

The Lost Daughter and the challenges of motherhood

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Directed by Maggie Gyllenhaal; written by Gyllenhaal, based on a novel by Elena Ferrante

What does having children do to a woman? Is motherhood a curse to be escaped, rather than a blessing to be embraced? *The Lost Daughter* (2021), based on a novel by Elena Ferrante, poses such questions. Though actress Maggie Gyllenhaal shows skill in her directorial debut, the film fails to convince in important ways.

Leda (Olivia Colman) is a professor of comparative literature who has just arrived in Greece for a vacation. She is relaxing on the sunny beach, which she seems to have all to herself, when a large and noisy family invades the scene. Jolted out of her solitude, Leda observes the intruders and tries to learn what she can about them. Her attention is drawn to Nina (Dakota Johnson), a young mother, and her small daughter Elena (Athena Martin). As Nina and Elena quietly play together, Leda is moved, her face expressing sadness and regret.

The very pregnant Callie (Dagmara Dominczyk) is Nina's sister-in-law. With more presumption than politeness, Callie suddenly asks Leda if she would move her chair so that the family could sit together. Leda coldly refuses, to Callie's astonishment, and the men in the family gaze at her through narrowed eyes. This minor incident creates disproportionate tension that Callie's subsequent apology fails to dissipate. It also shows us another facet of Leda's personality and raises questions about her history and motives.

Leda keeps most people at arm's length. She accepts Callie's apology but not her implicit offer of friendship. She behaves similarly toward Lyle (Ed Harris), the caretaker in charge of her rooms. Lyle sidles up to her as she is eating dinner one night, ostensibly to remind her to tell him if she ever needs

anything. She tolerates him, politely and with little warmth, before asking him to allow her to finish her meal. He leaves her in peace and sits down with his friends. Yet, on a whim, Leda coquettishly whispers in his ear before walking out the door.

Nina is one of the few recipients of Leda's sympathy and kindness. But even with Nina, Leda is at first reticent about herself. One day, Nina's realization that Elena has gone missing from the beach throws the whole family into tumult. Leda calmly reassures Nina amid the confusion before going off in search of the little girl. She quickly finds Elena and brings her back, to the family's great relief. But another aspect of Leda's intervention, which soon becomes a new source of turmoil, has gone unnoticed.

Laced through this story are episodes from Leda's past. We see her (played in these scenes by Jessie Buckley) at the beginning of her academic career, raising two young daughters. The girls sometimes play with their mother, but more often they whine, misbehave and call for attention. Leda is impatient and exasperated; her daughters are an intolerable burden to her. She stubbornly tries to focus on her work, even refusing to kiss one daughter's injured finger. Leda's husband Joe (Jack Farthing) is not of much help.

An unexpected invitation to a conference, with expenses paid, whisks Leda away from her domestic stress. Another surprise comes when the young but esteemed Professor Hardy (Peter Sarsgaard) praises Leda's work during his lecture, saying that Leda had anticipated a now-voguish perspective on literature. Hardy seems slightly silly and pretentious to us, but Leda is enchanted. By the end of the conference, Leda feels more restless than before.

Just as Leda found her daughters burdensome, Nina begins to be overwhelmed by Elena, who has become

unrelentingly cranky over a lost doll. Nina nevertheless tells Leda that she is happy with every aspect of her life. She is clearly trying to convince herself, as much as Leda, that this is true.

During a climactic scene, Nina confesses that she feels depressed and appeals for Leda's help. She feels hemmed in and can't see a way out of her crisis. Nina is describing, it would appear, what feminist Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) termed "the problem that has no name," the generalized anxiety and unhappiness of middle class women, dissatisfied with "husband and ... children and ... home." As a result, the scene feels glaringly anachronistic. One might as well be fleshing out a passage from Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, published the following year, which also focused on "unfulfilled vital needs" and the "status quo of general repression."

The conditions of middle class women have undergone significant changes in the past 60 years. A thin layer of professional women has prospered beyond its wildest dreams. British economist Alison Wolf already noted in 2013 that "year by year, decade by decade, more and more women have become highly educated professionals and managers. There are now more than 20 million such women in Europe alone, 80 million worldwide, and this is critical mass. ... In the UK, the percentage of earnings going to the top female one per cent has doubled since the 1980s. ... In America, almost 200,000 women are earning a quarter-million dollars a year, or more: and the *average* income, within that group, is a breath-taking \$475,000." This is the social basis for grasping gender politics.

On the other hand, millions of middle class women have joined the workforce and the vast majority of them, including teachers and other erstwhile "professionals," have been proletarianized. The modern-day equivalents of Friedan have abandoned any pretense about being concerned with the conditions of working class women.

In short, to be frank, Nina's anguish seems both "old-fashioned" and out of proportion to her situation.

Similar criticisms can be made about the depiction of young Leda's frustration. The choices that she made in response to her situation (which she later divulges to Nina, and which are presented as scandalous) were not the only choices available to her. Leda began her career at a time when many professional women brought their

young children to day care so that they could work. But this option does not exist in the movie, and Leda is consequently "pushed" into an act of rebellion. Had the movie been set decades earlier, this story would have been much more plausible.

But a more credible explanation for Leda's choices, in the past and in the present, is her egotism. When Leda describes herself as a selfish person and "an unnatural mother," she is being honest. We see this selfishness emerge in her relationship with her husband and daughters and in her relationship with Nina. Are we intended to see this unpleasant trait, honestly acknowledged or not, as something positive?

Gyllenhaal may have intended to shine a light on aspects of motherhood and professional life often swept under the rug. In itself, this would be a legitimate goal. But her picture of the situation that contemporary middle-class women face (working-class women are absent from the film) is neither thorough nor convincing. As a result, Leda becomes less sympathetic.

Colman is wonderful playing a character who throws up impenetrable defenses, yet who also seems at times to be on the brink of a confession. Buckley, too, excels in her portrayal of the ambitious and capable young Leda. But the movie, though decently made, gives the impression of having fallen well short of its ambition. Either its ideas were not terribly important, or they have not been thought through.



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