young girls, who do not possess Lila's boldness, even more pitiable.

It is within this context of pervasive violence that the evolution of Elena and Lila's friendship is presented to us. When Lila is adamant that she wants to continue her education, her father, Fernando, literally throws her out of a window whereas Elena's damaged relationship with her mother is because of, amongst other things, how Elena's time at school leaves her mother to deal with the drudgery of housework alone. However, the aspect of interpersonal psychological violence is important in understanding the complex layering of their friendship. The sudden slaps and insults provide the setting for the intimate rivalry of the two friends who oscillate between being champions and challengers of each other. The raw anguish of women such as Melina is seen and understood by a young Lila perhaps because of her defiance in the face of everyday violence whereas Elena is deeply disturbed and scared of Melina's actions and emotions. This could be why Elena was the one out of the two to leave the neighbourhood whereas Lila could not get out. Contrasted with the very public and forceful displays of masculinity that surround the two girls, the girls are witnesses to the internalized female fury that explodes to the surface time and gain. Desperate to preserve their autonomy, both girls turn to each other such as Elena's vow to protect Lila from her forced marriage. But things move quickly for Elena who takes advantage of her educational opportunities whereas Lila is limited by the lack of them. Hence, Lila is forced to consider the lesser of two evils in marrying Stefano which is a marriage of convenience but nonetheless better, in Lila's eyes, than marrying Marcello, a man she despises. Lila's decision to trade books for shoe design and wedding planning deeply disappoints Elena as she narrates in the first book,

"Lila established herself in the role of Stefano's fiancée. And even in our conversations, when she had time to talk, she seemed satisfied with what she had become, as if she no longer saw anything beyond it, didn't *want* to see anything beyond it, except marriage, a house, children"(271).

The family and social relations that populate the Neapolitan neighbourhood, highlights the same truth that informs the nature of their friendship; that intimacy is always entangled with violence and violation. The girls who vow to protect each other also steal lovers and in the very act of

writing their shared history, Elena is inflicting a massive emotional blow upon her friend. The earliest example of the power play between them is Lila befriending Carmen which troubled Elena and made her jealous. Elena also suspected that perhaps Lila convinced her to leave the boundaries of the neighbourhood to visit the beach in order to get Elena kicked out of middle school as punishment for her truancy. However, the same Lila would earnestly ask Elena to work hard and excel in school while she herself was preparing for marriage. Both girls drag each other repeatedly across their emotional landscapes which provides a picture of their complex and troubled psyche. Lila's ability to withstand and confront her circumstances does not have any of the tentativeness that is displayed by Elena as a young girl. Like Melina and Lidia, the theme of bitter competitiveness permeates the interactions of the younger girls as well. The need for attention is fierce but the women are treated differently if they actually succeed in getting it. Ada is punished by the Solaras for standing out; Lila and Elena make themselves targets due to their intellectual gifts whereas the girls amongst themselves harshly judge each other using parameters such as the femininity of their figures or the procurement of declarations of love from the opposite sex. However, the young girls and women are able to stitch together intimacy with brutality is because of the intuitive bond that they share as a group. Despite the terrible acts that the women of the neighbourhood endure themselves and inflict on each other, there is always room for pragmatism. For example, this is seen in the way Lila takes over the care of Elena's children while their mother focuses on her writing. This is because no one can predict what the other needs or desires more accurately and intuitively than the two friends themselves. The female psyche as presented by Ferrante in the tetralogy is that it is heavily informed by the intimate friendship; the intensity of which is not replicated in any of their relationships. Secrets, heartbreak, loss and romance are all heard and discussed while pushing each other with an integrity that is noticeably absent in the men who come into their lives.

Motherhood strengthens their friendship despite it being a fierce battle for both of them. They look after each other's children while grow in the understanding that the journey towards their self-actualization needs the other's constant challenge and care. Even while they look to separate from each other, the bond of their shared history and the fact that Naples is in their blood, is vital in forging their sense of self and their understanding of each other. When Lila meets Elena and Nino for the first time after she is informed of their affair, the latter invites all of their friends from the neighbourhood which infuriates Elena as she interprets it as an effort to shame Elena for

her choice; a product of Lila's envy. However, this act serves to demonstrate the conflict that distinguishes their approaches towards the neighbourhood that ties them together. Lila understands that their resilience and fragility has been forged in the corrupt quagmire of their neighbourhood and that no matter how far Elena wants to go from that reality, it will always come back to haunt her; in the form of Nino, in her decision to move back to her hometown in order to keep her children close to her and in the fact that it is home to her ally-Lila.

The city of Naples becomes a character in the Neapolitan tetralogy and while lives out her time in the neighbourhood, Elena is able to leave it but still remains tied to Lila. Ferrante explores the link between geography and class where access to school is limited by gender as well as one's class. Gigliola who had intended to attend to high school but ends up working at a pastry shop. The tumultuous self-realization of the girls is presented alongside the volatile self-realization of Italy where as the girls attempt to expand their understanding and consciousness; so also does the nation in its negotiation with Communist and Fascist ideologies in the post war era. Naples struggled with violence and poverty after the second World War and the childhood and girlhood of the girls reflects the time where as the southern part of the nation struggled with a legitimate access to political and social authority, the gap was filled by the camorra or the mafia in Naples which meant that the girls, due to their class and gender, also struggled due to the presence of that vacuum and its usurpation by the mafia. After Elena goes to university, the intricate interlinkages of class, gender and geography are further explored in the way Elena finds the political rallies and the world of intelligentsia are disconnected from each other and Elena's entry into that space is complicated due to her roots and her gender and the ever present element of violence. As Elena narrates her conversation with Nino in the fourth book,

"Some nights I curled up next to him and tried to explain myself to myself. I confessed that I liked subversive words, words that denounced the compromises of the parties and the violence of the state. Politics—I said—politics the way you think about it, as it certainly is, bores me, I leave it to you, I'm not made for that sort of engagement. But then I had second thoughts and added that I didn't feel cut out, either, for the other sort of engagement that I had forced myself into in the past, dragging the children along with me. The threatening shouts of the demonstrators frightened me, as did the aggressive fringes, the armed gangs, the dead on the streets, the revolutionary hatred of everything. I have to speak in public, I confessed, and I don't know what

I am, I don't know to what point I seriously believe what I say. Now, with Nino, I seemed able to put into words the most secret feelings, even things I didn't say to myself, even the incongruities, the acts of cowardice. He was so sure of himself, solid, he had detailed opinions about everything. I felt as if I had pasted onto the chaotic rebellion of childhood neat cards bearing phrases suited to making a good impression. At a conference in Bologna—we were part of a determined exodus headed to the city of freedom—we ran into constant police checks, and were stopped at least five times. Weapons leveled against us, out of the car, documents, there against the wall. I was frightened, at the time, even more than in Germany: it was my land, it was my language, I became anxious, I wanted to be silent, to obey, and instead I began to shout, I slipped into dialect without realizing it, I unloaded insults at the police for pushing me rudely. Fear and rage were mixed up, and often I couldn't control either one. Nino instead remained calm, he joked with the policemen, humored them, calmed me. For him only the two of us counted. Remember that we're here, now, together, he said, the rest is background and will change."(61)

On the other hand, Lila finds her thoughts and her every day life occupied by the spaces and the people that have challenged her. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"I noted for the first time, during that period, the rigidity of the perimeter that Lila had established for herself. She was less and less interested in what happened outside the neighborhood. If she became excited by something whose dimensions were not merely local, it was because it concerned people she had known since childhood. Even her work, as far as I knew, interested her only within a very narrow radius. Enzo occasionally had to spend time in Milan, or Turin. Not Lila, she had never moved, and I only began to notice that closing off of herself seriously when my own taste for travel intensified. I took every possible opportunity to travel outside of Italy, at the time, especially if it was possible to do so with Nino. For example, when the small German publisher who had brought out my little book organized a promotional tour in West Germany and Austria, Nino canceled all his engagements and acted as my cheerful and obedient driver. We travelled all over for some two weeks, gliding from one landscape to the next as if beside paintings with dazzling colors. Every mountain or lake or city or monument entered our life as a couple only to become part of the pleasure of being there, at that moment, and it always seemed like a refined contribution to our happiness. Even when rude reality intervened and frightened us because it corresponded to the darkest words that I uttered night

after night in front of radical audiences, we recounted the fear to each other afterward as if it had been a pleasant adventure."(60)

Here, Ferrante demonstrates how the female psyche and the female body first registers the various injustices of the socio-political system that women have to endure. Through the trials of girlhood, marriage, pregnancy and motherhood, they feel every pang of lovelessness, abandonment and shame at the corporeal level. This is the searing fact of their lives. Contraception and motherhood are used to dramatize how the female body becomes a battlefield in the conflict between desire and expectation. In the third book, Elena decides against having a third child as the burden of raising two daughters takes a toll on her body, literary career and her marriage. However, this aspect of reclaiming her body by using the pill makes her gain weight but stopping would be more detrimental to her well-being. Therefore, she chooses to suffer the discomfort of using condoms which adds to her already uncomfortable sexual encounters with her husband who remains oblivious to her woes.

Lila chooses to ground herself in Naples amidst the people she grew up with and attempts to uplift them alongside the transformation of the neighbourhood itself. As Elena narrates her conversation with Carmen Peluso in the fourth book,

"She began to speak of her with affection and gratitude. Lila took care of her friends. Lila took care of everyone: her parents, her brother, even Stefano. Lila had helped Antonio find an apartment and had become very friendly with the German woman he had married. Lila intended to set up her own computer business. Lila was sincere, she was rich, she was generous, if you were in trouble she reached into her purse. Lila was ready to help Pasquale in any way. Ah, she said, Lenù, how lucky you two are to have always been so close, how I envied you. And I seemed to hear in her voice, to recognize in a movement of her hand, the tones, the gestures of our friend. I thought again of Alfonso, I remembered my impression that he, a male, resembled Lila even in his features. Was the neighborhood settling in her, finding its direction?"(67)

Lila's commitment to her old friends from the neighbourhood meant that if Elena was ever in Lila's orbit, she had to put herself in close contact with those friends and acquaintances as well. As a result, Elena found her relationships evolving such as the renewed warmth of her dealings with Carmen. As a young girl, Lila had befriended Carmen and formed a trio with Elena which

invoked envy in Elena. Lila's attempts to ingratiate the neighbourhood and its inhabitants in Elena's life were not always appreciated by the latter but Lila's drive to prove her worth as the one who knows Elena best despite her friend's protestations created tension between them. An example of this emotionally violating interference in Elena's life by Lila is seen in her providing Elena with evidence of Nino betrayal. Elena had separated from Pietro to be with Nino in the third book but she is later informed by Lila in the fourth book that Nino was not being faithful to her. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"She looked me straight in the eye and revealed, in curt phrases, in Italian, that Nino had never left his wife, that he continued to live with her and his son, that as a reward he had been named, just recently, the director of an important research institute financed by the bank that his father-in-law headed. She concluded gravely: "Did you know?" I shook my head. "No." "If you don't believe me let's go see him and I'll repeat everything to his face, word for word, just as I told you now." I waved a hand to let her know there was no need. "I believe you," I whispered, but to avoid her eyes I looked out the door, at the street. Meanwhile from very far away came Carmen's voice saying: If you're going to Nino I want to come, too; the three of us will settle things properly. I felt her lightly touching my arm to get my attention. As small girls we had read photo-romances in the garden next to the church and had felt the same urge to help the heroine when she was in trouble. Now, surely, she had the same feeling of solidarity of those days, but with the gravity of today, and it was a genuine feeling, brought on by a wrong that was not fictional but real. Lila on the other hand had always scorned such reading and there was no doubt that at that moment she was sitting across from me with other motives. I imagined that she felt satisfied, as Antonio, too, must have been when he discovered Nino's falseness. I saw that she and Carmen exchanged a look, a sort of mute consultation, as if to make a decision. It was a long moment. No, I read on Carmen's lips, and that breath was accompanied by an imperceptible shaking of her head. No to what? Lila stared at me again, her mouth half open. As usual she was taking on the job of sticking a pin in my heart not to stop it but to make it beat harder. Her eyes were narrowed, her broad forehead wrinkled. She waited for my reaction. She wanted me to scream, weep, hand myself over to her. I said softly: "I really have to go now.'"(68)

This invasion by Lila into Elena's life reminds Elena of her poor, vulgar roots despite her best efforts to cultivate a sense of refinement through her education and her marriage. She married a

man she was not attracted to in order to fulfill the priority of leaving behind Naples and its disorder. However, Lila's incursions into her life impede Elena's wish to be free from Naples and all that it stands for. Elena was also defeated by the visceral hold that Lila held over her; the infuriating depth of understanding about each other meant that neither woman escape the critical eye of the other, sometimes offering consolation and sometimes offering pain but always steady in its dispensation of truth. As Elena narrates in the fourth book, "I was hurt, not because she had revealed that for more than two years Nino had been telling me lies about the state of his marriage but because she had succeeded in proving to me what in fact she had said from the start: that my choice was mistaken, that I was stupid"(70). While confronting Nino about his lies, Elena once again grapples with the push and pull of her roots where the dichotomized categorization of her two selves is creating tension. Her fierce anger at the men who use and abuse her reminds her of the fury of the women of her neighbourhood, who sacrificed their body and mind at the altar of their raging emotions. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"At that point I started yelling, I switched to dialect. He gave in immediately, he admitted everything, I had no doubt that Lila had told me the truth. I hit him in the chest with my fists and as I did I felt as if there were a me unglued from me who wished to hurt him even more, who wanted to beat him, spit in his face as I had seen people do as a child in the neighborhood quarrels, call him a shit, scratch him, tear out his eyes. I was surprised, frightened. Am I always this furious other I? I, here in Naples, in this filthy house, I, who if I could would kill this man, plunge a knife into his heart with all my strength? Should I restrain this shadow—my mother, all our female ancestors—or should I let her go?"(70)

Here, the legacy of the violent and violating female subject is foregrounded once again by the author which demonstrates the collective agony of the women who have come before her and who will come after her. Her viscerally female experiences contribute to both the making and unmaking of her self-actualization. The scope of this aspect is also extended in the souring of relations between Elena and Adele, her mother-in-law. Though Elena initially seemingly finds an ally in Adele, that understanding is then later undermined by Adele's commitment to preserve her family's honour at the cost of Elena's literary career and dignity. Here, Elena learns of the petty warfare waged by the elite class. If the brutal world of her childhood had a raw hostility to its violence; in Florence, Elena finds that the animosity moves beneath a carefully constructed

layer of hypocrisy and dishonesty which makes Elena's instinctive, bare responses of rage all the more clear. As Elena narrates in the fourth book in the aftermath of Elena ending her affair with Nino,

"I became intractable, I yelled at Dede and Elsa for no reason. But mainly I began to fight with Adele. One morning I threw in her face what she had done to hinder the publication of my book. She didn't deny it, in fact she said: It's a pamphlet, it doesn't have the dignity of a book. I replied: If I write pamphlets, you in your whole life haven't been capable of writing even that, and it's not clear where all this authority of yours comes from. She was offended, she hissed: You don't know anything about me. Oh no, I knew things that she couldn't imagine. That time I managed to keep my mouth shut, but a few days later I had a violent quarrel with Nino; I yelled on the phone in dialect, and when my mother-in-law reproached me in a contemptuous tone I reacted by saying: "Leave me alone, worry about yourself." "What do you mean?" "You know." "I don't know anything." "Pietro told me that you've had lovers." "I?" "Yes, you, don't be so taken aback. I assumed my responsibilities in front of everyone, even Dede and Elsa, and I'm paying for the consequences of my actions. You, who give yourself so many airs, you're just a hypocritical little bourgeois who hides her dirt under the carpet." Adele turned pale, she was speechless. Rigid, her face tense, she got up and closed the door of the living room. Then she said to me in a low voice, almost a whisper, that I was an evil woman, that I couldn't understand what it meant to truly love and to give up one's beloved, that behind a pleasing and docile façade I concealed an extremely vulgar craving to grab everything, which neither studying nor books could ever tame. Then she concluded: Tomorrow get out, you and your children; I'm sorry only that if the girls had grown up here they might have tried not to be like you."(72)

Elena's emotional state at the end of her affair with Nino provides a clear picture of how women, whether following their desires or not, end up trading one set of limitations for another. As a woman, doing without the restraints on her mind and body, does not ensure the result that Elena would get her sense of satisfaction or her freedom. The many iterations of her self- mother, lover and writer are tied together with her principal self- woman and therefore must constantly negotiate with its contradictions. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"But while I was preparing for a long, excruciating journey to Naples I changed my mind in a flash—an announcement on the loudspeaker was enough—and left for Milan. In this new

situation I needed money more than ever. I said to myself that first of all I should go to a publisher and beg for work. Only on the train did I realize the reason for that abrupt change of plan. In spite of everything, love writhed fiercely inside me and the mere idea of doing harm to Nino was repugnant to me. Although I now wrote about women's autonomy and discussed it everywhere, I didn't know how to live without his body, his voice, his intelligence. It was terrible to confess it, but I still wanted him, I loved him more than my own daughters. At the idea of hurting him and of no longer seeing him I withered painfully, the free and educated woman lost her petals, separated from the woman-mother, and the woman-mother was disconnected from the woman-lover, and the woman-lover from the furious whore, and we all seemed on the point of flying off in different directions. As I traveled toward Milan, I discovered that, with Lila set aside, I didn't know how to give myself substance except by modeling myself on Nino. I was incapable of being a model for myself. Without him I no longer had a nucleus from which to expand outside the neighborhood and through the world, I was a pile of debris."(73)

Elena's negotiation and confrontation with the project of her own womanhood involves the changing perceptions of her daughters about their mother. In the aftermath of Elena's separation from both Pietro and Nino, she finds refuge with her sister-in-law, Mariarosa, who is also an academic and who refuses to assign blame to her mother, Adele, in the context of Elena's troubles. The Neapolitan novels provide a deep layering of the mother-daughter dynamics and Elena's daughters gradually begin to see her as a person instead of just their maternal figure. Like her own mother, Elena also encompasses the complicated mixture of hostility and tenderness in her dealings with her children and her eye is trained on them to reveal them to the reader as individuals in the making. Elena does not present the kind of violent possessiveness that defines her own mother's relationship with her. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"Later I, too, was assigned one of these educational projects, and for my evening more people showed up than usual. My daughters sat on cushions in the first row, in the big living room, and they listened obediently. Starting then, I think, Dede began to observe me with curiosity. She had great respect for her father, her grandfather, and now Mariarosa. She knew nothing about me and didn't want to know anything. I was her mother, I forbade everything, she couldn't stand me. She must have been amazed that I was listened to with an attention that she on principle would never have given me. And maybe she also liked the composure with which I responded to criticisms;

that evening they came surprisingly from Mariarosa. My sister-in-law was the only one among the women present who did not agree with even a word of what I was saying—she who, long ago, had encouraged me to study, to write, to publish. Without asking my permission, she told the story of the fight I had had with my mother in Florence, demonstrating that she knew about it in detail. “Resorting to many learned citations,” she theorized that a woman without love for her origins is lost.”(77)

The female psyche that emerges in the Neapolitan novels is constantly in negotiation with the boundaries of female friendship, the evolving of the status of the two friends as lovers, daughters and mothers as well the tension created by the blurring of these boundaries. The question of who they are as friends and women is closely tethered to each other and their roots in Naples. Both women discover and have to contend with the fact that "love and sex are unreasonable and brutal"(80). Elena might have escaped the brutal world of her neighbourhood but the hostility and humiliation that informs the aftermath of her decision to pursue her needs demonstrates that she cannot escape the contradictory trajectories of her self-actualization process. Nino's plan to not leave his wife, Eleonora, and her important family connections whilst attempting to keep seeing Elena demonstrates that the male body and the male psyche does not have to deal with the same consequences as the female counterpart. Thus, Elena realizes the problems of attempting to cultivate a masculine outlook because it does not protect her from harm with its tendency towards emotional bankruptcy.

Another aspect of the psychological violence that manifests itself in the pages of the novel is the act of writing them. Lila warns Elena to not write about her and the latter breaks her promise by creating a sweeping account of their tumultuous yet rich friendship. Lila's desire to erase herself as a response to the men, women and the world at large that would not stop making demands on her. Lila presents the embodiment of a female psyche that uses erasure and dismemberment as a weapon against the infringement of her autonomy. When Stefano places Lila's wedding picture at a storefront, without her permission, Lila cuts it up and displays it again as a ghoulish collage of arms and legs. She refuses to be known or looked at in the way that men and the world has always looked at women; as objects to be coveted and possessed. At the end of the tetralogy, Elena wonders if Lila has overtaken the ownership of Elena's creation and thoughts like she was prone to but the feat of bringing Lila out of self-erasure belongs to Elena whose desperate,

confiding details are the practical form of Helen Cixous's *écriture féminine*. Elena's revenge of not letting Lila dissolve or be reduced turns her enigmatic friend into even more of a mystery and the only person capable of solving the riddle that is Lila Cerullo is Elena Greco.

The explicit and nefarious presence of violence is also explored in Cline's novel. Cline draws upon a Charles Manson like cult which makes the connection between countercultural groups and violence where the cult members might be misfits but some do not fit the portrayal of the unbalanced follower that contemporary readers might assume about cult members. Since the actual members of Manson's cult, especially the women were well educated, Cline does not depict caricatures as characters. The Russell Hadricks of the world prey on vulnerable women who submit to the power of his words but like the women presented in Ferrante's novels, they too possess a rage that can be destructive. Evie is drawn to this disquieting yet charismatic presence of Suzanne and the figure who inspires awe in Evie is her and not Russell. As the novel concludes and the murderous cult members are arrested, Evie recollects that while Hadrick tried to flee, the women were defiant until the end. She says, "Russell bolted when they came, as if he could outrun a whole squad of officers. The headlights of the police cruisers glowing in the bleached pink of the morning. How pitiful, the immediacy of Russell's capture, forced to kneel in the scrub grass with his hands on his head"(353). She adds, "The authorities didn't know who had done what, not yet, so Suzanne was just one of the skinny jumble of girls. Girls who spit in the dirt like rabid dogs and went limp when the police tried to handcuff them. There was a demented dignity to their resistance-none of them had run. Even at the end, the girls had been stronger than Russell"(353). The question remains as to why a cult/commune claiming to be operating on the principles of free love becomes the participant in notorious and gruesome murders. Cults have usually operated on the template of inclusiveness and enveloping its members with the kind of affection and attention that they have not received in their lives thus far. For a love-starved adolescent like Evie, it is the perfect space to escape the stifling expectations of her privileged life and catapult herself into transgressive space that is at first, simultaneously unnerving and exciting. Internalizing the mandate of the cult or its leader leads to a restructuring of the self that can have disastrous consequences. The female psyche that emerges her in relation to Evie and Suzanne is restless, perturbed and simmering with desires that cannot be expressed. I would like to argue that the power that comes from the unsayable is the immense force that drives the actions of the female figures in this novel.

For Evie, her life in the well-to-do part of town was a performance whereas with Suzanne, she felt liberated and seen. As Evie narrates in the novel, she would spend her time at her boarding school recycling her experiences as stories to the awe of her fellow schoolgirls. Evie was attempting to be a Suzanne; to exercise the power that she had given to others to some extent. However, Evie's need was driven by survival, again. She feared that the cult had left its inedible mark on her that would leave her unsociable but to her amazement, she was still capable of being an adolescent who made friends and talked "about a boyfriend, just one in a series of many"(341). She adds, "Casting a look in my direction all wrapped up in jealousy and wonder. The way I had looked at Suzanne, maybe, and how easy it was to keep a steady stream of stories, a wishful narrative that borrowed the best of the ranch and folded it into a new shape, like origami. A world where everything turned out as I'd wanted."(341)

In retrospect, for the adult Evie, the romance of her obsession with Suzanne hid the truth of the latter's darkness but even Suzanne appeared at Evie's school a few days before her arrest, the unsaid threat to ensure her silence only reinforced the protectiveness that Evie still felt for her friend, despite her "new harshness in her face; a blood blister under a fingernail"(345). Evie's pleasure and fear seemed to please Suzanne and she left Evie with a last haunting image.

"No had ever looked at me before Suzanne, not really, so she had become my definition. Her gaze softening my center so easily that even photographs of her seemed aimed at me, ignited with private meaning. It was different from Russell, the way she looked at me, because it contained him, too: it made him and everyone else smaller. We had been with the men, we had let them do what they wanted. But they would never know the parts of ourselves that we hid from them-they would never sense the lack or even know there was something more they should be looking for."(348)

Evie's satisfaction at being part of a "we" enabled her to sharpen her female gaze over Suzanne and the other girls whereas the male gaze of the menacing men around them had only seen them as objects to be judged and then looked at again. The intimate knowledge that Evie eventually revealed to herself was that her friend was tainted with the malaise that had affected her too, but for Evie, the urge for destruction and directed towards herself. Suzanne took it far beyond that. Evie says, "Suzanne was not a good person. I understood this. But I held the actual knowledge away from myself. How the coroner said that the ring and pinky fingers of Linda's left hand had

been severed because she had tried to protect her face"(348). In hindsight, the adult Evie remembers Suzanne's alertness towards Russell; something that Suzanne extended to Evie in a different way but the irksome manner in which Russell sat upon the cult's hierarchy reveals the problem of weak men seemingly controlling far superior and in the case of Suzanne, far more sinister, women. Why and How? Cline suggests that the answer is in the untapped female rage that infects any female who has had their sense of self twisted by the hypocrisy of men and therefore, that could include most adolescents and almost every woman. Evie believes that she was kicked out the murderous group and stranded in the streets before the murder because Suzanne perhaps wished to protect her; a small mercy towards her friend who would not bring herself to kill anyone. Perhaps Suzanne wished to protect Evie from the feverish bloodlust that would compel her to viciously kill other women and even a child. As Evie narrates,

"The hatred she must have felt to do what she'd done, to slam the knife over and over again like she was trying to rid herself of a frenzied sickness: hatred like that was not unfamiliar to me. Hatred was easy. The permutations constant over the years: a stranger at the fair who palmed my crotch through my shorts. A man on the sidewalk who lunged at me, then laughed when I flinched."(350)

Over the years, Evie would be forced to collect such experiences as most women do where the men "wanted me to know what I already knew: I had no power" and they "saw my need and used it against me"(350). Cline does not present Evie as a starry eyed follower of the cool girl who is mysterious and striking. Rather, the friendship of the two girls is awash with the knowledge that their anger is a marker that their identities have been marked with. Their collective psyche understands the import of the female rage that is against the sometimes shallow, superficial or visceral but always the easy way that men cut away at a woman or a young girl's sense of self-worth. As Evie narrates, "The hatred that vibrated beneath the surface of my girl's face--I think Suzanne recognized it. Of course my hand would anticipate the weight of a knife. The particular give of a human body. There was so much to destroy. Suzanne stopped me from doing what I might be capable of. And so she set me loose in the world like an avatar for the girl she would not be. She would never go to boarding school, but I still could, and she sent me spinning from her like a messenger for her alternate self."(350)

The thread of interpersonal psychological violence that ties the female characters together is contrasted with the male violence as the explicit violent committed by Suzanne and the other girls in the form of the murders of Mitch's friends. Evie during her time spent at the cult let herself be used by the likes of Russell and Mitch in order to be close to Suzanne; to feel what she felt in a twisted, sad game of solidarity. However, Evie was quick to see through the hollowness of Russell's persona which eventually became a parody of the average outsider's grumbling at being left at the borders of the system. It is only Suzanne and her persona who leave a mark on Evie left behind with a life that was "a continuous backing away from the edge"(351). As Evie narrates, "I only ever saw her again in photographs and news reports. Still. I could never imagine her absence as permanent. Suzanne and the others would always exist for me; I believed they would never die. That they would hover forever in the background of ordinary life, circling the highways and edging the parks. Moved by a force that would never cease or slow."(349)

The theme of violence in Thorpe's novel is presented through the lens of motherhood. From Mia's abortion to Lorrie Ann's traumatic labour; the pain borne and afflicted on women is presented in detail. Mia always considered her identity fixed by its opposition to Lorrie Ann's sense of self along with a friendship glued together by comradeship and secrets. Towards the end of the novel, Mia realizes that when confronted with a new Lorrie Ann, the same formulaic approach to their friendship will not be possible. This forces Mia to question why she must be the bad girl when clearly, Lorrie Ann has rapidly shed her pristine persona. Ironically, it takes the destruction of Lorrie Ann's character to initiate more wholesomeness into Mia's personal growth before the two women come full circle with respect to their own journeys. Despite her traumatic experience with childbirth and the burden of being a single mother to a disabled child, Lorrie Ann considers motherhood to be a revelation and a gift. This becomes the crucial factor between the two women as they navigate their divergent experiences of motherhood. Gradually, Mia studies Lorrie Ann's seemingly dispassionate attitude towards Zach and her growing drug problem which Mia is quick to equate with indifference. However, Lorrie Ann was wary of falling into her friend's good natured but still patronizing approach saying that Mia had after all, eaten a hamburger after her abortion; after killing her baby. Thorpe uses the prism of female friendship to dissect the themes of choice and selfhood wherein the cultural representation of ideal motherhood is questioned.

Mia had always built up Lorrie Ann as an almost mythological figure whose goodness was infallible. However, for Lorrie Ann, the aspect of goodness has not only made her identity a relational yardstick for her friend and later as an adult, it serves to hurt her child. As Mia narrates the conflict raging inside Lorrie Ann as she questions the moral authority of the medical staff and social workers to prolong her child's life even when it is causing him immense pain. Lorrie Ann says,

“They keep him alive---that’s the only definition of goodness they know, so they don’t care what the cost of life is, they want life and only life at any cost. They discount his suffering, they discount his misery. They even refuse to give him painkillers because they want him to live longer. It is beginning to seem to me like Mengele. Like science without any human feeling. It is the way robots would run things, creatures without any feelings.”(172)

Here, Mia is stunned by her friend's righteous fury that condemns the social institutions and patriarchal norms who put exhausting and unreasonable demands on women in the context of motherhood and then judge her harshly when she fails to meet them or worse when she fails to them because she put herself first. As Lorrie Ann says, “If I had to decide: either Mia and Zach can both suffer unspeakably or only Zach can suffer unspeakably, obviously, the right thing would be to choose that only he suffer. But somehow when I make the same decision regarding myself, it is considered selfish instead of sane.”(171). Lorrie Ann was ignored during childbirth; her pain normalized and set aside as one of the many things a woman must endure to pass the litmus tests of femininity. However, this very normalized indifference is not an option provided to the harried and depressed maternal figure who cannot go beyond her threshold of care and concern. In addition, Lorrie Ann chooses to exercise this aspect of indifference to withdraw from the trap of motherhood and attempts to find a release for herself while accepting the knowledge that none exists for her son. The female psyche that is revealed here is neither a victim nor is it innocent. It is a terrifying and liberating achievement that Lorrie Ann accomplishes for herself. Like Evie Boyd, who embraced the hatred and dark menace within her; Lorrie Ann decides to be selfish while encouraging Mia to embrace motherhood in all its complexity. As Lorrie Ann says, standing Mia's house in Istanbul, after losing custody of Zach, that “it’s a happy thing when a child is conceived. No matter what. It’s a joyful thing”(202). The paradox of this attitude bewilders Mia who is struggling with the fear of failure – failure to love her unborn child which

will make her a bad mother and the fear of failing to love Franklin whom, she is convinced, does not want children. In Mia's eyes, if Lorrie Ann's moral centeredness was a mirage, then who is she really? That Mia cannot put her trust in the dichotomized boundaries of their selves is an unsettling revelation for her psyche. As Mia says,

“You told Franklin because you're high enough to think that you know best about someone else's life, when you don't know anything. But you know what, you've always thought you were better than everybody. Hell, I thought you were better than everybody! I had this whole mythology about you and how fucking perfect you were. But how did that help you? It didn't do a fucking thing. It didn't matter how much I loved you—my love was just this sort of selfish indulgence, this thing I was doing for myself.”(202)

Here, Mia does not realize that the “selfish indulgence” she accuses herself of is the same thing that Lorrie Ann wants exoneration for regarding her son Zach. As a mother, Lorrie Ann is no longer willing to witness her son's suffering and rejects to put up with the pretense of mothering that only serves to please society at large. A society that considers the suffering of both mother and son as acceptable within the boundaries of ideal motherhood-sacrificial and invisible. This aspect of the invisibility of motherhood is an extremely crucial interpretation of the kind of freedom that is accessible to women throughout their life. The feverish objectification of a woman that begins from her girlhood seems to become warped when it comes to the concept of motherhood. As Lorrie Ann says,

“Everybody cares what a pretty, young girl does and says. And she's got some pretty strict archetypes to adhere to: Sleeping Beauty or Cinderella or Britney Spears. Pick your poison. But when you become a young mother? People don't give a fuck what you're doing. Their eyes glaze over before they even finish asking you. Once a woman starts doing the most important work of her life, all of a sudden, nobody wants to know a thing about it.”(206)

Lorrie Ann's decision to separate herself from her child becomes essential in order to assess the trajectories of her self-actualization process. Lorrie Ann and Arman decide to travel to India in order to escape their life in the States and Lorrie Ann embarks on a drug induced haze in order to not feel her pain. Her time in India reveals to her the inscrutable emptiness of her reality. As the narrator says, “The Valium helped, but it still seemed to be an eternity before they arrived in Goa

and the bus ride came to an end. Lor realized that the fact she was in such psychological distress from a simple nine hours of discomfort—not even pain, just discomfort—was a sign of how radically different she was from the Indians around her, who accepted this trial as nothing more than an ordinary part of life. All of the Indians were laughing and excited as they exited the bus, stretching their limbs joyfully, ready for a day of touring in sunny Goa. Arman, even, had taken it a bit better than she had, and it made her understand more fully how much one is changed by war. Lor, of course, had never fought in a war. She had never even run an obstacle course. The most she had done, really, was birth a child—even that she had done with an epidural and, in the end, while unconscious.”(147)

Thorpe demonstrates the emotional crisis experienced by Lorrie Ann where in an alien land, far way from home, her resilience and fortitude through the experiences of marriage and motherhood seem diminished even to her. Her sense of self-worth plummets as she struggles to process her existence without Zach. If she isn't her mother, then who is she? India was supposed to provide her with a deep cleanse of the soul but ironically her shattered psyche couldn't bear to be sober and hence, prompted Lorrie Ann to paradoxically seek emotional clarity while being high on every drug imaginable. The futility of this exercise doesn't escape her as she confesses to “running away from myself”(159). She adds to Portia, a woman she meets in Goa and leaves with to farther adventures leaving Arman behind, “I tried my whole life to be a good person and nothing ever worked out for me”(159). Here, I would like to argue that both Ferrante and Thorpe foreground the problems arising from the invisible labour done by a woman through her body which impacts the way she thinks about herself and what others think about her. The protagonists of these novels are tormented by the demands of their body and the price of which is neglected by the rest of society. Elena and Lila's period makes them bleed and signals the dawn of a new threshold in their girlhood; the girls of the neighbourhood are forced to understand the nature of their sexuality only when young boys and men put a value to it through their desire and the trial of motherhood comprises Elena's attempt to regain a sense of autonomy and intellectual integrity when pursuing her writing. On the other hand, Mia ascertains the value of embracing motherhood after a much more mature understanding of her friend's woes and her own revaluation of her mother's choices in the past. In the end, the respite provided to these characters comes not from their lovers or their children but from the deep sense of shared anxiety and loss due to their intimate friendships and the solidarity created by it.

In French's novel, the highly estrogen rich environment of the boarding school is the site of a multitude of complex exchanges between young girls. The dynamics of the relationship between Holly and her friends is depicted alongside the representation of the relationship between Selena and Chris and how that impacts the fragile ecosystem of loyalty and love that holds all these intimate relationships together. In the battlefield of adolescent desires, Becca stands out for her untainted originality which to others makes her, freakish and eccentric. The violating instincts of cruel girls and boys are seen and judged by her as she intensely considers their actions and condemns the hollowness of spirit and purpose. To Becca, her friends must be protected from these instincts or the very fabric of her friendships might be compromised. Becca's relationship and perception of Chris Harper evolves at the speed of light just like most adolescent relations which can confound a viewer not accustomed to the rapid fire changes of an adolescent's emotions. The violence foregrounded here involves the bullying and humiliation at the hands of one's peers but it also involves exchanges governed by gendered codes that can complicate even the most clear-eyed participants. Selena and Chris's game of push and pull demonstrates how difficult it can be for young girls to be assertive while grappling with the self-awareness that both girls and boys have a part to play. Chris Harper blows hot and cold over the emotional landscape of many girls at St. Kilda's which vexes Selena who wants clarity. She wonders if his murder was because she failed in her project of redeeming him ? or was she the one who was spared pain? As she says to the two detectives, "Chris wasn't that simple. He was cruel and he was kind. And he didn't like realizing that. It bothered him, that he wasn't just one thing."(287) The necessary violence at St. Kilda's must be seen through the emotional rollercoaster that young boys and girls endure in order to be seen and wanted.

Chapter Seven: Cutting Into the Culture of Men

When places and spaces are reimagined it affects the conceptualization of the individuals who inhabit them. In this chapter, it is examined how the themes of girlhood and female subjectivity threaten and challenge the notions of masculinity as presented in the chosen texts. The protagonists of Cline, Thorpe and the girls of St. Kilda's in French's novel, all are seen poring over girls' magazines that attempt to showcase an ideal version of girlhood but are not necessarily attuned to the fluid instincts of its young readers. The homogeneity that these pop culture magazines advocate and hope to inspire is nevertheless rooted in the aspect that still defines access to girlhood and womanhood via mass media --the importance of a collective identity. Beth Rodgers when examining the girls' magazines of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries suggests that the "attempt to foster an ideal of the inherent class neutrality of the 'joy-snatching spirit of girlhood' is a common feature of ruminations on the nature of modern girlhood and a central aspect of the popularization of the very term 'girl' itself"(36). She adds that referencing the readers of these magazines as "our girls", the "ideal of community and camaraderie amongst readers becomes a key signifier of the modernity of the girlhood these magazines espouse and valorize"(36). This valorization according to Rodgers is "closely related to the idealization of certain kinds of heroines, who are described in great detail as figures to aspire towards and as proof of the magnetism and adventure possible in girlhood"(36).

Now, when Evie Boyd and her friend Connie consider the dictats provided in glossy magazines, it is evident that they are more like prescriptions for their ailing and insecure adolescent selves. The strict guidelines associated with the application of face masks reflects the routine bursts deprivation that girls must subject themselves to in order to achieve a desired result, that result could be clear skin or something much more amorphous. Girls must always lose something to believe that is something to be gained at the end of that loss but while that loss remains definite and concrete, the sense of achievement if any, can be slippery. And it is through the vulnerability of this slippery sense of self that male intrusion takes place. The romantic machinations of pop culture magazines capture the imagination of its readers but may not transcend that imaginative plane. Rodgers suggests that this community of girl readers can "be a potentially powerful and transformative entity" and can "help shape competing constructions of girlhood"(37). However,

she also points out that simply addressing a plethora of readers as a single entity causes unresolved friction in the magazines' treatment of their subject matter. Above all, the spectrum of prescriptions advertised by these magazines whether for Evie growing up in the 1960s or for the present day girls at St. Kilda's, the articulation of these prescriptions do not take into account the vexing after effect of shame and self-regulation. As Evie's mother asks her to part her bangs in a more flattering manner, Evie narrates, "I'd parted my hair that way to cover the pimple, gone scabby from picking. I'd coated it with vitamin E oil but couldn't stop myself from messing with it, flaking on toilet paper to soak up the blood"(32). This aspect of self-regulation and the untaught tendency to endure pain becomes lethal when made malleable at the hands of feeble men who dissect and dilute the female experience only with their male gaze. An example is provided in the interaction between Selena and Chris during a school dance where Becca's non-compliance with notions of femininity immediately make her a subject of ridicule. As the narrator says,

"'You're friend's with her, right,' Chris says. Right?' He's pointing at Becca. Becca is dancing like an eight-year-old but the kind of eight-year-old who barely existed even back when they were eight, the kind who's never even seen a music video: no booty-shake, no hip-wiggle, no chest-thrust, just dancing, like no one'e ever told her there is a right way; like she's doing it just for her own fun."(226)

In contrast the pure joy exhibited by Becca and recognized by Selena, the likes of Chris and Joanna reduce Becca to what she isn't instead of what she embodies. Her failure to wear a dress at the school dance immediately prompts the question from Chris, asking if Becca is a lesbian. Selena's explanation that her friend doesn't like dresses just isn't a satisfactory answer. Here, the author demonstrates how the articulation of female autonomy is not assessed through the lens of agency and shows the effective normalization of its dismissal at an early age. Mia and Lorrie Ann also identify the differentiated standards governing their identity formation. Mia as an adolescent already experiences how female bodies must the consequences of their desire whereas the men can remain indulgent. Lorrie Ann's traumatic childbirth and the experience of motherhood put her on a learning curve that irreversibly impacts the men in her life. However, the enormous scale of the subversive power of female adolescence is presented through the Neapolitan novels.

In Ferrante's novel, the dilution of female autonomy is again seen through the lens of male violence where Elena grows up with a longing to please everyone and where Lila is thrown out of the window by her father, Fernando, for demanding her right to education. As Elena narrates in the first book,

"Fathers could do that and other things to impudent girls. Afterward, Fernando became sullen, and worked more than usual. That summer, Carmela and Lila and I often passed the workshop, but while Rino always gave us a friendly nod of greeting, the shoemaker wouldn't even look at his daughter as long as her arm was in the cast. It was clear that he was sorry. His violent moments as a father were a small thing compared with the widespread violence of the neighbourhood. At the Bar Solara, in the heat, between gambling losses and troublesome drunkenness, people often reached the point of *disperazione*-- a word that in dialect meant having lost all hope but also being broke--and hence of fights"(83)

This rampant culture of violence makes a mockery of not just civility but also strips away any facade of tenderness. Such uncompromising bleakness, therefore becomes the catalyst for Lila and Elena's hard edged rage. As Elena narrates in the first book, "Men returned home, embittered by their losses, by alcohol, by debts, by deadlines, by beatings, and at the first inopportune word they beat their families, a chain of wrongs that generated wrongs"(83). The murder of Don Achille has a profound impact on Lila who, as Elena says in the first book, "imagined that the murderer was female only because it was easier for her to identify with her"(84). This simmering, vulgar fury that the girls had inherited as a result of their Neapolitan roots, would surface again and again as they fall into and survive the traps laid by men which includes love, sex and marriage. When Elena discovers Nino's lies about separating from his wife in order to live with Elena, she reels with an anger that is viscerally feminine and it is precisely because of it that it must hurt her at the same time. As a young girl, the battle between her parents over the question of her education leaves her with bruises. She had earned the right to an education but must bear the scars of that victory. As an adult, in the wake of Nino's betrayal she is attacked by a physical pain that almost chokes her. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"One morning—Nino said, breathlessly—she asked if I had left you. I said yes. And she said: All right, I believe you. She said it just like that and from then on she began to pretend to believe me, pretend . Now we live in this fiction and things are working well. In fact, as you see, I'm here

with you, I sleep with you, if I want I'll go away with you. And she knows everything, but she behaves as if she knew nothing. Here he took a breath, cleared his throat, tried to understand if I was listening or harboring only rage. I continued to say nothing, I looked in another direction. He must have thought that I was yielding and he continued to explain with greater determination. He talked and talked, he was good at it, he put everything into it. He was winning, self-mocking, suffering, desperate. But when he tried to approach, I pushed him away, shouting. Then he couldn't bear it and burst into tears. He gesticulated, he leaned toward me, he murmured between tears: I don't want you to pardon me, I want only to be understood. I interrupted him, angrier than ever, I cried: You lied to her and you lied to me, and you didn't do it for love of either of us, you did it for yourself, because you don't have the courage of your choices, because you're a coward. Then I moved on to repugnant words in dialect, and he let himself be insulted, he muttered just some phrases of regret. I felt as if I were suffocating, I gasped, I was silent, and that allowed him to return to the charge. He tried again to demonstrate that lying to me had been the only way to avoid a tragedy. When it seemed to him that he had succeeded, when he whispered to me that now, thanks to Eleonora's acquiescence, we could try to live together without trouble, I said calmly that it was over between us. I left, I returned to Genoa."(71)

The culture of men that Nino benefits from enables him to indulge in his desires without facing the kind of consequences that women have to be wary of. He informs Elena that his wife, whom he never left despite claiming the opposite, is pregnant and that he wishes to continue to keep seeing Elena as a lover. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"Stormier—and terrible for me—was the day when Nino appeared without warning. He was tired from the long drive, unkempt in appearance, very tense. At first I thought he had come to decide, on his own authority, the fate of me and the children. Enough, I hoped he would say, I've cleared up my situation and we're going to live in Naples. I felt disposed to give in without any more nonsense, I was exhausted by the provisional nature of things. But it didn't turn out like that. We closed ourselves in a room, and he, amid endless hesitations, twisting his hands, his hair, his face, repeated, against all my expectations, that it was impossible for him to separate from his wife. He was agitated, he tried to embrace me, he struggled to explain that only by staying with Eleonora would it be possible for him not to give up me and our life together. At another moment I would have pitied him; it was evident that his suffering was sincere. But, at the

time, I didn't care in the least how much he was suffering, I looked at him in astonishment. "What are you saying to me?" "That I can't leave Eleonora, but I can't live without you." "So if I understand you: you are proposing, as if it were a reasonable solution, that I abandon the role of lover and accept that of parallel wife." "What do you mean, it's not like that." I attacked him, Of course it's like that, and I pointed to the door: I was tired of his tricks, his inspired ideas, his every wretched word. Then, in a voice that strained to come out of his throat, and yet with the air of someone who is uttering definitively the irrefutable reasons for his own behavior, he confessed to me a thing that—he cried—he didn't want others to tell me, and so he had come to tell me in person: Eleonora was seven months pregnant."(79)

Elena is counselled by her first boyfriend, Franco and her sister-in-law Mariarosa to reconsider her hate and her fury in order to ascertain if ant happiness can be salvaged from this indignity. Mariarosa asks her with respect to Eleonora, "what does a woman of your understanding feel at the idea that her happiness becomes the ruin of someone else?"(81). Within the culture of misogynistic male behaviour, the burden of weighing the well-being of other women also falls, not onto the shoulders of the men who are the clear culprits but must be considered by the other victim. Nino's cowardice and failure to take a stance somehow highlights this predicament as his suffering rather than his weakness of character in the eyes of others. Elena's fierce fury in the face of this hypocrisy is a challenge to the culture that is ready to dehumanize her. Elena notes that "Lila would come out of it as she always does, Lila would advise me: You've already made a big enough mistake, spit in their faces and get out, it was the ending she'd always wished for"(81). Only her friend and ally would know the fairness and power of Elena's rage. Elena narrates the following in the fourth book about Franco's advice,

"He listened without interrupting, until he realized that I had no more energy. Only at that point did he say, in his refined way, that it was a good rule not to expect the ideal but to enjoy what is possible. I got mad at him, too: The usual male talk, I shouted, who gives a damn about the possible, you're talking nonsense. He wasn't offended, he wanted me to examine the situation for what it was. All right, he said, this man has lied to you for two and a half years, he told you he had left his wife, he said he didn't have relations with her, and now you discover that seven months ago he made her pregnant. You're right, it's horrible, Nino is an abject being. But once it was known—he pointed out—he could have disappeared, forgotten about you. Why, then, did he

drive from Naples to Milan, why did he travel all night, why did he humiliate himself, accusing himself, why did he beg you not to leave him? All that should signify something. It signifies, I cried, that he is a liar, that he is a superficial person, that he is incapable of making a choice. And he kept nodding yes, he agreed. But then he asked: What if he loved you, seriously, and yet knew that he could love you only in this way?"(80)

A few days after this conversation, Franco would take his own life. Perhaps in the despair of his own anxieties he was able to provide clarity to Elena that was missing before. He says, "If he is more important to you than yourself—he said one evening, seeming almost dazed—you should take him as he is: wife, children, that permanent tendency to sleep with other women, the vulgar things he is and will be capable of"(82). His death gave Elena her answer in excruciating form. Like Thorpe's Lorrie Ann, who had been good all her life but was left with a hollow emptiness, Franco's memories and his struggle to survive his life overwhelmed her. Elena would have to survive that impulse to let go of restraint and feel the full scale of her emotions because doing so may not necessarily lead to her freedom. Therefore, she instead chooses to pick what can satisfy her in the moment, ready to be discarded later and returns to Naples with her children to live with Nino. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"There was blood on the pillow and on the sheet, a large blackish stain that extended to his feet. Death is so repellent. Here I will say only that when I saw that body deprived of life, that body which I knew intimately, which had been happy and active, which had read so many books and had been exposed to so many experiences, I felt both repulsion and pity. Franco had been a living material saturated with political culture, with generous purposes and hopes, with good manners. Now he offered a horrible spectacle of himself. He had rid himself so fiercely of memory, language, the capacity to find meaning that it seemed obvious the hatred he had for himself, for his own skin, for his moods, for his thoughts and words, for the brutal corner of the world that had enveloped him."(83)

The fourth and final book in the Neapolitan series is highly impactful in laying bare the emotional crisis of a woman who wants to 'become' her best version but is made to constantly question that becoming. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"But it was a stage set, I passed off as very reasonable what was in fact unreasonable and humiliating. I'm taking—I said, adapting Franco's words—what is indispensable to me now, and as soon as I've consumed his face, his words, every desire, I'll send him away. When I waited for him in vain for days I told myself it was better that way, I was busy, he was with me too much. And when I felt the sting of jealousy I tried to calm myself by whispering: I am the woman he loves. And if I thought of his children I said to myself: He spends more time with Dede and Elsa than with Albertino and Lidia. Naturally it was all true and all false. Yes, the force of Nino's attraction would wear out. Yes, I had a lot of things to do. Yes, Nino loved me, he loved Dede and Elsa. But there were also others, yes, whom I pretended to ignore. Yes, I was more attracted to him than ever. Yes, I was ready to neglect everything and everyone if he needed me. Yes, his ties to Eleonora, Albertino, and the newborn Lidia were at least as strong as his ties to me and my daughters. I lowered dark curtains over those yeses, and if in fact here or there a tear in the fabric made evident the true state of things I quickly resorted to big words about the world to come: everything is changing, we are inventing new forms of living together, and other nonsense of the sort that I myself uttered in public or wrote every time it happened. But the difficulties hammered at me every day, cracks were continually continually opening up. The city hadn't improved at all, its malaise wore me out immediately. Via Tasso turned out to be inconvenient. Nino got me a used car, a white Renault 4 that I immediately became attached to, but then I was always stuck in traffic, and I soon gave it up. I struggled to meet the endless demands of daily life much more than I ever had in Florence, Genoa, Milan. From the first day of school Dede hated her teacher and her classmates. Elsa, now in first grade, always came home depressed, her eyes red, and refused to tell me what had happened to her. I began to scold them both. I said they didn't know how to deal with adversity, they didn't know how to assert themselves, they didn't know how to adapt, and they had to learn. As a result the two sisters joined forces against me: they began to speak of their grandmother Adele and aunt Mariarosa as if they were divinities who had organized a happy world made just for them, they mourned them in an increasingly explicit way. When, in an attempt to win them back, I drew them to me, cuddled them, they hugged me unwillingly, and sometimes pushed me away. And my work? It became more and more evident that, especially in that successful period, I would have done better to stay in Milan and find a job at a publisher's. Or even settle in Rome, since I had met people on my promotional tours who had offered to help me. What were my daughters and I

doing in Naples? Were we there just to make Nino happy? Was I lying to myself when I portrayed myself as free and autonomous? And was I lying to my audience when I played the part of someone who, with her two small books, had sought to help every woman confess what she couldn't say to herself? Were they mere formulas that it was convenient for me to believe in while in fact I was no different from my more traditional contemporaries? In spite of all the talk was I letting myself be invented by a man to the point where his needs were imposed on mine and those of my daughters?"(84).

Elena and Lila's journey towards self-actualization has been a project entangled in each other. Her decision to return to Naples and hence confront the vulgarity she had sought to escape, becomes another avenue to display the truth that women are also capable of inflicting misery and violence even though for a long time men have ignored that truth. Elena's relationships with her mother and sister, Elisha who is carrying Marcello Solara's child, breakdown further in the wake of her returning to Naples. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"Ma, today it's not like it used to be. You can be a respectable person even if you leave your husband, even if you go with someone else. Why do you get so angry with me when you don't say anything about Elisa, who's pregnant and not married?" "Because you're not Elisa. Did Elisa study the way you did? From Elisa did I expect what I expected from you?" "I'm doing things you should be happy about. Greco is becoming an important name. I even have a little reputation abroad." "Don't boast to me, you're nobody. What you think you are means nothing to normal people. I'm respected here not because I had you but because I had Elisa. She didn't study, she didn't even graduate from middle school, but she's a lady. And you who have a university degree—where did you end up? I'm just sorry for the two children, so pretty and they speak so well. Didn't you think of them? With that father they were growing up like children on television, and you, what do you do, you bring them to Naples?" "I'm the one who brought them up, Ma, not their father. And wherever I take them they'll still grow up like that." "You are presumptuous. Madonna, how many mistakes I made with you. I thought Lina was the presumptuous one, but it's you. Your friend bought a house for her parents, did you do that? Your friend orders everyone around, even Michele Solara, and who do you order around, that piece of shit son of Sarratore?" At that point she began to sing Lila's praises: Ah, how pretty Lina is, how generous, now she's got her own business, no less, she and Enzo—they've known

how to get ahead. I understood that the greatest sin she charged to me was forcing her to admit, with no way out, that I was worth less than Lila."(88)

Elena's time in Naples in the 1980s reconnected her with Lila who had again taken over the reins of her education and had started a data programming centre in the neighbourhood. Lila's fierce drive to learn and express her intellect and her attempt to professionally separate herself from the control of the Solaras make her a force to be reckoned with in the neighbourhood where historically, young girls and women are defenseless. It is also notable that Carmen becomes the only woman amongst Elena and Lila's acquaintances to live a life of stability with a comfortable, peaceful marriage. The explosive potential of Lila makes her a stakeholder in the affairs of the neighbourhood which makes her a pioneer in some ways but also makes her a target. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"Lila learned, set aside, learned. She couldn't stop, she never retreated: the 34, the 5120, BASIC, Basic Sight, the logo. Lovely, I said, and I felt then the way I hadn't felt with my mother and my sister. They all seemed happy to have me among them again, and drew me generously into their lives. Enzo, as if to demonstrate that his ideas hadn't changed in spite of prosperity, began to relate in his dry manner what he saw when he went around to the factories: people were working in terrible conditions for practically nothing, and sometimes he was ashamed at having to transform the filth of exploitation into the tidiness of programming. Lila, for her part, said that to obtain that tidiness the bosses had been forced to show her all their dirt close up, and she spoke sarcastically about the duplicity, the tricks, the scams that were behind the façade of orderly accounts. Carmen was not to be outdone, she talked about gas, she exclaimed: Here, too, there's shit everywhere. And only at that point she mentioned her brother, citing all the right reasons that had led him to do wrong things. She recalled the neighborhood of our childhood childhood and adolescence. She told the story—she had never told it before—of when she and Pasquale were children and their father listed point by point what the fascists, led by Don Achille, had done to him: the time he had been beaten up right at the entrance to the tunnel; the time they'd made him kiss the photograph of Mussolini but he had spit on it, and if they hadn't murdered him, if he hadn't disappeared like so many comrades— there is no history of those whom the fascists killed and then "disappeared" —it was only because he had the carpentry shop and was well known in

the neighborhood, and if they had removed him from the face of the earth everyone would have noticed."(94)

Lila's challenge to the Solaras is in continuation of the ugly vein of animosity that has built up since Lila's girlhood. Her status in the eyes of the Solaras as an object to be longed for and lusted after and the resultant resistance from Lila reveals how women are expected to adapt to the pleasures of men. I would like to argue here that the beauty of women in the Neapolitan novels becomes an element that supports the belief that in the moments when a woman is attractive, only then does she become visible and valued. Lila's rejection of the Solaras is the refusal to adapt to such malignant thought. Lila and Elena both, instead, choose to demonstrate their beautiful minds to the world. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"So Elisa's aversion toward her was due not only to some disagreement with Marcello but to the fact that Lila had yet again broken off from the Solaras and, after using them, had done well. Basic Sight was earning her a growing reputation for innovation and for profit. It was no longer a matter of the brilliant person who since she was a child had had the capacity to take the disorder from your head and heart to give it back to you well organized or, if she couldn't stand you, to confuse your ideas and leave you depressed. Now she also embodied the possibility of learning a new job, a job that no one knew anything about but was lucrative."(97) Elena adds, "There was only one last question, which I asked Lila and Enzo, because I was feeling at ease and had in mind what Elisa had said to me a little earlier. I asked: And the Solaras? Enzo immediately stared at the floor. Lila shrugged, she said: The usual pieces of shit. Then she said sarcastically that Michele had gone mad: after his mother's death he had left Gigliola, he had thrown his wife and children out of the house on Posillipo and if they showed up there he beat them. The Solaras—she said, with a hint of gratification—are finished: imagine, Marcello goes around saying it's my fault that his brother is behaving like that. And here she narrowed her eyes, with an expression of satisfaction, as if what Marcello said were a compliment. Then she concluded: A lot of things have changed, Lenù, since you left; you should stay with us now; give me your phone number, we ought see each other as much as we can; and then I want to send you Gennaro, you have to see if you can help him."(95)

Another aspect of the two friends renewed relations is examined through the theme of motherhood. Women as wives and mothers have populated the Neapolitan series as the constant

casualties of male rage. Receiving and giving beatings, mothers have influenced the nature of femininity performed by their daughters. When Elena returns to Naples, Lila takes over the care of the children and the two friends fall into a comfortable system of writing and child care. This could be an inheritance from their mothers and the women who came before them where in the aftermath of yelling and disputes, there would always be someone to keep an eye on the children. Women learn to lean on each other and do this invisible labour which escapes the male gaze. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"Lila had dedicated herself to the children body and soul. And it could not have been easy to wake them in time in the morning, get them washed and dressed, give them a solid but quick breakfast, take them to school in the Via Tasso neighborhood amid the morning chaos of the city, pick them up punctually in that same turmoil, bring them back to the neighborhood, feed them, supervise their homework, and keep up with her job, her domestic tasks. But, when I questioned Dede and Elsa closely, it became clear that she had managed very well. And now for them I was a more inadequate mother than ever. I didn't know how to make pasta with tomato sauce the way Aunt Lina did, I didn't know how to dry their hair and comb it with the skill and gentleness she had, I didn't know how to perform any task that Aunt Lina didn't approach with a superior sensitivity, except maybe singing certain songs that they loved and that she had admitted she didn't know. To this it should be added that, especially in Dede's eyes, that marvelous woman whom I didn't visit often enough (Mamma, why don't we go see Aunt Lina, why don't you let us sleep at her house more, don't you have to go away anymore?) had a specific quality that made her unequalled: she was the mother of Gennaro, whom my older daughter usually called Rino, and who seemed to her the most wonderful person of the male sex in the world. At the moment I was hurt. My relations with the children were not wonderful and their idealization of Lila made things worse. Once, at yet another criticism of me, I lost my patience, I yelled: O.K., go to the market of mothers and buy another one. That market was a game of ours that generally served to alleviate conflicts and reconcile us. I would say: Sell me at the market of mothers if I'm no good for you; and they would answer, no, Mamma, we don't want to sell you, we like you the way you are. On that occasion, however, maybe because of my harsh tone, Dede answered: Yes, let's go right now, we can sell you and buy Aunt Lina."(101)

The theme of motherhood also put into focus how the narrative of marriage and motherhood involves adapting the female body to the pleasures and symbols of men. The question of mothering and its non-existent reward within patriarchal norms is demonstrated in the way Lila thinks about the naming of children after their fathers even though in both their cases, the fathers have not endured the brunt of parenting. Even after sacrificing their bodies to their children, that their place in the world would be determined by the names of their (absent) fathers is evidence of the cultural invisibility faced by mothers. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"Then out of the blue came a conversation that surprised me. Dede, in front of Elsa, who listened in some alarm, said in the tone she took when she wanted to explain a problem full of perils: "You know that Aunt Lina sleeps with Enzo, but they're not married?" "Who told you?" "Rino. Enzo isn't his father." "Rino told you that, too?" "Yes. So I asked Aunt Lina and she explained to me." "What did she explain?" She was tense. She observed me to see if she was making me angry. "Shall I tell you?" "Yes." "Aunt Lina has a husband just as you do, and that husband is Rino's father, his name is Stefano Carracci. Then she has Enzo, Enzo Scanno, who sleeps with her. And the exact same thing happens with you: you have Papa, whose name is Airola, but you sleep with Nino, whose name is Sarratore." I smiled to reassure her. "How did you ever learn all those surnames?" "Aunt Lina talked to us about it, she said that they're stupid. Rino came out of her stomach, he lives with her, but he's called Carracci like his father. We came out of your stomach, we live much more with you than with Papa, but we're called Airola." "So?" "Mamma, if someone talks about Aunt Lina's stomach he doesn't say this is Stefano Carracci's stomach, he says this is Lina Cerullo's stomach. The same goes for you: your stomach is Elena Greco's stomach, not Pietro Airola's." "And what does that mean?" "That it would be more correct for Rino to be called Rino Cerullo and us Dede and Elsa Greco." "Is that your idea?" "No, Aunt Lina's." "What do you think?" "I think the same thing." "Yes?" "Yes, absolutely."(102) "It didn't take much, in fact, to recognize that with this and other conversations about real and pretend fathers, about old and new last names, Lila had managed to make the living situation into which I had cast Dede and Elsa not only acceptable in their eyes but even interesting. In fact almost miraculously my daughters stopped talking about how they missed Adele and Mariarosa; they stopped saying, when they returned from Florence, that they wanted to go and stay forever with their father and Doriana; they stopped making trouble for Mirella, the babysitter, as if she were their worst enemy; they stopped rejecting Naples, the school, the teachers, their classmates,

and, above all, the fact that Nino slept in my bed. In short, they seemed more serene. And I noted those changes with relief. However vexing it might be that Lila had entered the lives of my daughters, binding them to her, the last thing I could accuse her of was not having given them the utmost affection, the utmost care, assistance in reducing their anxieties. That was the Lila I loved. She could emerge unexpectedly from within her very meanness, surprising me. Suddenly every offense faded— she's malicious, she always has been, but she's also much more, you have to put up with her —and I acknowledged that she was helping me do less harm to my daughters. One morning I woke up and thought of her without hostility for the first time in a long while. I remembered when she got married, her first pregnancy: she was sixteen, only seven or eight years older than Dede. My daughter would soon be the age of the ghosts of our girlhood. I found it inconceivable that in a relatively small amount of time, my daughter could wear a wedding dress, as Lila had, end up brutalized in a man's bed, lock herself into the role of Signora Carracci; I found it equally inconceivable that, as had happened to me, she could lie under the heavy body of a grown man, at night, on the Maronti, smeared with dark sand, damp air, and bodily fluids, just for revenge. I remembered the thousands of odious things we had gone through and I let the solidarity regain force. What a waste it would be, I said to myself, to ruin our story by leaving too much space for ill feelings: ill feelings are inevitable, but the essential thing is to keep them in check. I grew close to Lila again with the excuse that the children liked seeing her. Our pregnancies did the rest."(103)

Ferrante's treatment of the maliciousness of male behaviour is also shown in the way both women treat their children, old lovers and friends. Their pregnancies at the same time brought them closer but Lila's adolescent son Rino, already a touchy yet miniature version of his father, Stefano, did not take kindly to his mother's relations with Enzo, the father of Lila's daughter Tina. Elena's pregnancy further complicated her relationship with Nino but Lila helped Elena's daughters understand her predicament. It is notable that Elena looks at her gay childhood friend Antonio with affection and contrasts his beauty and grace with the likes of Donato Sarratore who represent the age old malignance of weak men -operating under the guise of respectability. The figure of Antonio, who is gay and embraced by his friends, goes against the conventional ideals of Italian masculinity. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"Naturally the only source of tension was Donato. Seeing him after twenty years made an impression on me. He wore a dark blue smoking jacket, and on his feet brown slippers. He was as if shrunken and broadened, he kept waving his stubby hands, with their dark age spots and a blackish arc of dirt under the nails. His face seemed to have spread over the bones, his gaze was opaque. He covered his bald crown with his sparse hair, dyed a vaguely reddish color, and when he smiled the spaces where the teeth were missing showed. At first he tried to assume his former attitude of a man of the world, and he kept staring at my bosom, and made allusive remarks. Then he began to complain: Nothing is in its place, the Ten Commandments have been abolished, women, who can restrain them, it's all a whorehouse. But his children shut him up, ignored him, and he was silent. After lunch he drew Alfonso into a corner—so refined, so delicate, as good-looking in my eyes as Lila and more—to indulge his craving to be the center of attention. Every so often I looked, incredulous, at that old man, I thought: it's not possible that I, I as a girl, at the Maronti was with that foul man, it can't really have happened. Oh, my God, look at him: bald, slovenly, his obscene glances, next to my so deliberately feminine classmate, a young woman in male clothes. And I in the same room with him, so very different from the me of Ischia. What time is now, what time was then."(109)

Adding to the theme of motherhood and the female subject, Ferrante in the fourth book provides the culmination of a relationship that tortured Elena since her childhood and girlhood- her relationship with her mother. It was her tormented relations with her mother that made Elena renounce her roots and her Neapolitan blood. Her mother's illness brings them together through a new dynamic that had been alien to them until then -- their bonding as women. This evolution is extremely crucial in understanding the fractured female psyche that emerges from the role of unruly maternal figures whose violent and violating tendencies are tied to larger aspects of maternal love and the interiority of women. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"Whatever I said, she always objected with rude refusals, there was nothing she didn't claim to be able to do without me. The doctor? She wanted to see him alone. The hospital? She wanted to go alone. The treatments? She wanted to take care of them alone. I don't need anything, she grumbled, get out, you only bother me. Yet she got angry if I was just a minute late (Since you had other things to do it was pointless to tell me you were coming); she insulted me if I wasn't ready to bring her immediately what she asked for and she would set off with her limping gait to

show me that I was worse than Sleeping Beauty, that she was much more energetic than I (There, there, who are you thinking about, your head's not there, Lenù, if I wait for you I'll get cold); she criticized me fiercely for being polite to doctors and nurses, hissing, If you don't spit in their faces, those pieces of shit don't give a damn about you, they only help if they're scared of you . But meanwhile inside her something was changing. Often she was frightened by her own agitation. She moved as if she feared that the floor might open beneath her feet. Once when I surprised her in front of the mirror—she looked at herself often, with a curiosity she had never had—she asked me, in embarrassment, do you remember when I was young? Then, as if there were a connection, she insisted—returning to her old violence—that I swear I wouldn't take her to the hospital again, that I wouldn't let her die alone in a ward. Her eyes filled with tears. What worried me most was that she became emotional easily: she had never been that way. She was moved if I mentioned Dede, if she suspected that my father had no clean socks, if she spoke of Elisa struggling with her baby, if she looked at my growing stomach, if she remembered the countryside that had once extended all around the houses of the neighborhood. With the illness there came, in other words, a weakness she hadn't had before, and that weakness lessened her anxiety, transformed it into a capricious suffering that frequently brought tears to her eyes. One afternoon she burst out crying because she had thought of Maestra Oliviero, although she had always detested her. You remember, she said, how she insisted that you take the test for admission to middle school? And the tears poured down without restraint. Ma, I said, calm down, what's there to cry about? It shocked me seeing her so desperate for nothing, I wasn't used to it. She, too, shook her head, incredulous, she laughed and cried, she laughed to let me know that she didn't know what there was to cry about."(112)

Elena was once disgusted by the corporeality of her mother; the dragging limp that tormented her even in her dreams and became a symbol of inadequacy in her mind as a young girl. However, by taking over the care of her mother's frail body, Elena is redeeming herself and her mother's emotional landscape. Her father crumpled under the weight of this news whereas her brothers, now working as the hired muscle of Marcello Solara's crime syndicate, went back to their jobs leaving behind money for their mother's treatment. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"From then on her periods of bitter silence diminished and those of uninhibited confidences increased. Sometimes she said embarrassing things. She revealed that she had never been with

any man but my father. She revealed with coarse obscenities that my father was perfunctory, she couldn't remember if sleeping with him had ever truly given her pleasure. She revealed that she had always loved him and that she still did, but as a brother. She revealed that the only good thing in her life was the moment I came out of her belly, I, her first child. She revealed that the worst sin she had committed—a sin for which she would go to Hell—was that she had never felt attached to her other children, she had considered them a punishment, and still did so. She revealed finally, without circumlocutions, that her only true child was me. When she said this—I remember that we were at the hospital for an examination—her distress was such that she wept even more than usual. She whispered: I worried only about you, always, the others for me were stepchildren; so I deserve the disappointment you've given me, what a blow, Lenù, what a blow, you shouldn't have left Pietro, you shouldn't have gone with Sarratore's son, he's worse than the father, an honest man who is married, who has two children, doesn't take someone else's wife."(113)

Lila's authority in the neighbourhood is again brought to the forefront by Elena's ailing mother as she asks Elena to take Lila's help and free her brothers from perishing under the thumb of the Solaras. Here, Ferrante is again demonstrating how the vein of violence is disrupting families and changing the neighbourhood into a centre of criminal activities.

"Like that, in a low voice. She was inconsolable, she sketched a picture that surprised me. Marcello is more criminal than Michele, she said, he pulled my children into the mud, he seems the better of the two but it's not true. He had changed Elisa, who now felt more Solara than Greco and was on his side in everything. She talked for hours, whispering, as if we were waiting our turn not in the ugly, crowded waiting room of one of the best hospitals in the city but in some place where Marcello lurked nearby. I tried to make light of it, to calm her, illness and old age were making her exaggerate. You worry too much, I said. She answered: I worry because I know and you don't, ask Lina if you don't believe me. It was here, on the wave of those melancholy words describing how the neighborhood had changed for the worse (We were better off when Don Achille Carracci was in charge), that she began to talk about Lila with an even more marked approval than before. Lila was the only one capable of putting things in order in the neighborhood. Lila was capable of harnessing the good and, even more, the bad. Lila knew everything, even the most terrible acts, but she never condemned you, she understood that

anyone can make a mistake, herself first of all, and so she helped you. Lila appeared to her as a kind of holy warrior who spread avenging light over the stradone, the gardens, amid the old buildings and the new. As I listened it seemed to me that now I counted, in her eyes, only because of my relationship with the neighborhood's new authority."(114)

Elena's return to Naples enables her to become a witness to the growing class conflict that defines the two separate experiences of the old neighbourhood and the new neighborhood. The influx of crime in the old neighbourhood where Lila lives has made her monitor the role of the Solaras in turning the place where they all grew up into an even worse centre of crime. Elena at this point, lives in Via Tasso, the safe and upper-class part of Naples and hence, is not affected by the rampant crime which includes drug related violence for which the Solaras are to blame. Lila with her status as an authority figure in the old neighbourhood takes it upon herself to lay waste to the Solaras' plan to bring more disorder and violence into her neighbourhood. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"As she talked she kept touching her forehead, she complained of the heat, of the slight headache she'd had since the morning. I understood that she wanted to reassure me but also, in a contradictory manner, show me a little of what was there where she lived and worked every day, behind the façade of the houses, on the streets of the new neighborhood and the old one. Thus on the one hand she repeatedly denied the danger, on the other drew me a picture of spreading crime, extortion, assault, theft, usury, revenge followed by revenge. The secret red book that Manuela maintained and that after her death had passed to Michele was now controlled by Marcello, who was also taking away from his brother—out of distrust—the management of the legal and illegal trafficking, the political friendships. She said suddenly: Marcello has been bringing drugs to the neighborhood for several years, and I want to see where it's going to end up. A remark like that. She was very pale, fanning herself with the edge of her skirt. Of all her allusions, only the one to drugs struck me, particularly because of her tone of disgust and disapproval. Drugs for me at that time meant Mariarosa's house, or, on certain evenings, the apartment on Via Tasso. I had never used drugs, apart from smoking once or twice, out of curiosity, but I wasn't outraged if others did, in the circles I had frequented and did frequent no one was outraged. So, to keep the conversation going, I stated an opinion, drawing on the days in Milan, and on Mariarosa, for whom taking drugs was one of many channels for individual well-

being, a way of freeing oneself from taboos, a cultivated form of release. But Lila shook her head in opposition: What release, Lenù, the son of Signora Palmieri died two weeks ago, they found him in the gardens. And I perceived the irritation she felt at that word, release, at my way of saying it, assigning it a positive value. I stiffened, I ventured: He must have had some heart trouble. She answered, He had heroin trouble, and she quickly added: That's enough, I'm fed up, I don't want to spend Sunday talking about the revolting activities of the Solaras."(126)

Elena realizes the privilege of her wealth and status as a literary figure which reinforces the fact that the two friends have been living and surviving in vastly different worlds but both of them have had to overcome misogyny and harassment and endure the imposition of the desires of lesser men. By focusing on the aspect of rampant crime, Ferrante is making sharp observations about the nexus between political establishments and the Camorra or the mafia. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"As for Marcello, in a flash drugs stopped being what they had seemed to me, a liberating game for wealthy people, and moved into the sticky theater of the gardens beside the church, they had become a viper, a poison that spread through the blood of my brothers, of Rino, perhaps of Gennaro, and murdered, and brought money into the red book once kept by Manuela Solara and now—having passed from Michele to Marcello—by my sister, in her house. I felt all the fascination of the way Lila governed the imagination of others or set it free, at will, with just a few words: that speaking, stopping, letting images and emotions go without adding anything else. I'm wrong, I said to myself in confusion, to write as I've done until now, recording everything I know. I should write the way she speaks, leave abysses, construct bridges and not finish them, force the reader to establish the flow: Marcello Solara who takes off quickly with my sister Elisa, with Silvio, with Peppe, with Gianni, with Rino, with Gennaro, with Michele enthralled by the shadow of the shadow of Lila; suggest that they all slip inside the veins of Signora Palmieri's son, a boy I don't even know and who now causes me pain, veins far away from those of the people Nino brings to Via Tasso, from Mariarosa's, from those of a friend of hers—I now remembered—who was sick, and had to detox, and my sister-in-law, too, wherever she is, I haven't heard from her for a long time, some people are always saved and some perish. I tried to expel images of voluptuous penetrations between men, of needles in veins, of desire and death."(127)

Another important element of resistance that runs through the history of Elena and Lila's friendship is Lila's tendency to exhibit the sensation of the "dissolving of margins" where she has an intense physiological reaction to moments of extreme stress and anxiety. Elena had been witness to the it for the time during New Year's celebration in 1958 and then again she bore witness to Lila's condition during the earthquake of November 23, 1980. As Elena Narrates in the fourth book,

"Finally I seized her by the arm, I shook her, and she opened her eyes, which seemed white. The noise was unbearable, the whole city was making noise, Vesuvius, the streets, the sea, the old houses of the Tribunali and the Quartieri, the new ones of Posillipo. She wriggled free, she cried: Don't touch me. It was an angry shout, and shocked me even more than the long seconds of the earthquake. I realized that I was mistaken: Lila, always in control of everything, at that moment wasn't in control of anything. She was immobilized by horror, fearful that if I merely touched her she would break."(128)

The two women have vastly different responses to the massive earthquake and Lila's experience of blurred boundaries can be linked to her eventual disappearance and erasure of her self. I would like to argue here that Lila's represents that unfilled and volatile femininity that rebels against the codes and markers that bind her body by choosing the act of erasure. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"I was afraid, yes, I was terrified. But to my great amazement I wasn't as frightened as Lila. In those seconds of the earthquake she had suddenly stripped off the woman she had been until a moment before—the one who was able to precisely calibrate thoughts, words, gestures, tactics, strategies—as if in that situation she considered her a useless suit of armor. Now she was someone else. She was the person I had glimpsed the time Melina walked along the stradone eating soap; or the one of the night of New Year's Eve in 1958, when the fireworks war broke out between the Carraccis and the Solaras; or the one who had sent for me in San Giovanni a Teduccio, when she worked in Bruno Soccavo's factory and, thinking something was wrong with her heart, wanted to leave me Gennaro because she was sure she would die. But now that other person seemed to have emerged directly from the churning guts of the earth; she bore almost no resemblance to the friend who a few minutes before I had envied for her ability to

choose words deliberately; there was no resemblance even in the features, disfigured by anguish."(132)

Lila's experience of boundaries dissolving is a means of questioning reality and the validity of reality as we know it. It invokes a sense of rebellion and takes away the solidity of form and shape from lived life experiences because the female subject is not fully reconciled with that lived reality. Instead, the female subject is questioning the notion of life having solid boundaries when it does not offer her happiness or the scope to achieve her full potential. So what then is the purpose behind such a life? What then are boundaries for? Here, women like Lila cannot be held within the thin boundaries of reality that cannot offer a space for her subjectivity in the first place. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"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 whispered that for her it had always been that way, an object lost its edges and poured into another, into a solution of heterogeneous materials, a merging and mixing. 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. Contrary to what she had been doing, she began to utter a profusion of overexcited sentences, sometimes kneading in the vocabulary of the dialect, sometimes drawing on the vast reading she had done as a girl. She muttered that she mustn't ever be distracted: if she became distracted real things, which, with their violent, painful contortions, terrified her, would gain the upper hand over the unreal ones, which, with their physical and moral solidity, pacified her; she would be plunged into a sticky, jumbled reality and would never again be able to give sensations clear outlines. A tactile emotion would melt into a visual one, a visual one would melt into an olfactory one, ah, what is the real world, Lenù, nothing, nothing, nothing about which one can say conclusively: it's like that. 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."(133)

Lila and by extension, Ferrante, provides a detailed explanation of the condition that has plagued Lila since her girlhood. There is both detail and abstraction in the way the blurring and melting of boundaries is presented to us. It could be seen as debilitating migraines when Lila talks about "the disquiet of the mind"(135). But the symbolism incorporated into the rest of it accompanies the aspect of reality such as the literal earthquake. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"She spoke for a long time. It was the first and last time she tried to explain to me the feeling of the world she moved in. Up to now, she said—and here I summarize in my own words, of the present—I thought it was a matter of bad moments that came and then passed, like a childhood illness. Do you remember New Year's Eve of 1958, when the Solaras shot at us? The shots were the least frightening part. First, even before they started shooting, I was afraid that the colors of the fireworks were sharp—the green and the purple especially were razorlike—that they could butcher us, that the trails of the rockets were scraping my brother Rino like files, like rasps, and broke his flesh, caused another, disgusting brother to drip out of him, whom I had to put back inside right away—inside his usual form—or he would turn against me and hurt me. All my life I've done nothing, Lenù, but hold back moments like those. Marcello scared me and I protected myself with Stefano. Stefano scared me and I protected myself with Michele. Michele scared me and I protected myself with Nino. Nino scared me and I protected myself with Enzo. But what does that mean, protect, it's only a word. I could make you, now, a detailed list of all the coverings, large and small, that I constructed to keep myself hidden, and yet they were of no use to me. Do you remember how the night sky of Ischia horrified me? You all said how beautiful it is, but I couldn't. I smelled an odor of rotten eggs, eggs with a greenish-yellow yolk inside the white and inside the shell, a hard-boiled egg cracked open. I had in my mouth poisoned egg stars, their light had a white, gummy consistency, it stuck to your teeth, along with the gelatinous black of the sky, I crushed it with disgust, I tasted a crackling of grit. Am I clear? Am I making myself clear? And yet on Ischia I was happy, full of love. But it was no use, my head always finds a chink to peer through, beyond—above, beneath, on the side—where the fear is. In Bruno's factory, for example, the bones of the animals cracked in your fingers if you merely touched them, and a rancid marrow spilled out. I was so afraid that I thought I was sick. But was I sick? Did I really have a murmur in my heart? No. The only problem has always been the disquiet of my mind. I can't stop it, I always have to do, redo, cover, uncover, reinforce, and then suddenly undo, break. Take Alfonso, he's always made me nervous, ever since he was a boy, I've felt that

the cotton thread that held him together was about to break. And Michele? Michele thought he was who knows what, and yet all I had to do was find his boundary line and pull, oh, oh, oh, I broke it, I broke his cotton thread and tangled it with Alfonso's, male material inside male material, the fabric that I weave by day is unraveled by night, the head finds a way. But it's not much use, the terror remains, it's always in the crack between one normal thing and the other. It's there waiting, I've always suspected it, and since yesterday evening I've known for certain: nothing lasts, Lenù, even here in my belly, you think the creature will endure but it won't. You remember when I married Stefano and I wanted the neighborhood to start again from the beginning, to be only beautiful things, the ugliness of before was not supposed to be there anymore. How long did it last? Good feelings are fragile, with me love doesn't last. Love for a man doesn't last, not even love for a child, it soon gets a hole in it. You look in the hole and you see the nebula of good intentions mixed up with the nebula of bad. Gennaro makes me feel guilty, this thing here in my belly is a responsibility that cuts me, scratches me. Loving courses together with hating, and I can't, I can't manage to solidify myself around any goodwill. Maestra Oliviero was right, I'm bad. I don't even know how to keep friendship alive. You're kind, Lenù, you've always had a lot of patience. But tonight I finally understood it: there is always a solvent that acts slowly, with a gentle heat, and undoes everything, even when there's no earthquake. So please, if I insult you, if I say ugly things to you, stop up your ears, I don't want to do it and yet I do. Please, please, don't leave me, or I'll fall in."(135)

Both Lila and Elena have been under the relentless gaze of men and Lila's condition enables her to see through the ugliness of all things. On the other hand, Elena realizes that her understanding of reality is rooted in the solid reality of people and places. Lila had to stay in Naples and undergo the trauma of physical and emotional violation whereas Elena dealt with her trauma of the violent neighbourhood by escaping to another place. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"But, even now as I pondered the wave of Lila's distraught words, I felt that in me fear could not put down roots, and even the lava, the fiery stream of melting matter that I imagined inside the earthly globe, and the fear it provoked in me, settled in my mind in orderly sentences, in harmonious images, became a pavement of black stones like the streets of Naples, a pavement where I was always and no matter what the center. I gave myself weight, in other words, I knew how to do that, whatever happened. Everything that struck me—my studies, books, Franco,

Pietro, the children, Nino, the earthquake—would pass, and I, whatever I among those I was accumulating, I would remain firm, I was the needle of the compass that stays fixed while the lead traces circles around it. Lila on the other hand—it seemed clear to me now, and it made me proud, it calmed me, touched me—struggled to feel stable. She couldn't, she didn't believe it. However much she had always dominated all of us and had imposed and was still imposing a way of being, on pain of her resentment and her fury, she perceived herself as a liquid and all her efforts were, in the end, directed only at containing herself. When, in spite of her defensive manipulation of persons and things, the liquid prevailed, Lila lost Lila, chaos seemed the only truth, and she—so active, so courageous—erased herself and, terrified, became nothing."(136)

Lila's struggle with respect to the blurring and dissolving of borders reveals the struggle to contain her fierce expressiveness; to contain herself. On the other hand, Elena is governed by the relief and desire to reconstruct herself. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"I observed Lila's figure. I remembered what she had said and implied shortly before the earthquake, I had the impression that a legion of demons was pursuing her. She used Enzo, she used Pasquale, she used Antonio. She remodeled Alfonso. She subdued Michele Solara, leading him into a mad love for her, for him. And Michele was thrashing about to free himself, he fired Alfonso, he closed the shop in Piazza dei Martiri, but in vain. Lila humiliated him, continued to humiliate him, subjugating him. How much did she know now of the two brothers' business. She had set eyes on their affairs when she collected data for the computer, she even knew about the drug money. That's why Marcello hated her, that's why my sister Elisa hated her. Lila knew everything. She knew everything out of pure, simple fear of all that was living or dead. Who knows how many ugly facts she knew about Nino. She seemed to say to me from a distance: Forget him, we both know that he's safely with his family and doesn't give a damn about you."(138)

Elena as a result of Lila's re-entry into her life, also gets involved with the neighbourhood against her wishes. Ferrante, here circles back to the place that forged the identities of the two friends. Their pregnancies occurring at the same time, whilst living in Naples, signal a regeneration of their mother's stories. Elena's return to Naples also reveals to her how the other women in her life are faring amidst the same men who tormented her and Lila. Elena's sister has become a dependent on and ally of Marcello Solara whereas her mother's illness and eventual death shakes

her sense of self. Elena gives birth to a daughter Imma or Immacolata and here, too, the female body becomes the site resistance and control; to be seen, touched and felt by others. During her mother's illness; Marcello and Elena fight over the nature of Signora Greco's care and her body, in turn, becomes a thing to be controlled and conquered to prove a point. Signora Greco "is the Solaras' business"(161). Lila's attempts to intervene earn her death threats from Marcello. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"That allusion to the milk helped me. I sat next to Immacolata's cradle as if her nearness could preserve my swollen breasts. What was the body of a woman: I had nourished my daughter in the womb, now that she was out she was nourished by my breast. I thought, there was a moment when I, too, had been in my mother's womb, had sucked at her breast. A breast as big as mine, or maybe even bigger. Until shortly before my mother got sick my father had often alluded obscenely to that bosom. I had never seen her without a bra, in any stage of her life. She had always concealed herself, she didn't trust her body because of the leg. Yet at the first glass of wine she would counter my father's obscenities with words just as coarse in which she boasted of her attractions, an exhibition of shamelessness that was pure show."(154)

Through the female subject and through the female body, Ferrante presents the conflict between order and chaos as exemplified by Elena and Lila. If violence, humiliation and the indignities of life can corrode a woman's sense of self then confidences, love and a restoration of dignity can have the opposite effect. Elena reconfigures her relationship with her mother and the corporeality of her mother no longer torments her. At the end of her life, Elena's mother becomes childlike, spilling secrets and in need of attention. Perhaps the widening borders of her mother's childhood and girlhood made her more human. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"My mother had recovered. Of course, she was frail, and if she didn't see us children every day she feared catastrophe and began to cry. Also, she was permanently in bed, while before, even if laboriously, she had moved, gone out. But it seemed indisputable that the luxuries of the clinic were beneficial to her. To be treated like a great lady became a game that distracted her from the illness and that, with the help of some drug, diminished the pain, making her at times euphoric. She liked the large luminous room, she found the mattress comfortable, she was proud of having her own bathroom, and in the room, no less. A real bathroom—she pointed out—not a toilet, and she wanted to get up and show it to me. Not to mention that there was the new granddaughter.

When I went with Imma to see her she held the baby next to her, talked to her in baby talk, grew excited, claiming—which was very unlikely—that Imma had smiled at her. But in general her interest in the infant didn't last long. She began to speak of her own childhood, of adolescence. She went back to when she was five, then she slid to twelve, then fourteen, and she related to me from within those ages things that had happened to her and her companions of that time. One morning she said to me in dialect: As a child I knew about death, I've always known about it, but I never thought it would happen to me, and even now I can't believe it. Another time, following her own thoughts, she began to laugh, and whispered: You're right not to baptize the baby, it's nonsense; now that I'm dying I know that I'll turn into little bits and pieces. But mostly it was in those slow hours that I truly felt I was her favorite child. When she embraced me before I left, it was as if she meant to slip inside me and stay there, as once I had been inside her. That contact with her body, which had irritated me when she was healthy, I now liked."(160)

The culture of men that is exposed and dissected in the Neapolitan novels also frames the paternal figure with respect to the maternal figure. The men are also shaped by the violence they partake in and encourage but it is only the mother who breaks or makes their children and their spouses. Elena's return to Naples provides her with clarity to unmask her relationship with both her parents. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"It was odd how the clinic soon became a place of meeting for the old and the young of the neighborhood. My father slept there with my mother, and when I saw him in the morning his beard was unshaven, his eyes were frightened. We barely greeted each other, but that didn't seem unusual. I had never had much contact with him: at times affectionate, often distracted, occasionally in support of me against my mother. But it had almost always been superficial. My mother had given him a role and taken it away according to convenience, and especially when it came to me—making and unmaking my life was to be only for her—she had pushed him into the background. Now that the energy of his wife had almost completely vanished, he didn't know how to talk to me nor I to him. I said hi, he said hi, then he added: while you keep her company, I'll go smoke a cigarette. Sometimes I wondered how he had managed to survive, a man so ordinary, in the fierce world he had moved in, in Naples, in his job, in the neighborhood, even at home."(161)

Lila's pregnancy also foregrounds the conflict between order and chaos. Her fear of people and things being devoid of meaning reaches a crescendo with childbirth. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"But Lila was late because of a sort of presentiment in her body. Although she wasn't having contractions she didn't feel well and, finally, as a precaution, had Enzo take her to my house. Even before she went in she felt the first pains. She immediately called Carmen, ordering her to come and give the neighbor a hand, then Enzo took her to the clinic where our gynecologist worked. The contractions suddenly became violent but not decisive: the labor lasted sixteen hours. Lila's account was almost funny. It's not true, she said, that you suffer only with the first child and afterward it's easier—you always suffer. And she brought out arguments as fierce as they were humorous. It seemed to her pointless to safeguard the child in your womb and at the same time long to get rid of it. It's ridiculous, she said, that this exquisite nine months of hospitality is accompanied by the desire to throw out the guest as violently as possible. She shook her head indignantly at the inconsistency of the mechanism. It's crazy, she exclaimed, resorting to Italian, it's your own body that's angry with you, and in fact rebels against you until it becomes its own worst enemy, until it achieves the most terrible pain possible. For hours she had felt in her belly sharp cold flames, an unbearable flow of pain that hit her brutally in the pit of her stomach and then returned, penetrating her kidneys. Come on, she said sarcastically, you're a liar, where is the great experience. And she swore—this time seriously—that she would never get pregnant again."(166)

The aspect of scrutiny that defined the lives of the two friends is showcased again in the aftermath of the birth of their daughters. The aspects of chaos and order; visibility and disappearance are tied to the experience of being a woman. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"The babies immediately became an excuse to spend more time together. Lila and I talked on the phone, met to take them for a walk, spoke endlessly, no longer about ourselves but about them. Or at least so it seemed to us. In reality a new richness and complexity in our relationship began to manifest itself through a mutual attention to our daughters. We compared them in every detail as if to assure ourselves that the health or illness of the one was the precise mirror of the health or illness of the other and as a result we could readily intervene to reinforce the first and cut off the second. We told each other everything that seemed good and useful for healthy development,

engaging in a sort of virtuous competition of who could find the best food, the softest diaper, the most effective cream for a rash. There was no pretty garment acquired for Nunzia—but now she was called Tina, the diminutive of Nunziatina—that Lila did not also get for Imma, and I, within the limits of my finances, did the same. This onesie was cute on Tina, so I got one for Imma, too—she'd say—or these shoes were cute on Tina and I got some for Imma, too."(168).

Ferrante's treatment of the two friends occupying space in the world as female subjects is given multiple dimensions in the form of their childhood, girlhood, through parents, through lovers and then through their children. Therefore the entirety of a lifetime was needed as a framework to explore them as subjects. The cyclical nature of visibility and disappearance is personified with the birth of Imma and the death of Signora Greco. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"I observed her: she was a gray, wrinkled old woman, even though she wasn't a hundred but sixty. I then first felt the impact of time, the force that was pushing me toward forty, the velocity with which life was consumed, the concreteness of the exposure to death: If it's happening to her, I thought, there's no escape, it will happen to me as well . One morning, when Imma was just over two months old, my mother said weakly: Lenù, I'm truly content now, it's only you I'm worried about, but you are you and you've always been able to arrange things as you liked, so I have confidence. Then she went to sleep and fell into a coma. She held out for a few more days; she didn't want to die. I remember that I was in her room with Imma; by now the death rattle was continuous, it had become one of the ordinary sounds of the clinic. My father, who couldn't bear to hear it anymore, had stayed home that night, weeping. Elisa had taken Silvio out to the courtyard to get some air, my brothers were smoking in a room nearby. I stared for a long time at that insubstantial bulge under the sheet. My mother was diminished almost to nothing, and yet she had been truly burdensome, weighing on me, making me feel like a worm under a rock, protected and crushed. I wished that wheeze would stop, right away, now, and, to my surprise, it did. Suddenly the room was silent. I waited, I couldn't find the strength to get up and go to her. Then Imma clicked her tongue and the silence was broken. I left the chair, went over to the bed. The two of us—I and the infant, greedily seeking my nipple in her sleep, to feel that she was still part of me—were, in that place of illness, the only living and healthy part of my mother that remained. That day, I don't know why, I had put on the bracelet she had given me more than

twenty years before. I hadn't worn it for a long time; I usually wore the finer jewelry that Adele had recommended. From then on I wore it often."(169)

The trauma of being a woman and surviving it spills onto the act of writing it and as Elena strives to endure, she also strives to make sure her intellectual voice endures as well. The permeability of reality and abstraction that applies to Lila's worldview is contrasted with the realism and solidity that Elena longs for. In her writing, she longs to contain that essence of solidity and in the end, contain her friend. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"I struggled to accept my mother's death. Even though I didn't shed a tear, the pain lasted for a long time and perhaps has never really gone away. I had considered her an insensitive and vulgar woman, I had feared her and fled. Right after her funeral I felt the way you feel when it suddenly starts raining hard, and you look around and find no place to take shelter. For weeks I saw and heard her everywhere, night and day. She was a vapor that in my imagination continued to burn without a wick. I missed the different way of being together we had discovered during her illness, I prolonged it by retrieving positive memories of when I was a child and she was young. My sense of guilt wanted to compel her to endure. In a drawer I put a hairpin of hers, a handkerchief, a pair of scissors, but they all seemed inadequate objects, even the bracelet was worthless. My pregnancy had brought back the pain in my hip and Imma's birth hadn't relieved it, but maybe that was why I decided not to go to the doctor. I nurtured that pain like a bequest preserved in my body. The words she had said to me at the end (You're you, I have confidence) also stayed with me for a long time. She died convinced that because of how I was made, because of the resources I had accumulated, I would not be overwhelmed by anything. That idea worked inside me and in the end helped me. I decided to prove to her that she had been right. I began again in a disciplined way to take care of myself. I returned to using every bit of empty time for reading and writing. I lost what little interest I'd had in petty politics—I couldn't get excited at the intrigues of the five governing parties and their quarrels with the Communists, as Nino now was actively doing—but I continued to follow closely the corrupt and violent drift of the country. I collected feminist readings and, still fortified by the small success of my last book, proposed articles to the new journals directed at women."(171)

This theme of thinking, writing as countering dissolution is another aspects that undermines the culture of men. Women and their bodies being shaped by men is overturned when women

reconfigure their relationship with their own bodies. This is accompanied by patriarchal attitudes to female intellect. If Elena had to arrive at a point of realization and strive to not acquire a masculine way of thinking; then Lila's fearsome intellect break down and reorders the intelligence of lesser men such as Nino. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"He was trying to finish an essay on work and the automation of Fiat, but I saw that he was in trouble (What precisely is a microprocessor, what's a chip, how does this stuff function in practice). I had said to him: talk to Enzo Scanno, he's smart. He had asked absentmindedly: Who is Enzo Scanno? Lina's companion, I answered. He said with a half smile: Then I prefer to talk to Lina, she certainly knows more. And, as if the memory had returned, he added, with a trace of resentment: Wasn't Scanno the idiot son of the fruit seller? That tone struck me. Enzo was the founder of a small, innovative business—a miracle, considering that the office was in the heart of the old neighborhood. Precisely because he was a scholar, Nino should have displayed interest and admiration toward him. Instead, he had returned him, thanks to that imperfect— was—to the time of elementary school, when he helped his mother in the shop or went around with his father and the cart and didn't have time to study and didn't shine. He had, with irritation, taken every virtue away from Enzo, and given them all to Lila. That was how I realized that if I had forced him to delve into himself, it would have emerged that the highest example of female intelligence—maybe his own worship of female intelligence, even certain lectures claiming that the waste of women's intellectual resources was the greatest waste of all—had to do with Lila, and that if our season of love was already darkening, the season of Ischia would always remain radiant for him. The man for whom I left Pietro, I thought, is what he is because his encounter with Lila reshaped him that way."(181)

And therefore, Lila remains the authority on Elena. She had predicted Nino's infidelity and it comes to fruition after the birth of Imma. Elena understood Lila's conviction that nothing is permanent. No semblance of order whether stemming from love or not, lasts forever. It must fall apart. Here, this realisation is accompanied by the idea that the culture of men that harms and degrades women is a finely calibrated belief system that can operate with brute ignorance of the kind that Elena had seen in her neighbourhood or it can come packaged as the sophisticated, well-read facade of hollow men like Nino. This prompts the question of who or what do women

even love? Why do they submit to these varied degradations especially if it is the superficial kind that hides behind respectability and authority. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"Nino had fucked the servant and then gone to his appointment, not giving a shit about me or even about his daughter. Ah, what a piece of shit, all I did was make mistakes. Was he like his father? No, too simple. Nino was very intelligent, Nino was extraordinarily cultured. His propensity for fucking did not come from a crude, naïve display of virility based on half-fascistic, half-southern clichés. What he had done to me, what he was doing to me, was filtered by a very refined knowledge. He dealt in complex concepts, he knew that this way he would offend me to the point of destroying me. But he had done it just the same. He had thought: I can't give up my pleasure just because that shit can be a pain in the ass. Like that, just like that. And surely he judged as philistine—that adjective was still very widespread in our world—my possible reaction. Philistine, philistine. I even knew the line he would resort to in sophisticated justification: What's the harm, the flesh is weak and I've read all the books. Exactly those words, nasty son of a bitch. Rage had opened up a pathway in the horror. I shouted at Imma— even at Imma —to be quiet. When I reached Lila's house I hated Nino as until that moment I had never hated anyone."(187)

Nino Sarratore's character is effectively used to present this idea of the tainted culture of men. It not just presents the constant cycle of lies and betrayal but the dirty greed of possessing everything about a woman. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"“Did Nino call?” “Yes.” “What did he say?” “That it was foolish, that I should stay with you, that I should help you understand, that today people live like this. Talk.” “And you?” “I slammed the telephone down on him.” “But he'll call again?” “Of course he'll call again.” I felt discouraged. “Lila, I don't know how to live without him. It all lasted such a short time. I broke up my marriage, I came to live here with the children, I had another child. Why?” “Because you made a mistake.” I didn't like the remark, it sounded like the echo of an old offense. She was reminding me that I had made a mistake even though she had tried to get me out of the mistake. She was saying that I had wanted to make a mistake, and as a result she had been mistaken, I wasn't intelligent, I was a stupid woman. I said: “I have to talk to him, I have to confront him.” “All right, but leave me the children.” “You can't do it, there are four.” “There are five, there's also Gennaro. And he's the most difficult of all.” “You see? I'll take them.” “Don't even

mention it." I admitted that I needed her help, I said: "I'll leave them until tomorrow, I need time to resolve the situation." "Resolve it how?" "I don't know." "You want to continue with Nino?" I could hear her opposition and I almost shouted: "What can I do?" "The only thing possible: leave him." For her it was the right solution, she had always wanted it to end like that, she had never concealed it from me. I said: "I'll think about it." "No, you won't think about it. You've already decided to pretend it was nothing and go on." I avoided answering but she pressed me, she said that I shouldn't throw myself away, that I had another destiny, that if I went on like that I would lose myself. I noticed that she was becoming harsh, I felt that to restrain me she was on the point of telling me what for a long time I had wanted to know and what for a long time she had been silent about. I was afraid, but had I not myself, on various occasions, tried to urge her to be clear? And now, had I not come to her also so that finally she would tell me everything? "If you have something to tell me," I said, "speak." And she made up her mind, she looked at me, I looked down. She said that Nino had often sought her out. She said that he had asked her to come back to him, both before he had become involved with me and after. She said that when they took my mother to the hospital he had been particularly insistent. She said that while the doctors were examining my mother and they were waiting for the results in the waiting room he had sworn to her that he was with me only to feel closer to her. "Look at me," she whispered. "I know I'm mean to tell you these things, but he is much worse than I am. He has the worst kind of meanness, that of superficiality.'"(190)

Interestingly, the break from Nino would enable Elena to reassess her life in Naples and the primacy of her role as writer and mother. The development of the two girls, Imma and Tina, is seen as a foreshadowing of what is to come. They would also be following in the footsteps of their mothers. Imma, seen as a slow learner, represents the effort and toil of Elena to escape towards a different life whereas Tina, Lila's daughter is precocious. Eventually, Naples informs the colour of Elena's writing which is received well and in the autobiographical workings of her second novel, Elena Greco becomes a mirror to Elena Ferrante. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"Why am I here, why am I wasting time like this. The girls and Naples have eaten me alive. I don't study, I don't write, I've lost all discipline. I had gained a life very far from what might have been expected for me, and look how I had ended up. I felt exasperated, guilty toward

myself and especially toward my mother. Furthermore, Imma had been making me anxious: when I compared her with Tina I was sure she was suffering from some developmental problem. Lila's daughter, although she was three weeks younger, was very lively, seemed more than a year old, whereas Imma seemed unresponsive and had a vacant look. I observed her obsessively, I harassed her with tests that I invented on the spot. I thought: it would be terrible if Nino not only had ruined my life but had given me a daughter with problems. And yet people stopped me on the street because she was so plump, so fair. Here, even at the post office, the women in line complimented her, how chubby she was. But she didn't even smile. A man offered her a candy and Imma stretched out her hand reluctantly, took it, dropped it. Ah, I was constantly anxious, every day a new worry was added to the others."(198)

Elena attempts to embrace Naples as a source of inspiration within a wider process to embrace her roots. Elena decides to move back to her old neighbourhood and raise her children there till she finishes with her writing. This decision to bring her daughters to the very place that she detested and escaped brings to fruition her changed negotiation with the politics of that space. As an adult as as a writer, she can now look at that space with a difference that didn't exist before. She says,

"Suddenly I began to look at the city and especially at the neighborhood as an important part of my life; not only should I not dismiss it but it was essential to the success of my work. It was a sudden leap, going from distrust to a joyful sense of myself. What I had felt as a precipice not only acquired literary nobility but seemed to me a determined choice of a cultural and political arena. The editor himself had sanctioned it authoritatively, saying: For you, returning to the point of departure has been a step forward. Of course, I hadn't said that the book was written in Florence, that the return to Naples had had no influence on the text. But the narrative material, the human depth of the characters came from the neighborhood, and surely the turning point was there. Adele hadn't had the sensitivity to understand, so she had lost. All the Airotas had lost. Nino had lost, too, as in essence he had considered me one of the women on his list, without distinguishing me from the others. And—what for me was even more significant—Lila had lost. She hadn't liked my book, she had been severe, it was one of the few times in her life she had cried, when she had had to wound me with her negative judgment. But I didn't want it from her, rather I was pleased that she was wrong. From childhood I had given her too much importance,

and now I felt as if unburdened. Finally it was clear that what I was wasn't her, and vice versa. Her authority was no longer necessary to me, I had my own. I felt strong, no longer a victim of my origins but capable of dominating them, of giving them a shape, of taking revenge on them for myself, for Lila, for whomever. What before was dragging me down was now the material for climbing higher. One morning in July of 1982 I called her and said: "All right, I'll take the apartment above you, I'm coming back to the neighborhood."(201)

Elena's spatial reconfiguration of her relationship with the neighbourhood also makes this an attempt to separate herself from Lila's authoritative control over the space they once shared and the space Elena has now returned to. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"I watched the trucks that passed noisily along the stradone, raising dust. I walked in the gardens that were full of syringes. I went into the neglected, empty church. I felt sad in front of the parish cinema, which had closed, in front of the party offices, which were like abandoned dens. I listened to the shouting of men, women, children in the apartments, especially at night. The feuds between families, the hostilities between neighbors, the ease with which things came to blows, the wars between gangs of boys. When I went to the pharmacy I remembered Gino; I felt revulsion at the sight of the place where he had been killed, and went cautiously around it. I spoke compassionately to his parents, who were still behind the old dark-wood counter, more bent over, white-haired in their white smocks, and as kind as ever. As a child I endured all this, I thought, let's see if now I can control it. "How is it that you decided to do it?" Lila asked some time after the move. Maybe she wanted an affectionate answer, or maybe a sort of recognition of the validity of her choices, words like: You were right to stay, going out into the world was of no use, now I understand. Instead I answered: "It's an experiment." "Experiment in what?" We were in her office. Tina was near her, Imma was wandering on her own. I said: "An experiment in recomposition. You've managed to have your whole life here, but not me: I feel I'm in pieces scattered all over." She had an expression of disapproval. "Forget these experiments, Lenù, otherwise you'll be disappointed and leave again. I'm also in pieces. Between my father's shoe repair shop and this office it's only a few meters, but it's as if they were at the North Pole and the South Pole." I said, pretending to be amused: "Don't discourage me. In my job I have to paste one fact to another with words, and in the end everything has to seem coherent even if it's not." "But if the coherence isn't there, why pretend?" "To create order. Remember the novel I gave

you to read and you didn't like? There I tried to set what I know about Naples within what I later learned in Pisa, Florence, Milan. Now I've given it to the publisher and he thought it was good. It's being published." She narrowed her eyes. She said softly: "I told you that I don't understand anything." I felt I had wounded her. It was as if I had thrown it in her face: if you can't connect your story of the shoes with the story of the computers, that doesn't mean that it can't be done, it means only that you don't have the tools to do it. I said hastily: You'll see, no one will buy the book and you'll be right. Then I listed somewhat randomly all the defects that I myself attributed to my text, and what I wanted to keep or change before it was published. But she escaped, it was as if she wanted to regain altitude, she started talking about computers and she did it as if to point out: You have your things, I mine."(204)

Elena's writing project and the proximity of the two friends raising their children together also presents Ferrante's concerns regarding female intellect. Both Imma and Tina mirror the respective journey and spirit of their mothers. Lila herself is aware, proud and possibly wary of her daughter's intelligence but a regeneration of that female expression in her daughter that Lila herself embodies does not necessarily guarantee happiness or freedom. Lila was afraid that she had failed her son Rino and that her daughter would also suffer but she was confident that Elena's daughters would grow well and shine. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"My daughter did not have the qualities of Lila's daughter. A few days earlier the anxiety that she was in some way retarded had dissipated. I had taken her to a very good pediatrician, the child showed no retardation of any sort. I was reassured. And yet comparing Imma to Tina continued to make me uneasy. 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. As long as Lila talked about the computer—we were starting then to use that word—I observed them both with admiration. At that moment I felt happy, satisfied with myself, and so I also felt, very clearly, that I loved my friend for how she was, for her virtues and her flaws, for everything, even for that being she had brought into the world. The child was full of curiosity, she learned everything in an instant, she had a large vocabulary and a surprising manual dexterity. I said to myself: She has little of Enzo, she's like Lila, look how she widens her eyes, narrows them, look at the ears that have no lobe. I still didn't dare to admit that Tina attracted me more than my daughter, but when that demonstration of skill ended, I was very excited about the computer, and full of praise for the

little girl, even though I knew that Imma might suffer from it (How clever you are, how pretty, how well you speak, how many things you learn), I complimented Lila, mainly to diminish the unease I had caused her by announcing the publication of my book, and, finally, I drew an optimistic portrait of the future that awaited my three daughters and hers. They'll study, I said, they'll travel all over the world, goodness knows what they'll be. But Lila, after smothering Tina with kisses— yes, she's sooo clever —replied bitterly: Gennaro was clever, too, he spoke well, he read, he was very good in school, and look at him now."(205)

Ferrante's novels also give a detailed account and critique of women's engagement with writing as a career where Elena was able to recognize the same vulgar rivalry that surrounded her childhood and girlhood. I would like to argue here that in Ferrante's novels, the most writing that Elena pursues within the novels, is closely tied to her friendship with Lila. Intellectual ideas and debates without the intimacy of human emotion and human relations is not presented as defensible in the novels. Elena while returning to Naples also sees the rift that cannot be fully reconciled with regard to her relationship with her neighbourhood. She can never fully return to it, just like she cannot return to her adolescent days. As Elena narrates the fourth book,

"We talked about everything, but not the way we had as adolescents: those times would never return. She asked questions about things she had heard on television and I answered volubly. I talked about the postmodern, the problems of publishing, the latest news of feminism, whatever came into my mind, and Lila listened attentively, her expression just slightly ironic, interrupting only to ask for further explanations, never to say what she thought. I liked talking to her. I liked her look of admiration, I liked it when she said: How many things you know, how many things you think, even when I felt she was teasing. If I pressed for her opinion she retreated, saying: No, don't make me say something stupid, you talk. Often she asked me about famous people, to find out if I knew them, and when I said no she was disappointed. She was also disappointed—I should say—when I reduced to ordinary dimensions well-known people I'd had dealings with. "So," she concluded one morning, "those people aren't what they seem." "Not at all. Often they're good at their work. But otherwise they're greedy, they like hurting you, they're allied with the strong and they persecute the weak, they form gangs to fight other gangs, they treat women like dogs on a leash, they'll utter obscenities and put their hands on you exactly the way they do on the buses here." "You're exaggerating?" "No, to produce ideas you don't have to be a

saint. And anyway there are very few true intellectuals. The mass of the educated spend their lives commenting lazily on the ideas of others. They engage their best energies in sadistic practices against every possible rival.” “Then why are you with them?” I answered: I’m not with them, I’m here. I wanted her to feel that I was part of an upper-class world and yet different. She herself pushed me in that direction. She was amused if I was sarcastic about my colleagues. Sometimes I had the impression that she insisted so that I would confirm that I really was one of those who told people how things stood and what they should think. The decision to live in the neighborhood made sense to her only if I continued to count myself among those who wrote books, contributed to magazines and newspapers, appeared sometimes on television. She wanted me as her friend, her neighbor, provided I had that aura. And I supported her. Her approval gave me confidence. I was beside her in the Villa Comunale, with our daughters, and yet I was definitively different, I had a wide-ranging life. It flattered me to feel that, compared to her, I was a woman of great experience and I felt that she, too, was pleased with what I was. I told her about France, Germany, and Austria, about the United States, the debates I had taken part in, here and there, the men there had been recently, after Nino. She was attentive to every word with a half smile, never saying what she thought. Not even the story of my occasional relationships set off in her a need to confide.”(209)

Lila's presence as an all encompassing entity did not diminish with Elena's return to Naples and this makes it clear to Elena that within the spaces that she knew as a child, perhaps it was she who now had outgrown that space. Her access to it would be in the eyes of others, be attributed to Lila, but for Elena it would be better to leave the ghosts of the neighbourhood behind, after vanquishing them. As Elena narrates in the fourth book.

"There was no way of getting anything else out of her, it was I who talked about sex and often in an explicit way. My ramblings, her silences. Yet, whatever the subject, during those walks, something was released from her very body that enthralled me, stimulating my brain as it always had, helping me reflect. Maybe that was why I sought her out. She continued to emit an energy that gave comfort, that reinforced a purpose, that spontaneously suggested solutions. It was a force that struck not only me. Sometimes she invited me to dinner with the children, more often I invited her, with Enzo and, naturally, Tina. Gennaro, no, there was nothing to be done, he often stayed out and came home late at night. Enzo—I soon realized—was worried about him, whereas

Lila said: He's grown-up, let him do as he likes. But I felt she spoke that way to reduce her partner's anxiety. And the tone was identical to that of our conversations. Enzo nodded, something passed from her to him like an invigorating tonic. It was no different on the streets of the neighborhood. Going shopping with her never ceased to amaze me: she had become an authority. She was constantly stopped, people drew her aside with a respectful familiarity, they whispered something to her, and she listened, without reacting. Did they treat her like that because of the success she had had with her new business? Because she gave off the sense of someone who could do anything? Or because, now that she was nearly forty, the energy she had always had imbued her with the aura of a magician who cast spells and instilled fear? I don't know. Of course it struck me that people paid more attention to her than to me. I was a well-known writer and the publishing house was making sure that, in view of my new book, I was often mentioned in the newspapers: the *Repubblica* had come out with a fairly large photograph of me to illustrate a short article on forthcoming books, which at a certain point said: *Highly anticipated is the new novel by Elena Greco, a story set in an unknown Naples, with bloodred colors, et cetera.* And yet next to her, in the place where we were born, I was only a decoration, that is, I bore witness to Lila's merits. Those who had known us from birth attributed to her, to the force of her attraction, the fact that the neighborhood could have on its streets an esteemed person like me."(209)

Ultimately, the act of writing would display the double-face of the neighbourhood for all the world to see. Elena's novel would initiate an investigation and chatter about the connection between the Solaras and the Camorra which would eventually play a role in the disappearance of Lila's daughter, Tina. Tina is mistakenly in a photo with Elena as her daughter and this could have made her a target of the mafia.

"I stood stock-still, my suitcase beside me. I read the article, four pages with pictures of the ugliest places in the neighborhood: the only one with me was the one with Tina, a beautiful picture in which the bleak background of the apartment gave our two figures a particular refinement. The writer wasn't reviewing my book and didn't speak of it as a novel, but used it to give an account of what he called "the dominion of the Solara brothers," a borderland territory, perhaps tied to the new organized Camorra, perhaps not. Of Marcello it said little, alluding mainly to Michele, to whom it attributed initiative, unscrupulousness, a tendency to jump from

one political cart to the next, according to the logic of business. What business? Panorama made a list, mixing the legal and the illegal: the bar-pastry shop, hides, shoe factories, mini-markets, night clubs, loan sharking, cigarette smuggling, receiving stolen goods, drugs, infiltration of the post-earthquake construction sites. I broke into a cold sweat. What had I done, how could I have been so imprudent. In Florence I had invented a plot, drawing on facts of my childhood and adolescence with the boldness that came from distance. Naples, seen from there, was almost a place of imagination, a city like the ones in films, which although the streets and buildings are real serve only as a background for crime stories or romances. Then, since I had moved and saw Lila every day, a mania for reality had gripped me, and although I hadn't named it I had told the story of the neighborhood. But I must have overdone it, and the relationship between truth and fiction must have gone awry: now every street, every building had become recognizable, and maybe even the people, even the violent acts. The photographs were proof of what my pages really contained, they identified the area conclusively, and the neighborhood ceased to be, as it had always been for me while I was writing, an invention. The author of the article told the history of the neighborhood, even mentioning the murders of Don Achille Carracci and Manuela Solara. He went on at length about the latter, hypothesizing that it had been either the visible point of a conflict between Camorra families or an execution at the hands of the "dangerous terrorist Pasquale Peluso, born and raised in the area, former bricklayer, former secretary of the local section of the Communist Party." But I hadn't written anything about Pasquale, I hadn't written anything about Don Achille or Manuela. The Carraccis, the Solaras had been for me only outlines, voices that had been able to enrich, with the cadence of dialect, gestures, at times violent tonalities, a completely imagined scheme. I didn't want to stick my nose in their real business, what did "the dominion of the Solara brothers" have to do with it. I had written a novel."(222)

Lila's authority in the neighbourhood also lays waste to the ghosts of her past with Elena where their intellect and gender made them powerless. Now, she had poured all meaning that had been extracted from her life, back into the source of her beginnings. Thus, she was able to remain in the neighbourhood and also thrive. Here, Ferrante has presented a female subjectivity that is embellished by the experience of female friendship and articulates a renewed negotiation with the self and with the spaces the self has inhabited.

In French's novel, the culture of men and young boys is filtered through the experience of interpersonal exchanges and social media. Connie Morrison argues that among the "locations in which girlhood identity is being constructed socially and culturally, personalized avatar sites designed for the online sharing and creation of avatars on social networking sites promise a space for the cultivation of uniqueness and individuality. When girls are asked to create an avatar self-likeness--what might be conceived of as a visual self-narrative situated within commercially designed online spaces--and when they are asked to discuss their creative decisions among themselves by way of critically reflecting on their choices of representation, a cultural politics involving multiple relational power structures is uncovered"(244). The boys at Colm's and the girls at St. Kilda's harnessed the exposure to social media and chatting applications to customize their desires according the demands of a online narrative. Boys solicited scandalous photographs from girls and the girls supplied them. However, the characters of Becca and Holly especially undermine the lazy exchange of cultural currency that demands instant exposure and disclosure. The mystery and power of secrets is only utilized by a few girls who do not want to be identity conformists. Here, French and the authors of the chosen texts have represented the personal, social and intellectual power of the female subject that can cut into the culture of men propagated by society that is ready to render the female subject invisible.

Conclusion

The thesis examines the construction of girlhood and womanhood through the wide lens of female friendship. The framework of girlhood studies is used to examine the adolescent female subject and her path towards selfhood through her representation in the chosen texts. The uniqueness of the friendship experience that emerges within these novels is separate in its treatment when seen in the context of girlhood and in the context of womanhood. Girlhood as a cultural category when seen via the social experience of friendship looks at the figure of the young girl as a subject endowed with agency of her own and not as a subject waiting for womanhood. The representation of the figure of the girl as a docile individual with a docile body has been the historical standard in fiction. However, the thesis has attempted to trace and examine the nature of the category 'adolescent' that has been reconfigured historically through the perspectives of age, sexuality and popular culture. The thesis has foregrounded the female body as the site of rage, of symbolic conflict between chaos and order, class conflict and of performativity in relation to femininity. The theoretical framework of girlhood studies is necessary to frame the contradictory meanings attached to the figure of the girl. The concerns of sexuality and the moral agitation of patriarchal society around it represent an important medium to assess and interrogate the double standards and assumptions surrounding the behaviour of girls and women. An additional aspect linked to the concerns surrounding adolescent and female sexuality is the devaluing of adolescent desire and pleasure. We find that doing so renders them as only empty vessels to which any meaning can be assigned. And hence, the theoretical framework of girlhood studies is important to break down the sense of confusing amorphousness that surrounds the discussion around girls' culture. The vivid gruesomeness of girlhood provides the framework for the discussion of sexuality and the performance of femininity. This is further linked to the construction of womanhood within the framework of female friendship.

In the first chapter, the concept of friendship has been examined which reveals the presence of relational identity formation that is prevalent in the context of girlhood. Throughout history, women have sought kinship with other women and usually these ties are forged during childhood and adolescence. The feminine responses to friendship have not always been examined in literature and in fiction, mostly written by men, the depictions of female bonding has only served

to depict the derivative representations of adolescence and girlhood influenced by patriarchal stereotypes. The vast psychological landscape of female friendship is examined in the chosen texts where the young girls actively participate in defining each other in relational terms. In Ferrante's tetralogy, Elena quickly identifies Lila as an intellectual rival. We find that female intellect is a means of negotiating the codes of masculinity and femininity in the novels through the character of Elena. Elena initially attempts to cultivate a masculine way of thinking in order to be harsher and more assertive. However, her slim tract containing feminist concerns about the tendency of women to cultivate a masculine intelligence demonstrates how the prevailing systems of literary and intellectual consumption do not adequately engage with or reward the writing of women. Here, Ferrante is pointing towards the entire patriarchal domination of intelligentsia. I would like to argue here that the representation of girlhood when seen through the lens of the Neapolitan neighbourhood reveals that class and identity are not simply symptomatic of each other but are tightly bound to each other—class is identity. In the chosen texts by Thorpe, Cline and French, class also has a bearing on the experience of girlhood and the female subject's response to it. Evie's chronic restlessness stems from her boring yet privileged life; Mia like Elena and Evie is desperate to leave the place of her origins in order to shed the tainted insecurities that come with it. The elite boarding school of St. Kilda's in French's novel does not explicitly deal with the class paradigm but deals with the affectations of class in relation to the consumption of girls' culture.

In the second chapter, the trajectory of the identity formation of the female protagonists has been explored where girls historically and well as fictionally have not been given importance or representation in their own right. In the chosen texts, the women authors have given focus to the interiority and self-reflection of the young girls as the definitive experiences of their girlhood or adolescence are foregrounded. This includes the examination of the performance of femininity in the chosen texts and how the female protagonists are indoctrinated to regulate their behaviour and attitude in order to conform to patriarchal stereotypes of female behaviour. Examples are provided in the form of Elena and Lila being violently attacked by the male classmates for being intellectually superior to them. Evie's understanding and performance of femininity is directly controlled by her mother whose attempts at rejuvenating her youth and reinventing herself do nothing to address her daughter's insecurities but instead inflames them. In Thorpe's novel, Mia and Lorrie Ann are also exposed to adult experiences and Mia's experience of abortion at fifteen

is a particularly emotionally scarring event for the teenager. We find that the responses of the female protagonists to the mainstreaming and homogenization of their femininity is instrumental in the process of their self-actualization. The aspect of sexuality becomes important here as the girlhood of the female adolescents is defined by their negotiation with the penetrating male gaze. Here, the male gaze is accompanied by the culture of self-policing that is perpetuated by mass media and pop culture to keep the femininity of young girls restrained and tightly controlled. Hence, we find that this self-policing tendency is essential in perpetuating a collective, imaginative of girlhood which remains invisible and unaccepted unless it conforms to these rules of femininity. Here, I am also arguing that the female gaze as exhibited by Evie also becomes an extension of the male gaze that sexualizes Suzanne and the other girls she comes in close contact with and adds to the stereotype of young girls reduced to things to be looked at judged.

In the third chapter, the intense and intimate emotional landscape of female friendship is explored in detail where the intense relational self-definition between the two friends provides the first basic opportunities to begin the process of self-actualization. However, this relational process is not a rudimentary dichotomization of characteristics and allows the young girls to respond to and confront the aspect of objectification and feeling of inadequacy that remains a persistent feature of their existence due to the supremacy of patriarchal norms in society. In addition, I have highlighted the importance of the act of writing especially in relation to Ferrante's novels and how it impacts the nature of the friendship between Elena and Lila. Through their changing affective negotiation with the spaces that they inhabited and embodied as children, both Elena and Lila arrive at an enhanced understanding of the girls they were and the women they have become. Lila resorts to harsher ways to cement and sustain her authority in the neighbourhood in the fourth book,

"Once when I was waiting for Lila at Basic Sight with Imma and Tina, everything seemed to become clearer: Lila was doing new work but totally immersed in our old world. I heard her shouting at a client in an extremely crude way about a question of money. I was shaken, where had the woman who graciously emanated authority suddenly gone? Enzo hurried in, and the man—a small man around sixty, with an enormous belly—went away cursing. Afterward I said to Lila: "Who are you really?" "In what sense?" "If you don't want to talk about it, forget it." "No, let's talk, but explain what you mean." "I mean: in an environment like this, with the

people you have to deal with, how do you behave?" "I'm careful, like everyone." "That's all?" "Well, I'm careful and I move things around in order to make them go the way I say. Haven't we always behaved that way?" "Yes, but now we have responsibilities, toward ourselves and our children. Didn't you say we have to change the neighborhood?" "And to change it what do you think needs to be done?" "Resort to the law." I was startled myself by what I was saying. I made a speech in which I was, to my surprise, even more legalistic than my ex-husband and, in many ways, more than Nino. Lila said teasingly: "The law is fine when you're dealing with people who pay attention if you merely say the word 'law'. But you know how it is here." "And so?" "So if people have no fear of the law, you have to instill the fear yourself. We did a lot of work for that shit you saw before, in fact a huge amount, but he won't pay, he says he has no money. I threatened him, I told him: I'll sue you. And he answered: Sue me, who gives a damn." "But you'll sue him." She laughed: "I'll never see my money that way. Some time ago, an accountant stole millions from us. We fired him and filed charges. But the law didn't lift a finger." "So?" "I was fed up with waiting and I asked Antonio. The money was returned immediately. And this money, too, will return, without a trial, without lawyers, and without judges."(212)

In the fourth chapter, the impact of education in the lives of the protagonists is revealed. Lila and Elena as well as Mia and Lorrie Ann end up taking divergent paths in life because of the educational opportunities in their life. Evie, too, returns to a posh boarding school carrying the scars of a greater education in friendship, human character and desire. Her time spent at the ranch bequeathed her with the informal education about male desire. The setting of French's novel is able to rejuvenate the figure of the schoolgirl in contemporary language. Here, we find that the responses to female intellect and autonomy are distilled and diluted according to patriarchal norms. The aspect of chaos and order in Ferrante's works and the reordering of the self that takes place in the other chosen texts is tied to the theme of education and the female subject's negotiation with it. Here, we find that Ferrante foregrounds the importance of street smarts or informal education and specialized knowledge. Lila is informed about class politics by Pasquale who is a sharp observer of these fault lines. Here, Lila as a character is able to express and provide a manifestation of her analyses by producing shoes that can be called works of art. This impulse of the female subject is tied to larger themes of writing and the role of the female creator.

In the fifth chapter, the idea of rebel mothers is put forth in order to examine the effects of the corporeality of the maternal figure which can make and unmake a female subject such as the case with Elena Greco. Both Mia and Evie have a difficult relationship with their mothers and this impacts their response to motherhood as an experience for them and done to them. The female characters superimpose or co-relate the crudeness and unpleasantness of their existence to their mothers. Here, we find that the distancing and embracing of motherhood constantly changes the dynamics of the female subject's self-actualization process and the thread of female friendship is an important element supporting it. The relationship of the characters with their mothers is an important rejuvenation of the traditional mother-daughter relationships in fiction that has introduced the dynamics of female kinship for a long time. However, the emotionally raw and biting portrayal of the violent and neglectful maternal figure is an important vessel to examine the making and unmaking of the female subject. The theme of motherhood in Ferrante's novels are also related to the negotiation of Elena and Lila with their own children. Elena as a writer struggles with guilt as to whether she is neglecting her children by bringing them back to her old Neapolitan neighbourhood where the girls pick up crude Italian dialect and unlearn the sense of sophistication that their own mother had to learn by fleeing her home. Here, we find that the resistance and rebellion of Elena, Lila and Lorrie Ann presents the idea of mothers who are violating the commonplace and stereotypical notion of motherhood as the epitome of sacrifice and martyrdom. The character of Mia though initially skeptical of motherhood finds herself firmly situated in the redemptive embrace of motherhood at the end of the novel.

In the sixth chapter, the aspect of necessary interpersonal psychological violence continues demonstrating the complexity of female friendship. Here, the rampant presence of male violence is also examined with respect to the emotional landscape of the female subject. Here, we find that the aspect of violence cannot be divorced from the nature of female friendship and that the repetition of rupture and reconciliation is an essential process to make their girlhood and womanhood visible. Male violence functions within the chosen texts to exploit and intimidate the female protagonists while subjecting them to the persistent and debilitating male gaze.

In the final and seventh chapter, the culture of men that renders the female subject invisible is presented where in the Neapolitan novels, this presence is perpetual and haunting. Lila literally cuts up her wedding portrait that was displayed without her permission and created a disfigured

jumble of arms and legs which symbolizes her rage and her use of self-erasure as an act of defiance against patriarchal control. This erasure would come to fruition with her disappearance.

The act of writing oneself as female is subversive in Ferrante's novels and the aftermath of the publication of Elena's novel drawn from the neighbourhood and therefore by extension, from Lila is rewarding. However, the challenge it presents to the male driven violent socio-political establishment becomes soon clear. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"I stayed. Lila tried to soothe me, she even tried to make me forget that she had again been critical of my book. She started off in dialect and then began to speak in the Italian she brought out on important occasions, which never failed to surprise me. She cited the experience of the earthquake, for more than two years she had done nothing except complain of how the city had deteriorated. She said that since then she had been careful never to forget that we are very crowded beings, full of physics, astrophysics, biology, religion, soul, bourgeoisie, proletariat, capital, work, profit, politics, many harmonious phrases, many unharmonious, the chaos inside and the chaos outside. So calm down, she said laughing, what do you expect the Solaras to be. Your novel is done: you wrote it, you rewrote it, being here was evidently useful to you, to make it truer, but now it's out and you can't take it back. The Solaras are angry? So what. Michele threatens you? Who gives a damn. There could be another earthquake at any moment, even stronger. Or the whole universe could collapse. And then what is Michele Solara? Nothing. And Marcello is nothing. The two of them are merely flesh that spouts out threats and demands for money. She sighed. She said in a low voice: The Solaras will always be dangerous beasts, Lenù, there's nothing to be done; I thought I had tamed one but his brother made him ferocious again. Did you see how many blows Michele gave Alfonso? They're blows he wanted to give me but he hasn't got the courage. And that rage at your book, at the article in Panorama, at the photos, is all rage against me. So don't give a shit, the way I don't give a shit. You put them in the newspaper and the Solaras can't tolerate it, it's bad for business and for scams. To us, on the other hand, it's a pleasure, no? What do we have to worry about? I listened. When she talked like that, with those high-flown pronouncements, the suspicion returned that she had continued to consume books, the way she had as a girl, but that for incomprehensible reasons she kept it hidden from me. In her house not a single volume was to be seen, apart from the hypertechnical pamphlets that had to do with the work. She wanted to present herself as an uneducated person,

and yet suddenly here she was talking about biology, psychology, about how complicated human beings are. Why did she act like that with me? I didn't know, but I needed support and I trusted her just the same. In other words, Lila managed to soothe me. I reread the article and I liked it. I examined the photographs: the neighborhood was ugly but Tina and I were pretty. We began to cook, and the preparations helped me reflect. I decided that the article, the photos, would be useful for the book and that the text of Florence, filled out in Naples, in the apartment above hers, really was improved. Yes, I said, let's screw the Solaras. And I relaxed, I was nice to the children again.(224)

The thesis has aimed to present the multitude of aspects of female friendship wherein they influence and sustain the process of performance of femininity and the construction of girlhood and womanhood. Being a woman in society and in the world has been the grand projects of the writers of the chosen texts and the methodology of girlhood studies presents the critical framework to dissect a hitherto under-represented phase of the female experience. The relevance of the socio-cultural environment is foregrounded in all the chosen texts. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"My fury first became rage, then changed into contempt for myself. I couldn't forgive myself for remaining paralyzed in the face of violence. I said to myself: What have you become; why did you come back here to live, if you weren't capable of reacting against those two shits; you're too well-meaning, you want to play the democratic lady who mixes with the working class, you like to say to the newspapers: I live where I was born, I don't want to lose touch with my reality; but you're ridiculous, you lost touch long ago, you faint at the stink of filth, of vomit, of blood. I had thoughts like that and meanwhile images came to my mind in which I let loose mercilessly against Michele. I hit him, scratched him, bit him, my heart pounding. Then the desire for violence died down and I said to myself: Lila is right, one writes not so much to write, one writes to inflict pain on those who wish to inflict pain. The pain of words against the pain of kicks and punches and the instruments of death. Not much, but enough. Of course, she still had in mind our dreams of childhood. She thought that if you gained fame, money, and power through writing, you became a person whose sentences were thunderbolts. Whereas I had long known that everything was more mediocre. A book, an article, could make noise, but ancient warriors before

the battle also made noise, and if it wasn't accompanied by real force and immeasurable violence it was only theater. Yet I wished to redeem myself, the noise could do some damage."(244)

The Neapolitan neighbourhood, the Corona Del Mar beach town, Petaluma and Dublin all shape and reshape the female characters and the breakdown of their ties with the people and places of their past is an essential tool involved in the creation of self-assertion. Another aspect of the subversive quality of female writing as embodied in these chosen texts are the book covers. This is especially seen in the Neapolitan series where the cheap-looking badly made covers do not indicate the depth of the writing it holds within. This calls into question the practices of the literary machine that can superficially devoid female voices of meaning. This deliberate act by Ferrante is an important development in the way female literary voices are seen and processed.

The most important aspect of the experience of female friendship has been the outcomes it can generate because at the center of its operation lies the power of female rage that calibrates the responses of the female protagonists in all the chosen texts. This rage powers Becca murder of Chris Harper, Lorrie Ann's abandonment of her child; Mia's reshaped relationship with herself and her friend; Evie's obsession with and remembrance of the times with Suzanne as well the grand project of Elena and Lila to bring down the Solaras and redeem their neighbourhood and hence, their roots. In the fourth book, the two friends proceed to put in writing the evidences supporting the long line of misdeeds committed by the Solaras in order to punish them by law. As Elena narrates in the fourth book,

"She returned half an hour later with a floral-print bag full of documents. We sat down at the kitchen table, while Tina and Imma chattered softly, moving dolls, horses, and carriages around the floor. Lila took out a lot of papers, her notes, also two notebooks with stained red covers. I immediately leafed through these with interest: graph-paper pages written in the calligraphy of the old elementary schools—account books, minutely annotated in a language full of grammatical mistakes and initialed on every page “M.S.” I understood that they were part of what the neighborhood had always called Manuela Solara's red book. How the expression “red book” had echoed during our childhood and adolescence: evocative yet threatening—or perhaps evocative precisely because threatening. But whatever other word one might use in speaking of it—“register,” for example—and no matter if the color was altered, Manuela Solara's book excited us like a secret document at the center of bloody adventures. Here it was, instead. It was

a collection of school notebooks like the two I had before me: very ordinary dirty notebooks with the lower right edge raised like a wave. I realized in a flash that the memory was already literature and that perhaps Lila was right: my book—even though it was having so much success—really was bad, and this was because it was well organized, because it was written with obsessive care, because I hadn't been able to imitate the disjointed, unaesthetic, illogical, shapeless banality of things. While the children played—if they merely hinted at a quarrel we let out nervous cries to quiet them—Lila placed before my eyes all the material in her possession, and explained the meaning of it. We organized and summarized. It was a long time since we had undertaken something together. She seemed pleased, I understood that this was what she wanted and expected from me. At the end of the day she disappeared again with her bag and I returned to my apartment to study the notes. Then, in the following days, she wanted us to meet at Basic Sight. We locked ourselves in her office and sat at the computer, a kind of television with a keyboard, very different from what she had showed me and the children some time before. She pressed the power button, she slid dark rectangles into gray blocks. I waited, bewildered. On the screen luminous tremors appeared. Lila began to type on the keyboard, I was speechless. It was in no way comparable to a typewriter, even an electric one. With her fingertips she caressed gray keys, and the writing appeared silently on the screen, green like newly sprouted grass. What was in her head, attached to who knows what cortex of the brain, seemed to pour out miraculously and fix itself on the void of the screen. It was power that, although passing for act, remained power, an electrochemical stimulus that was instantly transformed into light. It seemed to me like the writing of God as it must have been on Sinai at the time of the Commandments, impalpable and tremendous, but with a concrete effect of purity. Magnificent, I said. I'll teach you, she said. And she taught me, and dazzling, hypnotic segments began to lengthen, sentences that I said, sentences that she said, our volatile discussions were imprinted on the dark well of the screen like wakes without foam. Lila wrote, I would reconsider. Then with one key she erased, with others she made an entire block of light disappear, and made it reappear higher up or lower down in a second. But right afterward it was Lila who changed her mind, and everything was altered again, in a flash: ghostly moves, what's here now is no longer here or is there. And no need for pen, pencil, no need to change the paper, put another sheet in the roller. The page is the screen, unique, no trace of a second thought, it always seems the same. And the writing is incorruptible, the lines are all perfectly straight, they emit a sense of cleanliness even now that we are adding

the filthy acts of the Solaras to the filthy acts of half of Campania. We worked for days. The text descended from Heaven to earth through the noise of the printer, materialized in black dots laid on paper. Lila found it inadequate, we returned to pens, we labored to correct it. She was irritable: from me she expected more, she thought I could respond to all her questions, she got angry because she was convinced that I was a well of knowledge, while at every line she discovered that I didn't know the local geography, the tiny details of bureaucracies, how the communal councils functioned, the hierarchies of a bank, the crimes and the punishments. And yet, contradictorily, I hadn't felt her to be so proud of me and of our friendship in a long time. We have to destroy them, Lenù, and if this isn't enough I'll murder them. Our heads collided—for the last time, now that I think of it—one against the other, and merged until they were one. Finally we had to resign ourselves and admit that it was finished, and the dull period of what's done is done began. She printed it yet again, I put our pages in an envelope, and sent it to the publishing house and asked the editor to show it to the lawyers. I need to know—I explained on the telephone—if this stuff was sufficient to send the Solaras to jail."(245)

This thesis has aimed to answer the question as to who we are without our friends and the and to what extent the emerging female subject within the network of female friendship is assertive, confident and subversive. The methodological framework of girlhood studies along with a feminist framework are needed to fully assess the ramifications of the friendship experience on the female subject as the concept of girlhood has not been vigorously examined in contemporary fiction with a searing focus on the raw details of female behaviour, sexuality, femininity and its place within patriarchal norms.

The presentation of the figure of the young girl as capable of complex analyses of her surroundings and aware of the gendered expectations thrust upon her society becomes the versatile paradigm to question why girls during their adolescence receive extremely contradictory signs regarding their bodies and its sexualization. We find that the adolescent is deemed to be in perpetual need of control and surveillance. Mothers and peers directly and also indirectly influence their understanding of their bodies and what it means to be feminine. We find that the themes of memory and trauma are intertwined with the subjectivity of the young girl and also informs the becoming of a woman. We find that the intersection of misogyny and

violence has a destructive effect on female autonomy which is routinely overlooked and dismissed in this regard.

The thesis also concludes that the power of female intelligence in intellectual and political pursuits exposes not just how socio-political institutions act upon each other but that women are capable of clearly understanding their own exploitation. This is most evident in the Neapolitan novels where Elena's intellectual pursuits exposes her to a refined world of sophisticated and time-tested intellectualism but there is a rigidity and regression there that does not allow the segregation of the woman from the writer, lover, mother and wife but if the woman decides to undertake this segregation then she is penalized for it. Here, again the fierce anger felt by these women and young girls is an important device to point out the hypocrisy of the male pontificating figures who use female bodies and minds according to their desires. In the case of Evie, her engagement with Suzanne and the other girls provides her with a contrasting image of the men like Russell and Mitch who are either functioning as the average disgruntled outsider or the sleazy predator who lurks behind a façade of respectability. In Thorpe's novel, the anger is directed towards the deliberate act of society to render young mothers invisible while glorifying and sexualizing the female subject's beauty and youth when she is an adolescent or a young unmarried woman.

Another important aspect to examine the identity formation within girlhood and womanhood has been the unfairness and brutality of love and sex as presented in the chosen texts. In the Neapolitan novels, this is evident in the relationships between Lila and Stefano, Lila and Antonio, Elena and Donato, Elena and Pietro, Elena and Nino. In Evie's case, this must be seen in her first attempts at initiating a relationship with Peter and the subsequent submission to Russell in order to please Suzanne. The relationship between Mia and Franklin and that of Lorrie Ann with Jim and Arman in Thorpe's novels foregrounds the emotional crises of the two friends and their struggle to reconcile reality with good intentions and the tricks of fate.

The focused treatment of the concept of girlhood in French's novel provides the contradictory signals attached to the reception and articulation of girlhood as well as its devaluing within patriarchal norms. The aspects of bullying and violence in the characterization of the contemporary schoolgirl is an important device to foreground the changing nature of girlhood and its impact on a generation that is increasingly influenced by popular culture including social

media. French's schoolgirl is more aware of her direct and indirect exploitation at the hands of patriarchal norms and the inclusion of a decisive violent act presents to us a model of girlhood that is darker and more menacing not because it had to be but because until now no one had noticed what young girls thought or wanted and what they are capable of. I would like to conclude by saying that the experience of female friendship remains the rich site of examining the complex variables involved in the evolution of the female subject in contemporary fiction.

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