



Research article

Deconstructing Motherhood and Maternal-Daughter Tensions in Dacia Mariani's *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship in Dacia Mariani's *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*. The study finds that the novel challenges traditional notions of maternal identity within the framework of Italian patriarchal culture. Set in eighteenth-century Sicily, the narrative follows Marianna, a deaf and mute noblewoman who, through writing and introspection, gradually reclaims her autonomy and redefines her maternal legacy. While her mother embodies a conventional model of womanhood, constrained by societal expectations and silent complicity in patriarchal norms, Marianna's detachment from her marks the beginning of a journey toward self-determination. Mariani raises crucial questions about maternal inheritance, female autonomy, and the possibility of disrupting oppressive structures across generations. The novel speaks to contemporary debates on gender, motherhood, and women's agency by exposing the historical roots of patriarchal systems that continue to impact female experience.

Keywords: motherhood, mother-daughter relationship, Italian patriarchy, maternal identity.

Funding: No funding was received for this research and publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declared no conflicts of interest.

Article History: Received: 31 July 2025. Revised: 04 June 2026. Accepted: 20 June 2026. First published: 28 June 2026.

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Publisher: Critical Gender Studies Network (CGSN)

Citation: Wang, Z. (2026). Deconstructing Motherhood and Maternal-Daughter Tensions in Dacia Mariani's *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*. *Critical Gender Studies Journal*. 3(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21659/cgsj.v3n1.02>

1. Introduction

Motherhood has long occupied a central place in feminist thought, particularly in debates concerning its representation, institutionalization, and lived experience. In the Italian literary tradition, maternal figures have often been constructed through normative, idealized images—models that emphasize devotion, self-sacrifice, and silence. These representations, while deeply embedded in cultural discourse, frequently fail to capture the complex, ambivalent, and often painful experiences of mothering (Benedetti, 2007, p. 4).

This paper engages with *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* (*The silent duchess*) (1990), a historical novel by Dacia Maraini, one of the most influential contemporary Italian writers and a prominent voice in Italian feminism. Throughout her literary career, Maraini has consistently addressed issues of gender inequality, violence, female autonomy, sexuality, and motherhood, examining the ways in which patriarchal structures shape women's lives across different historical periods. Although set in eighteenth-century Sicily, *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* speaks directly to concerns that remained central to Italian feminist debates in the twentieth century and continue to resonate today, including women's agency, the transmission of gender roles, and the possibility of resisting patriarchal norms.

The novel follows the life of Marianna, a young aristocratic woman rendered mute after a traumatic childhood experience. As Marianna evolves from a silenced daughter to a reflective and autonomous mother, Maraini exposes the intergenerational transmission of patriarchal maternal norms while simultaneously imagining alternative forms of female affiliation and maternal inheritance. In this respect, the novel anticipates many of the questions later articulated by feminist thinkers such as Rich, and Irigaray, Muraro concerning motherhood, female subjectivity, and maternal genealogy.

Through a close reading of the text, this article examines how Maraini deconstructs traditional ideals of motherhood and reimagines the mother-daughter relationship as a site of both conflict and transformation. The following section outlines the theoretical framework that underpins this analysis. Drawing on the feminist theories of Rich, Muraro, and Irigaray, it explores how the novel formulates alternative models of female subjectivity, symbolic transmission, and intergenerational continuity. By tracing the historical roots of patriarchal structures, Maraini's narrative offers insights that remain relevant to contemporary discussions of motherhood and women's autonomy in Italian society.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on key contributions from feminist theory to examine how *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* reimagines motherhood beyond normative patriarchal structures. Feminist scholars have long challenged essentialist understandings of motherhood, emphasizing its social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions rather than treating it as a natural or universal condition (Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1989). Within this tradition, motherhood emerges not as a fixed identity but as a contested site where power, subjectivity, and gender relations are negotiated.

A foundational contribution to this debate is Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), which distinguishes between motherhood as an institution and

motherhood as lived experience. According to Rich, the institution of motherhood functions as a patriarchal structure that disciplines women into roles of self-sacrifice, obedience, and reproductive obligation (1976, p. 166). By contrast, mothering as an experience possesses the potential to become a source of creativity, agency, and affective power when freed from social coercion. Rich's distinction is particularly useful for understanding Marianna's trajectory, since her struggle is not directed against motherhood itself but against the social structures that reduce women to passive maternal functions.

While Rich focuses primarily on motherhood as a social institution, Luisa Muraro approaches the maternal from a different perspective. In *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (*The symbolic order of mother*) (1991). Muraro shifts attention from the mother as a social institution to the symbolic significance of the mother-daughter relationship. Writing within the tradition of Italian sexual difference feminism, Muraro argues that the maternal relation constitutes the original site through which language, meaning, and subjectivity are transmitted. As she states, "dalla madre noi riceviamo la vita e la parola, insieme (from the mother we receive life and language together)" (2006, p. 150). Unlike the paternal symbolic order, which is grounded in law and authority of the father (patriarchy) (Muraro, trans. Novello, p. 26), the maternal symbolic order is based on reciprocity, mediation, and recognition. Significantly, Muraro's perspective is daughter-centred: rather than examining motherhood primarily from the mother's point of view, she explores how female subjectivity emerges through a renewed symbolic relationship with the mother.

Muraro's reflections resonate closely with the work of Luce Irigaray, whose writings on sexual difference, female genealogy, and mother-daughter relations similarly challenge the erasure of maternal subjectivity within patriarchal culture. Writing in dialogue with both French psychoanalysis and European feminist thought, Irigaray argues that Western symbolic systems have historically deprived women of a female lineage by obscuring the significance of the mother-daughter bond. For this reason, she advocates the recovery of maternal genealogy as a necessary condition for female subjectivity and autonomy (1993, pp. 125-149). As a result, women often struggle to establish an autonomous sense of self because they lack symbolic models of female continuity and reciprocity.

For Irigaray, the transformation of the mother-daughter relationship is therefore a crucial political and cultural task. Rather than reproducing hierarchical models based on authority and dependence, she advocates relationships grounded in reciprocity, mutual recognition, and respect for difference. In *Sexes and Genealogies*, she argues that women must learn to establish woman-to-woman relationships that allow both mothers and daughters to exist as autonomous subjects rather than as extensions of one another (1991, p. 50). This critique of maternal omnipotence and her call for reciprocal female relations exercised a significant influence on debates within European and Italian second-wave feminism, particularly among theorists concerned with sexual difference and female symbolic authority.

Although Muraro and the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective developed a specifically Italian feminist framework, their reflections on female genealogy and symbolic mediation share important points of convergence with Irigaray's thought. Both reject universalist models of subjectivity based on masculine norms and seek to reclaim the maternal relation as a source of female meaning and authority. Within the context of Maraini's novel, Irigaray's emphasis on

reciprocity offers an important lens through which to interpret Marianna's evolving relationship with Giuseppa and her gradual rejection of controlling forms of motherhood.

Taken together, Rich, Irigaray, and Muraro offer complementary perspectives on motherhood. Rich exposes the institutional mechanisms through which motherhood is regulated by patriarchal power; Irigaray highlights the importance of female genealogy and intergenerational continuity; and Muraro reclaims the maternal relation as a symbolic source of language and meaning. These perspectives are particularly relevant to Dacia Maraini's feminist project, which repeatedly explores the relationship between female autonomy, maternal inheritance, and patriarchal authority. Although Maraini was not directly associated with the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, her literary work shares with Italian second-wave feminism a sustained concern with female autonomy, patriarchal power, and the possibility of constructing alternative female genealogies. As critics such as Sharon Wood (1995) and Joann Cannon (1999) have observed, Maraini's fiction consistently interrogates the ways women negotiate inherited roles while seeking alternative forms of self-definition. Read through this theoretical lens, *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* emerges not only as a critique of patriarchal motherhood but also as an exploration of maternal transformation, female genealogy, and the possibility of reimagining the mother-daughter relationship.

3. Textual Analysis: Narrative Context and Main Characters

La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa is set in eighteenth-century Sicily and follows the life of Marianna, a young noblewoman rendered mute after a traumatic childhood experience. As the narrative unfolds, the reader gradually learns that Marianna's muteness is the consequence of a rape committed by her maternal uncle, who later becomes her husband—a violence not only tolerated but effectively sanctioned by her family. Marianna's silence thus functions both as a personal trauma and as a powerful metaphor for the exclusion of women from speech, authority, and self-determination within patriarchal culture.

The novel is situated within the highly hierarchical world of the Sicilian aristocracy, governed by rigid codes of honor, inheritance, and family obligation. Women are expected to serve primarily as wives, mothers, and transmitters of social prestige, with few outlets for personal agency or intellectual development. Yet Maraini's reconstruction of eighteenth-century Sicily is not merely historical. By exposing the mechanisms through which patriarchal power regulates women's bodies, desires, and destinies, the novel invites reflection on structures that continue to shape gender relations in contemporary society, albeit in different forms.

Despite being married at a young age and bearing several children, Marianna gradually carves out a space for autonomy through reading, writing, and silent observation. Her intellectual development unfolds through letters, notebooks, and moments of introspection, transforming silence from a condition of oppression into a source of critical awareness. Through this process, Marianna evolves from an object of patriarchal control into a subject capable of interpreting and reshaping her own experience.

The novel also constructs a complex female genealogy spanning three generations: Marianna's mother, Maria; Marianna herself; and her daughters, particularly Manina and Giuseppa. Each

woman embodies a different response to motherhood, desire, and social constraint, revealing both continuity and rupture within maternal transmission. In this sense, the mother-daughter relationship becomes one of the central structures through which the novel explores the reproduction—and potential transformation—of patriarchal values.

By focusing on Marianna's evolving position within this genealogical and symbolic structure, Maraini reimagines maternal inheritance not as a fixed legacy but as a dynamic process of negotiation, resistance, and change. The novel therefore provides a particularly rich site for examining how motherhood can function simultaneously as a mechanism of social reproduction and as a potential source of female agency.

4. Motherhood as Sacrifice: Marianna and Manina

In *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*, motherhood is not represented as fulfillment or self-realization but as a site of sacrifice, bodily discipline, and the gradual erosion of female subjectivity. Through the parallel experiences of Marianna and her daughter Manina, Maraini exposes the extent to which maternal expectations demand the renunciation of women's creative aspirations, transforming motherhood into a mechanism through which patriarchal values are reproduced across generations.

Marianna's experience exemplifies this dynamic. Before becoming a mother, she displays a genuine passion for painting, a form of artistic expression that allows her to engage imaginatively with the world around her. Yet this creative impulse disappears following the birth of her first child. As the narrator observes: "Peccato avere perso la pratica dei colori. Ma è successo senza una ragione, alla nascita della prima figlia (What a pity she has lost the skill of using colours; it left her for no obvious reason when her first child was born)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 110; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 101). Critics have interpreted this loss differently. Irene Marchegiani Jones associates it primarily with the oppressive conditions of Marianna's marriage, whereas Cristina Siggers Manson argues that Maraini deliberately links the interruption of creativity to motherhood itself rather than to matrimony. The novel appears to support the latter interpretation, since artistic expression vanishes not at the moment of marriage but with the assumption of maternal responsibilities.

Adrienne Rich's critique of essentialist notions of motherhood provides a useful framework for understanding this process. As she argues, "Motherhood is earned, first through an intense physical and psychic rite of passage—pregnancy and childbirth—then through learning to nurture, which does not come by instinct" (1995, p. 12). Marianna's maternal identity is therefore not presented as natural or inevitable, but as something laboriously acquired through bodily sacrifice and emotional discipline. The relationship between motherhood and self-renunciation becomes even more explicit in the narrator's description of Marianna's maternal experience: "Nella maternità ha messo la sua carne, i suoi sensi, adeguandoli, piegandoli, limitandoli (She has put into motherhood both her flesh and her feelings, adapting them, restricting them, renouncing them)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 87; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 80). The accumulation of verbs — *adeguare*, *piegare*, *limitare* (*adapt*, *restrict*, *renounce*) — emphasises a process of continual adjustment through which bodily desires and personal ambitions are subordinated to maternal

duty. Motherhood thus appears not as an innate fulfilment but as a socially regulated practice requiring the systematic restriction of the self.

A similar pattern emerges in the life of Marianna's daughter Manina. As a young woman, Manina takes pleasure in music and regularly performs for guests at the family home. Following the death of a child and two subsequent miscarriages, however, she too relinquishes music. As Maraini writes:

Dopo la morte del secondogenito e i due aborti che erano seguiti, i Chiarandà avevano smesso di ricevere. Solo la domenica qualche volta invitavano i parenti a pranzo e poi Manina veniva spinta quasi con la forza al clavicembalo (After the death of their second child and the two miscarriages that followed it, the Chiarandas had ceased entertaining. Only on Sundays did they sometimes ask relations to dinner and then Manina would play the harpsichord with great energy). [...]

In seguito ha rinunciato del tutto. Ora al clavicembalo siede la figlia Giacinta di sette anni, accompagnata dal maestro ticinese che batte il tempo sul coperchio con una bacchetta di legno di ulivo (Later she gave up music altogether. Now her seven-year-old daughter Giacinta sits at the harpsichord beside a music teacher from Switzerland, who beats time on the lid with a baton made from olive wood) (Maraini, 1990, pp. 143-144; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, pp. 129-130).

The image of her daughter Giacinta replacing her at the instrument under the instruction of a male teacher only reinforces the intergenerational transfer of loss, where daughters inherit both a social role and the remnants of a sacrificed desire. Nevertheless, Manina appears to accept her maternal role with a mixture of irony and resignation. Describing her own body, she remarks: "Il mio corpo è una sala d'aspetto: c'è sempre qualche infante che entra o che esce (My body is a waiting-room, there is always an infant coming in or going out)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 140; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 127). The metaphor of the waiting room evokes a body permanently available to reproduction, defined less by personal desire than by its reproductive function. Motherhood here becomes an institutional occupation of the female body rather than an autonomous expression of identity.

This contradiction is sharply echoed in Adrienne Rich's observation that: "If we could look into (mothers') fantasies—their daydreams and imaginary experiences—we would see the embodiment of rage, of tragedy, of the overcharged energy of love, of inventive desperation... the machinery of institutional violence wrenching at the experience of motherhood" (1995, p. 128).

Maraini stages precisely this wrenching. Both Marianna and Manina love their children, yet their maternal experiences are inseparable from sacrifice, exhaustion, and the suppression of creative potential. Their lives reveal how patriarchal motherhood transforms love into obligation and self-giving into self-erasure.

The section therefore represents the first stage in Marianna's transformation. By exposing the costs of institutional motherhood, Maraini not only critiques the sacrificial model imposed on women in eighteenth-century Sicily but also anticipates later feminist reflections on the ways reproductive and domestic labour continue to shape women's lives. The maternal gaze that emerges from these pages is undoubtedly loving, yet it is also marked by loss—a love that struggles to preserve space for female creativity and selfhood.

5. Marianna's Mother: Complicity and Silence

Marianna's mother, Maria, embodies a silenced and socially constrained model of maternity typical of patriarchal aristocratic culture. Her presence in the novel is marked by resignation and emotional withdrawal, a condition that critics such as Joann Cannon describe as a form of predetermined social scripting, where female agency is reduced to passivity and domestic inertia (1995, p. 138). Within this framework, Maria's apparent inactivity is not merely psychological withdrawal but a culturally produced condition that reflects what Adrienne Rich defines as the "institution of motherhood", a system that regulates women's roles through ideals of devotion, obedience, and silence.

This institutional logic becomes most visible in the episode following Marianna's rape, where Maria urges her daughter to return to her husband, thus reproducing rather than challenging the violent structures that govern female existence. This maternal refusal underscores the lack of female solidarity within patriarchal norms and exemplifies what Rich described as institutional "violence wrenching at the experience of motherhood" (1995, p. 280). In this sense, Maria does not function as a protective presence but as a mediator of patriarchal law, revealing the extent to which motherhood, within this system, can become complicit in the reproduction of violence.

The complexity of this maternal figure is initially perceived by Marianna as rejection. In her early years, she defines herself in opposition to her mother, declaring: "non diventerò mai come lei, si dice, mai, neanche morta (I shall never be like her, she says to herself. Never. Not even when I am dead)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 8; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 10). This resistance recalls Carl Jung's discussion of the daughter's reaction to the maternal archetype, whereby the daughter constructs her identity through negative identification with the mother. Yet feminist theorists have argued that such opposition is not merely psychological but deeply shaped by patriarchal culture. Adrienne Rich describes this dynamic as *matrophobia*, "the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of becoming one's mother" (1995, p. 235). Marianna's rejection of Maria reflects precisely this anxiety: what she fears is not her mother herself, but the prospect of inheriting a life marked by silence, passivity, and submission. Her declaration therefore reveals the effects of a patriarchal symbolic order that positions mothers and daughters as antagonists rather than allies, encouraging daughters to seek autonomy through separation from the maternal figure.

Marianna's initial rejection of her mother is further reinforced by her strong emotional attachment to her father. His death, unlike that of her mother, causes her profound sorrow and highlights the emotional distance that continues to characterize her relationship with Maria. Only later in life does Marianna begin to understand the conditions that led her mother to surrender her agency. She realizes, with empathy, that Maria had chosen to "farsi morta per non dover morire (become lifeless so that she would never have to die)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 28; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 27), a survival strategy emblematic of generations of women subjected to patriarchal rule. What Marianna initially interprets as weakness gradually emerges as a form of adaptation to a social system that offered women few alternatives.

The breach in the mother-daughter bond, particularly evident in the aftermath of Marianna's rape, has been interpreted by Giuseppa Santagostino through the lens of the myth of Demeter and

Persephone. Just as Demeter is unable to prevent the abduction of her daughter, so too is Maria powerless—or unwilling—to intervene. Santagostino observes: “Come nel mito, la madre è assente o incapace di intervenire; madre e figlia non sono più in presenza l’una dall’altra, sono in due territori linguistici diversi (As in the myth, the mother is absent or unable to intervene; mother and daughter are no longer in each other’s presence—they exist in two different linguistic territories)” (1996, p. 412). This fracture lies at the core of the novel and signals a broken maternal bond shattered by patriarchal violence.

However, as Adrienne Rich reminds us, the Demeter–Persephone myth should not be read simply as a narrative of separation or maternal failure, but as a symbolic structure shaped by patriarchal history. The separation between Demeter and Kore is “an unwilling one”; it is neither grounded in the daughter’s rebellion nor in the mother’s rejection. Rather, it reveals the fragility and historical suppression of the mother–daughter cathexis, already endangered even before recorded history (1995, p. 240). In Rich’s reading, the myth preserves traces of a pre-patriarchal symbolic order in which maternal power and female continuity were more fully recognized, even though this order has been largely erased or transformed. Read through this perspective, Maria and Marianna’s separation is not simply a personal or psychological rupture but the effect of a broader symbolic disruption of female genealogy. The novel thus resonates with Rich’s insight that both mothers and daughters, across history, have longed for a maternal relation capable of resisting violence and restoring continuity. Yet within patriarchal structures, this desire is repeatedly interrupted, producing a recurring pattern of loss, misrecognition, and silence.

Maraini’s novel thus reconstructs a genealogy of female silence, one that is constantly threatened by patriarchal violence and erasure. As Luce Irigaray argues in *Sexes and Genealogies*, “patriarchal domination, where and when men arrogate the power of the mother to themselves. It also allows them to destroy the genealogy of the mother and to recruit women, one by one, into male genealogy” (Muraro, trans. Novello, p. 42). In Marianna’s story, generations of women attempt—often in vain—to resist this appropriation. The narrative does not idealize the mother but situates her within a historical and symbolic order that limits her agency. It is only through the act of recognition and narrative re-elaboration that Marianna begins to reconstruct a different maternal legacy—one no longer rooted in silence, but in understanding, continuity, and transformation.

6. Marianna as Mother: Continuity and Break

Although Marianna’s relationship with her mother is marked by silence, disappointment, and emotional distance, Maria’s death initiates a process of retrospective understanding. Only after losing her mother does Marianna begin to reconstruct her as a woman rather than merely as a failed maternal figure. What emerges is not reconciliation in the conventional sense, but a more complex recognition of the conditions that shaped Maria’s resignation.

This recognition is mediated through the rediscovery of the maternal body. As Sharon Wood notes, “Marianna’s recollection of her own mother similarly focuses not on actions or words but on physical presence” (1993, p. 231). After Maria’s death, Marianna recalls details that had previously escaped her attention:

Della signora madre le appaiono nel dormiveglia dei particolari a cui non ha mai fatto

attenzione, come se la vedesse per la prima volta: i due piedi gonfi e bianchi che ciondolavano dal bordo del letto, i due alluci come funghi porcini che muoveva come se dovesse suonare una immaginaria spinetta con i piedi. La bocca dalle labbra carnose che apriva neghittosamente per ricevere il cucchiaino pieno di brodo (she is haunted by memories of her mother, to which she has never before paid much attention, as if she were seeing her for the first time: how she used to dangle her white swollen feet from the side of the bed, her big toes like two puff-balls, twitching as if she were playing an imaginary spinet with her feet. Her mouth with its full red lips that parted listlessly to imbibe a spoonful of broth (Maraini, 1990, p. 28; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 53).

Rather than recalling words or maternal guidance, Marianna remembers gestures, bodily traces, and sensory impressions. This scene evokes what Adrienne Rich identifies as “the longing for and possibility of connection between mother and daughter – a connection founded on physical sensation” (1995, p. 231). Yet this retrospective reconciliation does not erase the legacy of absence and resignation left by the mother. Marianna remains determined not to reproduce her mother’s passivity, having vowed from childhood: “non diventerò mai come lei (I shall never be like her)” (Maraini, 1990, p. 8; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 10).

Ironically, it is precisely Marianna’s condition—her muteness and disability—that enables her to fulfill that promise. Silenced by trauma, she is also partially released from social expectations imposed upon women of her class. As Sumeli Weinberg observes, if muteness symbolizes the hollowing of the self, it also liberates her from the shame of a role imposed by social determinism (1995, p. 182). Deprived of speech, Marianna she develops alternative forms of knowledge through introspection, reading, and writing. Her disability therefore becomes a paradoxical source of subjectivity, enabling her to question inherited models of womanhood and motherhood.

Marianna’s experience of motherhood is therefore marked by a persistent tension between rejection and repetition. While she consciously refuses the passive model embodied by Maria, she remains deeply shaped by the patriarchal structures that governed her own upbringing. Her maternal identity develops through a series of negotiations, failures, and partial victories that reveal both the possibilities and the limits of maternal transformation within patriarchal society. The death of her son Signoretto intensifies this awareness. At the same time, Marianna becomes increasingly conscious of the premature separation from two of her daughters: Manina, married at the age of twelve, and Felice, sent to a convent at eleven, and both disappear from her daily life before a meaningful maternal bond can fully develop. Although such arrangements were common among Sicilian aristocratic families, Marianna experiences them as painful losses. She attempts to oppose these decisions, particularly in Manina’s case, but ultimately finds herself unable to challenge the combined force of family authority and social convention. Reflecting on Manina’s marriage, she admits: “Con Manina, dopo le prime battaglie, ha lasciato correre, per stanchezza, per noia, perchissà, per viltà (With Manina, after the first battle, she had let it go, through exhaustion, boredom, through cowardice)” (Maraini, 1990, p. 86; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 80). Marianna does not possess Demeter’s mythical power to retrieve her daughter from the underworld of patriarchal institutions. Yet unlike Maria, she experiences this inability not as indifference but as failure, revealing an emerging maternal consciousness that questions rather than simply reproduces inherited norms.

This transformation becomes most evident in her relationship with Giuseppa. More than any of her other daughters, Giuseppa mirrors Marianna's rebellious temperament and desire for self-determination. Their relationship repeatedly echoes Marianna's own frustrated appeals to her mother. As a young girl, Marianna had protested against her arranged marriage by writing: "Non mi marito (I will not get married)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 30; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 29). Years later, Giuseppa similarly turns to her mother for support when faced with a marriage she does not want: "Io non lo voglio lo zio, signora madre, diteglielo voi (I don't want my uncle. Mother, you tell him for me)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 117). Although Marianna's intervention cannot completely alter patriarchal structures, her response differs fundamentally from that of her own mother. Rather than dismissing her daughter's desires, she listens to them. By silently supporting her daughter, Marianna rewrites the scene of maternal betrayal and helps Giuseppa avoid a preordained marital fate.

As she listens to her daughter complain about her marriage, Marianna notices how much they resemble one another—both in appearance and temperament: "Marianna intravede la sua testa riflessa nello specchio dietro la scrivania, accanto a quella figlia e si trova così somigliante a lei, quasi fossero sorelle (Marianna catches a glimpse of her head reflected next to that of her daughter in the mirror behind the writing-bureau, and realises that they are so alike that it is almost as if they were sisters)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 167; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 151). To consider her daughter as a sister rather than a child reveals Marianna's capacity to transcend the conventional hierarchy that previously structured their relationship.

The decisive turning point occurs years later, when Giuseppa confesses her love for her cousin despite being married. Initially, Marianna is tempted to forbid the relationship, reproducing the same prohibitive logic that has governed her own life. Yet she immediately recognizes the violence implicit in such an act:

«Devi troncare, Giuseppa, il cugino Olivo è sposato e non puoi scrivergli.»

[...]

«Ma io gli voglio bene.»

Marianna fa per scrivere un altro divieto ma si trattiene.

Come suona arrogante la sua interdizione: stroncare, recidere, tagliare... con un brivido ripensa alle mani del cappuccino che penetrano nelle carni del signor marito zio per strappare via le viscere, pulire, scarnificare, raschiare, conservare. Chi vuole conservare usa sempre coltelli finissimi. Anche lei, da madre apprensiva, ora è lì pronta ad amputare i sentimenti di sua figlia.

Giuseppa non ha neanche ventisette anni. [...] Perché non indulgere ai suoi desideri anche se sono proibiti?

('You must break it off, Giuseppa. Cousin Olivo is married and you shouldn't be writing to him.'

[...]

'But I love him.'

Marianna is about to write another prohibition but she restrains herself.

How arrogant her refusal sounds: to break off, chop off, cut off... With a shiver she thinks of the hands of the Capuchin friars cutting into uncle husband to rip out his guts, to clean, to strip off the flesh, to scrape, to preserve. Those who want to preserve always use sharp knives. How apprehensive a mother she is, all out to amputate the feelings of her daughter.

Giuseppa is only twenty-seven. From her young body arise tender odours of hair damp with sweat, of skin reddened by the sun. Why not give in to her desires, even if they are forbidden?) (Maraini, 1990, p. 167; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 151)

Reflecting on her on the language of prohibition, she imagines herself metaphorically "amputating" her daughter's feelings, just as patriarchal authority has attempted to amputate her own desires.

However, rather than repeat the error of encouraging her daughter to remain in a safe yet unhappy institutionalized relationship, Marianna adopts a different position: a skepticism toward rigid correctness. After a moment of hesitation, she changes her tone and tells Giuseppa: "Scrivi pure la tua lettera, non ti guarderò... (Write your letter by all means, I shall not be watching you.)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 168; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 151). This seemingly simple gesture represents one of the most significant moments in the novel. Marianna does not decide for her daughter; nor does she withdraw into passive silence. Rather, she creates a space in which Giuseppa can exercise her own agency. In doing so, she breaks with both patriarchal authority and maternal possessiveness.

The scene resonates strongly with Luce Irigaray's call to move beyond maternal omnipotence and toward a reciprocal relationship between women. As Irigaray affirms:

In a sense we need to say goodbye to maternal omnipotence (the last refuge) and establish a woman-to-woman relationship of reciprocity with our mothers, in which they might possibly also feel themselves to be our daughters. In a word, liberate ourselves along with our mothers. That is an indispensable precondition for our emancipation from the authority of fathers. In our societies, the mother/daughter, daughter/mother relationship constitutes a highly explosive nucleus. Thinking it, and changing it, is equivalent to shaking the foundations of the patriarchal order (1992, p. 50).

Marianna's refusal to control Giuseppa's desires embodies precisely this shift. For the first time in the novel, motherhood is no longer defined by sacrifice, obedience, or authority, but by recognition.

Marianna's maternal journey therefore remains incomplete and often contradictory. She cannot entirely escape the structures that have shaped her life, nor can she fully protect her daughters from them. Yet she succeeds in transforming the meaning of maternal inheritance. Unlike Maria, who transmitted silence and resignation, Marianna gradually learns to transmit trust, autonomy, and the possibility of choice. Through Giuseppa, the novel imagines a maternal relationship no longer based on repetition but on transformation, preparing the ground for the symbolic reconfiguration of motherhood that will emerge more fully through Marianna's writing.

7. Writing and the Symbolic Order

Throughout *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*, writing functions as a transformative practice that enables Marianna to move from imposed silence to symbolic agency. Initially emerging as a pragmatic necessity due to her muteness, writing gradually becomes a space of self-reflection, and narrative reconstruction, through which Marianna reinterprets her past, reconfigures her position within the maternal and familial order.

This practice operates simultaneously on three interconnected levels: as memory, allowing Marianna to reconstruct and reinterpret lived experience; as resistance, challenging the silencing imposed on her body and voice; and as transmission, through which she seeks to communicate with her daughters in a symbolic language charged with meaning and affection. However, this maternal transmission remains partial and uneven, as only Giuseppa engages fully with this written mode of relation, while Manina and Felice largely refuse it, revealing fragility of maternal continuity across generations.

Within this framework, Marianna's writing gestures toward the construction of what Luisa Muraro defines as a maternal symbolic order, one that contrasts with the patriarchal order that has historically excluded women from meaning-making and cultural transmission. As Luisa Muraro writes, "La madre è, universalmente, il nome della relazione che è condizione di vita umana. [...] E cioè che dalla madre noi riceviamo la vita e la parola, insieme, e che l'ordine simbolico lo fa non il potere né la legge, ma la lingua (The mother is, universally, the name of the relationship that is the condition of human life. [...] That is, from the mother we receive both life and language, and the symbolic order is shaped not by power or law, but by language itself)" (Muraro, 2006, p. 150). In this sense, symbolic authority is not located in institutional power but in the originary relation through which language and life are transmitted. Muraro's reflection on symbolic authority highlights a major disruption in the feminine lineage: "She taught us to speak and she answered for language and its ability to say what it is. [...] But the mother loses her authority in our adult lives, and this, I think, is the cause of the symbolic incompetence" (Muraro, trans. Novello, p. 32).

Marianna's writing can therefore be read as an attempt to re-activate this symbolic relation beyond its rupture: a form of maternal inscription that does not reproduce inherited discourse but re-articulates it through experience. This reconfiguration is reinforced by Ida Dominijanni's discussion of Luisa Muraro's thought. Reflecting on the symbolic significance of the mother-daughter relationship after patriarchy, Dominijanni suggests that female subjectivity may be renewed not through resentment towards the mother, but through a form of symbolic gratitude capable of reconnecting women to a female genealogy and opening new possibilities for articulating experience (Muraro, 2006, p. 150). Marianna's genealogical reconstruction thus shifts from a logic of inheritance as submission to one of difference and transformation.

This symbolic tension between transmission and rupture is further illuminated through the contrast between Marianna and her own mother. While Marianna seeks to re-appropriate language through writing, her mother remains fully inscribed within the patriarchal symbolic order. She persuades her daughter to accept an arranged marriage with the words: "tu hai il dovere di accettare lu zitu che ti indichiamo perché ti vogliamo bene... (your duty is to accept the bridegroom we have found for you because we love you)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 33; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 29). And when Marianna, after suffering violence from her uncle, the husband, returns home,

the mother reproaches her harshly, invoking traditional proverbs such as “*Cu si marita p’amuri sempri campa ‘n duluri* (Marry for love and end up in pain)” (Maraini, 1990, p. 33; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 31). As Muraro argues, she “ends up saying what others have said or would say, finding support in what they want to say” (trans. Novello, p. 28), such expressions function not as individual speech but as the reiteration of a collective linguistic order, in which the mother becomes a vehicle of transmitted norms rather than a subject of enunciation.

Against this background, Marianna’s writing operates as a rupture: it does not simply reproduce inherited meanings but intervenes in them, transforming silence into articulation. In this sense, her practice resonates with Adrienne Rich’s distinction between motherhood as institution and motherhood as lived experience, where the latter is not a fixed identity but a relational and historical process: “Motherhood, in the sense of an intense, reciprocal relationship with a particular child ... is one part of female process; it is not an identity for all time” (1995, pp. 36-37). Writing thus becomes not only a means of survival, but a political act and symbolic act through which Marianna reclaims the maternal line as a site of agency rather than subordination.

By committing herself to writing, Marianna breaks with a pre-scripted destiny and reclaims subjectivity not as an object of patriarchal narration, but as a speaking and interpreting subject. This act initiates a re-foundation of maternal lineage grounded not in obedience or sacrifice, but in memory, relational autonomy, and symbolic re-signification.

8. The Final Gesture: Leaving

Marianna’s decision to embark on a journey across Italy represents both the narrative and symbolic culmination of her transformation: from a passive victim of patriarchal structures to an active subject capable of determining her own future. Her departure is neither an abandonment of maternal responsibility nor a rejection of family bonds. Rather, it constitutes an act of emancipation—for herself and for her daughters. By reclaiming the right to move, to choose, and to inhabit the world on her own terms, Marianna disrupts the traditional association between motherhood and self-sacrifice.

Her son Mariano—the only remaining male heir of the family—confronts her with restrained hostility: “*E chi baderà alle figlie?* (And who will take care of your daughters?)” (Maraini, 1990, p. 246; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 217). Marianna’s response is brief and resolute: “*Baderanno a sé stesse. Sono grandi* (They are perfectly capable of looking after themselves. They are grown-up)” (Maraini, 1990, p. 246; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 217). This exchange encapsulates the ideological shift at the heart of the novel. Whereas Mariano reproduces the patriarchal assumption that women require supervision and protection, Marianna recognizes her daughters as autonomous subjects capable of directing their own lives. Motherhood is thus redefined not as perpetual guardianship but as the capacity to foster independence.

As Adrienne Rich argues that mothers transmit to their daughters not only values and expectations but also a sense of what forms of freedom are possible. A mother who struggles to create a more livable and autonomous life offers her daughter a model of resistance and self-determination (1995, p. 247). Marianna’s final decision can be read precisely in these terms. By choosing her own

freedom, she leaves her daughters an inheritance different from the one she received: not resignation, silence, and obedience, but the possibility of choice.

Although none of her daughters becomes a revolutionary figure, each negotiates her own relationship with social expectations in different ways. More importantly, they grow up with the example of a mother who eventually refuses to remain confined within the role assigned to her. Her struggle creates a symbolic space in which alternative forms of female subjectivity become imaginable.

In this sense, Marianna's departure does not mark a break with motherhood but its transformation. Rather than controlling her daughters' futures, she entrusts them with the responsibility of shaping their own. The final gesture of leaving becomes an act of maternal care grounded not in sacrifice or possession, but in trust, distance, and freedom. Through this ending, Maraini offers a vision of motherhood that remains deeply relevant to contemporary debates on female autonomy and intergenerational inheritance.

9. Conclusion

Dacia Maraini's *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* offers a complex and multi-generational reflection on the possibilities and limits of motherhood within a patriarchal society. Through the figure of Marianna, the novel traces a gradual yet decisive process of transformation: from silence to writing, from submission to agency, and from the repetition of inherited models to a conscious attempt to reconfigure them. Marianna's search for self-determination is inseparable from her rethinking of motherhood, which ultimately becomes a site not of sacrifice but of negotiation, responsibility, and freedom.

Read through the lens of feminist theory, the novel illustrates Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as an institution and mothering as lived experience. While the institutional structures surrounding Marianna demand obedience, self-denial, and submission, her personal experience as a mother gradually opens the possibility of a different maternal practice, grounded in recognition rather than control. At the same time, Luisa Muraro's reflections on the symbolic order of the mother illuminate Marianna's attempt to reconstruct a female genealogy through writing, memory, and the transmission of meaning. The dialogue between Maraini's narrative and these feminist frameworks reveals how motherhood can function simultaneously as a mechanism of oppression and as a potential source of female subjectivity.

The novel's significance extends beyond its eighteenth-century setting. Although situated in a distant historical context, *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* continues to speak to contemporary debates concerning women's autonomy, gendered expectations, maternal identity, and intergenerational inheritance. Maraini's feminism does not propose an idealized image of motherhood; rather, it exposes its contradictions and explores the possibility of transforming maternal relationships without denying their complexity.

Ultimately, Marianna's final departure represents more than an individual act of liberation. It symbolizes the interruption of a cycle of silence and resignation that has shaped generations of women. By choosing autonomy without renouncing maternal attachment, Marianna leaves her daughters a legacy not of obedience, but of possibility. In this sense, the novel imagines a form

of female genealogy founded not on repetition, but on transformation—a vision that remains profoundly relevant to contemporary feminist thought.

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