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The Limping Mother(land): Reading Immacolata in Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* as an Allegory for Constructions of Southern Italian 'Backwardness'

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This article examines how the limping mother, Immacolata, in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels functions as an allegory for widely held perceptions of Southern Italian 'backwardness'. Drawing on close reading, feminist theory, Orientalism, and socio-political readings of Italy and its South, it argues that Immacolata's maternal role reflects largely Anglophone constructions of Italy's contemporary global identity. Immacolata's domestic confinement as a mother in patriarchal Naples mirrors constructions of Italy's South as feminine. Her limping body functions as a corporeal allegory for Orientalist narratives of Italy's national weakness, and the constructed 'crippling' effect of the Mezzogiorno that contributes to Italy's 'backwards' global identity. Lastly, Elena's matrophobic rejection of Immacolata stages the contemporary phenomenon of internal Italian migration from South to North, and to countries outside Italy. That these parallels can be drawn from a text written by an Italian author suggests that Ferrante deliberately reveals the internalised shame of Southern Italian identity, demonstrating the permeation of these constructions of Southern Italian 'backwardness' into Southern Italians' sense of self. This article demonstrates Immacolata's effectiveness as an allegorical figure for widely held perceptions of Southern Italian identity, in itself revealing the problematics of these perceptions. By repositioning the marginalised maternal body as a site of comment in Italian studies, this article provides a critical view of global representations and perceptions of Italian identity. This suggests the need for greater critical engagement with Orientalist framings of Italian identity, particularly within Anglophone media, and calls for deeper examination of Italy's associated stereotypes.

Introduction

Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* are amongst the most globally consumed pieces of contemporary Italian literature. Known for her dizzyingly visceral writing style (Milkova), Ferrante's novels explore mothers, daughters, and female friendship within a violent Naples that has "positively positioned" the city for foreign readers (Avalle 19). While scholarship exploring Ferrante's daughters and the friendship between Elena and Lila is well-saturated,

with notable scholars including Emanuela Caffè, Ruth Glynn, Stiliana Milkova, and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, Ferrante's written mothers are comparatively understudied. One such figure is Immacolata Greco, mother of the protagonist, Elena, in Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels*, whose limping body haunts the narrative despite her limited textual presence. Italy has been historically associated with the maternal image, through the "glorioso archetipo" (Bravo 139) of the "powerful, self-sacrificial, possessive, suffering, resilient" *mamma italiana* (Giorgio 120). It is therefore pertinent to examine Immacolata's maternal role in Ferrante's work, and what her presentation in the novels signifies for Italian identity given these novels' global readership.

This article argues that Immacolata functions as an allegory for widely held perceptions of Southern Italian 'backwardness'. Immacolata's role as a domestic service provider mirrors constructions of Italy's South as feminine. Her limping body evokes the historic Southern Question¹ and the perceived 'crippling' effect of the Mezzogiorno. Further, Elena's rejection of her mother(land) stages the contemporary phenomenon of internal Italian migration from South to North, and to countries outside Italy. As a Neapolitan mother, Immacolata is closely linked to Southern Italian identity. Due to historic divides between Southern and Northern Italian identity, it is pertinent to examine what Immacolata means for Italy's South, rather than homogenising her body as an allegory for the whole country. I approach these themes through close readings of Ferrante's texts, in which I draw on the feminist theory of "matrophobia", Edward Said's framework of Orientalism, and socio-political readings of the Mezzogiorno. This allegorical comparison reveals the problematics of dominant constructions of Southern Italy as culturally inferior – constructions which are frequently achieved, I will show, through Orientalist discursive mechanisms.

Scholars widely agree that British voices have been instrumental in constructions of Italian identity (Thorpe; Robinson; Patriarca). From the "Grand Tour" tradition of writing by young British aristocrats travelling to Italy to complete their cultural education, through to representations of Italy in Romantic literature, all the way to contemporary media on Italy,

¹ The Southern Question is a defining aspect of Italian national politics and identity. The term was coined by Antonio Gramsci in his 1926 work, which articulates the discourse surrounding the North/South divide within Italy, where the South is perceived as economically, politically, and socially inferior to the North. This is a problem reflected in infrastructure inequalities between Northern and Southern Italy, and it continues to define and divide Italians today.

British voices have been particularly influential in constructing Italian identity. Further, the global circulation of Anglophone media means that these representations achieved an exceptional degree of visibility and longevity, and that they continue to impact global perceptions of Italy. Dickie's 1999 work explains how British voices construct Italy as politically, socially, and economically inferior to Britain's constructed cultural superiority, defined by an umbrella term of 'backwardness'. This denotes a rhetoric of the country "'lagging behind' and 'catching up' relative to the economies of Northern Europe" (Agnew 25), and of an indolent, work-shy population (Patriarca 53). Crucial to my analysis of Immacolata as a Neapolitan mother is the way these British voices label the South as the extreme of this 'backwardness'. Southern Italy is described as a land of primitiveness, corruption, femininity, and irrationality; the scapegoat for the country's overarching perception as 'backwards' in comparison to the modern countries of civilisation in Northern Europe (Dickie; Gramsci; Casillo). Schneider posits that this perception stems from the Grand Tour era, where British tourists were particularly sensitive to the squalor of southern cities (Schneider 4).

Thorpe and Robinson have crucially employed Edward Said's theory of Orientalism to elucidate this British construction of Italian identity. They apply Said's original framework, which posits that Oriental identity is constructed as a social and moral inferior Other in opposition to perceived Occidental cultural superiority (Said). Whilst Thorpe acknowledges that the "Saidian paradigm" (Thorpe 12) is inadequate in the Italian case, due to Italy's European status and how it has in part been "positively idealised" (Thorpe 14) by British voices, I argue that a framework of Orientalism is applicable to the case of Italian identity, as the same discursive mechanisms are at work as in the construction of Oriental identity. Italy, like the Orient, is mediated as indolent, morally corrupt, struggling economically, and is constructed in opposition to an identifiable, culturally dominant Other. Schneider constricts her application of Said's framework, arguing for an internal Orientalism *within* Italy whereby Southern identity is constructed in opposition to Northern identity. She argues that British voices overtly expressed distaste for Southern Italy, painting the country as having been "dragged down by its southern half" (Schneider 8) and contributing to an internalised shame that resulted in perceptions of Southern Italians "as racial or cultural others whose differences from northerners were intrinsic and for all time" (Schneider 12). As Immacolata

is a Neapolitan mother, and Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* are so closely linked to notions of Southern Italian identity in contrast to the North, this paper considers specifically Orientalist constructions of Southern Italian 'backwardness'.

The paper is split into three sections. The first examines British constructions of Southern Italy as feminised, mirroring Immacolata's role as an archetypal woman limited to the domestic sphere. The second draws on Fredric Jameson's theory of the body as a national allegory, Said's Orientalism, and Schneider's theory of internal Orientalism to allegorise Immacolata's body with constructions of the 'limping' Italian South. It also applies Glynn's concept of the "northern gaze" as a literary articulation of Schneider's theory of internal Orientalism between Northern and Southern Italy. Glynn argues that, in Ferrante's novels, Elena's adherence to and success within the rules of the Italian education system represent the constructed civilisation of Northern Italy and Northern Europe outside Italy (Glynn, "Porosity" 67). I therefore frame Elena's narrative gaze as an Orientalist dominant voice that constructs her mother(land) in accordance with British Orientalist constructions of Southern Italian identity. The final section applies Adrienne Rich's definition of matrophobia: the fear of turning into one's mother, to explore Elena's relationship with Immacolata (Rich). I analyse how Elena's flight from the Neapolitan neighbourhood in which she grew up stages the reality of young Southern Italians' flight from the South, in a mass exodus to seek opportunities on higher ground, both further North in Italy and abroad. I frame this as representative of the deep permeation of British constructions of Italian 'backwardness' into the Italian cultural imagination. This angle of internalised shame also explains why these British constructions of 'backwardness' can be read through a fictional Italian body, written by an Italian writer. I argue that as Immacolata is narrated through the lens of Elena's shame of her mother(land), Ferrante deliberately reproduces these derogatory constructions of Southern Italian 'backwardness', precisely to reveal their internalisation in Southern Italian self-perception. In this sense, Elena represents an Orientalist gaze upon her mother(land)'s constructed 'backwardness' both because she feels she is superior to it, and because she has internalised a shame and fear of living up to this identity.

This article contributes to Ferrante scholarship by repositioning the marginalised maternal body of Immacolata as an allegory for national identity. It positions a globally

consumed piece of contemporary Italian literature as a site of comment on British constructions of Southern Italian identity. Immacolata's character and body function as a successful allegory for British constructions of Southern Italian identity. My analysis reveals the derogatory nature and impact of these constructions, offering an original intersection between Italian literary studies and Orientalism. Interpreting a singular body as a national allegory reflects Fredric Jameson's 1986 theory of Third-World, post-colonial literary bodies as national allegories, which has been criticised for its Orientalist homogenisation of Third-World cultures and texts and its essentialist framing of Third-World literary bodies as necessarily collective and national (Ahmad). I recognise that applying this theory to Immacolata's body risks a reductive view of Italy and the Mezzogiorno, but I suggest that this is heuristic rather than totalising, as Jameson's logic reflects Orientalist constructions that have historically shaped perceptions of Italy and the Mezzogiorno (Thorpe; Robinson; Schneider). Ultimately, I argue that reading Immacolata's body as a national allegory both reveals and challenges the endurance of these dominant constructions of Southern Italian identity.

Immacolata and the Confinement of the Feminised Nation

In Ferrante's novels, Immacolata's maternal role of domestic provision allegorises the construction of Southern Italy as feminised, and therefore weak. Confined to the domestic sphere by her symbolic limp, she reflects reductive archetypes of femininity, thus thematically embodying the derogatory perception of Southern Italy as hyper-feminine in contrast to the more masculine North. Italians are characterised in Grand Tour literature as an effeminate people who lack the "military mettle" of other European countries (Casillo 84). The country connotes frivolity, emasculated down to its geological body which, whilst praised for its beauty, cannot compare to the "forbidding masculine ruggedness and magnitude" of Northern Europe (Casillo 138). Internally, Southern Italians are referred to as an anomalous "woman-people" (Dickie 1) in contrast to the "popolo-uomini" of the North (Glynn, *Naples and the Nation* 228). This makes Immacolata, as a Southern Italian mother, the embodied extreme of this historic construction of Italy and its South as feminine.

Throughout the novels, Immacolata remains confined to the domestic sphere, subordinated by patriarchal violence from her husband, who “sometimes beat her” (Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend* 45). Significantly, her limp restricts her physical mobility, whilst also translating as a metaphor for “the traditional female confinement to the private sphere” (Caputi 643). Immacolata’s body therefore physically and symbolically demonstrates her compliance with her role as a female domestic labourer. This restriction to the domestic sphere extends outside Naples; despite geographically shifting from her home, she remains confined within domestic walls through Elena’s narrative gaze and is constantly defined by her confining limp. When caring for a feverish Elena in Pisa, Immacolata appears almost by magic in Elena’s domestic sphere. Any travel that she undergoes exists only in Elena’s imagination: “I thought of her alone [...] in an unknown city” (Ferrante, *New Name* 414), thus her existence outside the home is never tangibly recognised. Ferrante’s use of the verb “thought” articulates Elena’s first-person narrative control in her refusal to witness her mother’s existence outside the household; she *thinks* of her journey but does not *see* it. This highlights the way the narrative is mediated through Elena’s thoughts and indicates her status as an unreliable narrator. Moreover, during this visit, Immacolata’s “known footsteps” come from “the darkest depths of [Elena’s] mind” (Ferrante, *New Name* 412), indicating Elena’s shame of Immacolata: she has tried to hide her mother even from her own consciousness as she reinvents herself further North in Italy. This euphemistic but conscious reference to Immacolata’s gait suggests that Elena’s shame of her mother derives principally from her limiting limp. Elena’s narrative gaze therefore locks Immacolata away as a domestic tool, where she remains throughout the tetralogy, narratively defined and confined by her crippling limitations.

The Limping South

Immacolata’s body emerges as allegorically constitutive of Orientalist constructions of Southern Italian identity, reflecting derogatory British constructions of Italy’s South as primitive and barbaric (Dickie; Gramsci). As a disabled Neapolitan mother, Immacolata is a productive site through which to examine Orientalist constructions of the Mezzogiorno’s status as the “ball and chain”; the symbolic dragging limb that impedes progress for Italy as a whole (Gramsci 33). Scholars have argued that Italy is ambivalent within the “Saidian

paradigm”, as Italy’s European status means that Italy ostensibly is part of the Occidental group that, within Said’s framework, have historically defined Oriental identity as their inferior (Thorpe 12). However, the same discursive mechanisms and rhetoric are at work in the construction of Southern Italian identity in opposition to dominant voices, warranting a critical analysis of the significance of this framing. That Immacolata’s body fits an allegorical representation of this stereotypically primitive and barbaric South reveals the impact of British voices on questions of Italian identity today and calls for a more nuanced examination of these stereotypes.

Avalle argues the *Neapolitan Novels* have “positively positioned” Naples in the minds of Ferrante’s readers (Avalle 19). Yet in the novel, Elena’s descriptions of the neighbourhood and of Immacolata’s body cement stereotypes of the South as a land of “lazy, incapable, criminal and barbaric” people (Gramsci 33). Elena laments that her world was “full of words that killed: croup, tetanus, typhus ...” (Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend* 33), echoing Naples’ former association with the “third world” (Hooper 277). This imagery of disease and decay is reflected in Immacolata’s body: as she reveals to Elena in *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015), her limp was the result of a childhood illness from which she never fully recovered, indicating the community’s poverty and lack of access to medical care. Much as this limp symbolises female restriction to the domestic sphere, it also becomes a corporeal manifestation of the South’s perceived backwardness. If the South’s lack of development produces a generation of limping children, the Mezzogiorno is destined to be perceived as biologically limited. This reflects the derogatory discourse which represents Southern Italians as “biologically inferior” (Gramsci 33). Ferrante’s depiction of Naples therefore cements common constructions of Southern Italian identity, with Immacolata’s limp as symbolic of the South’s perceived backwardness.

Immacolata further embodies the South’s primitiveness through her portrayal as the antithesis to Elena’s education. Although she occasionally praises Elena’s achievements throughout the tetralogy, the construction of the narrative from Elena’s perspective frames Immacolata as the “persecutory shadow” that strives to halt her academic development (Caffè 40). Upon Elena’s return from Lila’s wedding at the beginning of *The Story of a New Name*, Immacolata hits her, knocking off her glasses. Elena shouts: “See what you’ve done? You’ve broken my glasses and now because of you I can’t study” (Ferrante, *New Name* 28).

She blames her mother's violence, itself characteristic of the neighbourhood's primitiveness, for threatening her education. These glasses symbolise intellectuality; a marker of difference between Elena and her uneducated family, whose eyes do not strain to read books. A lack of education indicates an intellectual primitiveness, and therefore, for Elena, Immacolata's violent attack against the educational tool of her glasses represents the incarnation of the primitive South. In this context, Immacolata is not merely a passive obstacle, but an aggressor with an insidious objective, positioning the South as a monstrous Other.

An Orientalist Matrophobia

Just as Southern Italy is depicted as barbaric in comparison to the civilised North (Schneider), Immacolata is presented as primitive in opposition to Elena's success. This reflects Glynn's argument that Elena represents the "northern gaze" (Glynn, "Porosity" 67). For Glynn, Elena is "susceptible to disciplinary power" (Glynn, *Naples and the Nation* 240), and she is presented in the novel as an exemplar of Northern models of political success. She can thus appear as an antithesis to the primitiveness of the South, despite her genetic condition as a Neapolitan. In this sense, the relationship between Immacolata and Elena becomes the literary articulation of Orientalist constructions of Southern Italian identity, with Elena constructed as the culturally dominant Other. Indeed, Elena's narrative control presents her as superior to the neighbourhood and to her mother, whom she figuratively locks away in the domestic sphere.

One explanation for Elena's Orientalist framing of her mother is Elena's deep matrophobia of Immacolata. Throughout the tetralogy, Elena fears morphing into her mother, terrified that this limp will "dictat[e] her future" (Recio Ruíz 26), which mirrors Rich's definition of matrophobia (Rich). Fear of Immacolata and the stagnation that she and the neighbourhood connote is Elena's *unheimlich*; her motivation for escaping the maternal "abyss" (Caputi 641). Because Immacolata is continually associated with the neighbourhood and with forms of socio-economic stagnation, Elena's matrophobia extends beyond the maternal figure herself and becomes more representative of her feelings towards her *motherland*.

This sentiment is demonstrated through an accusation from Elena's husband, Pietro, who says that Elena is "just like [her] mother if she had had an education and had started writing novels" (Ferrante, *Lost Child* 67). For the reader, Immacolata and education are each other's symbolic antitheses throughout the narrative, so Pietro's statement appears as a paradox. It suggests that, as a non-narrating character, Immacolata has other qualities that Elena omits, reducing her to a state in which she is both inferior and opposite to Elena. Indeed, Elena seems to revel in the fact that "the venomous figure" of her mother "existed only in [her] memory" (Ferrante, *Lost Child* 183) as Immacolata nears death, suggesting she finds power in narrating her mother as she likes. Particularly due to Elena's retrospective narration, this fear of morphing into her mother and the consequent desire to present herself as her antithesis may in fact stem from Pietro's accusation of Elena's similarity to Immacolata. It is subsequently Elena's reductive portrayal of Immacolata that allows her to corporeally comply with the reductive stereotypes of Orientalist constructions of Southern Italian identity. Ferrante reveals and reproduces derogatory stereotypes of Southern Italians through Immacolata's body, ultimately revealing Elena's Orientalist attitude towards her mother(land). Immacolata and her hated body can therefore be allegorised as the marginalised South in all respects.

Matrophobia and Flight from the Mother(land)

In the narrative arc of the tetralogy, Elena does not merely harbour matrophobic sentiments towards her mother, but actively severs herself from her mother(land). Exploring Elena's matrophobic flight from Immacolata, I draw a parallel between Elena's flight from the neighbourhood and the contemporary phenomenon of internal migration from Southern to Northern Italy and abroad.

At Lila's wedding, Elena actively breaks ties with her mother and the neighbourhood. She considers what would happen if she were to stay with her neighbourhood boyfriend, Antonio. She expresses discomfort that her mother "restrained [her]" (Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend* 321) and conflates a relationship with Antonio as a necessary condition of the stagnation she associates with Immacolata and the neighbourhood. Remaining with Antonio would signify a transition to her mother's body: "staying near her meant staying in her

world, becoming completely like her. And if I became like her, who would be right for me if not Antonio?" (Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend* 321–22). Meanwhile, Elena considers another romantic option, Nino Sarratore, who for her represents the option to use "education for upward mobility" (Ferrante, *Frantumaglia* 371). Elena is at a crossroads, represented through two love interests who signify juxtaposing lives, with her mother's physical grip restraining her from choosing for herself. Ultimately, this conflict culminates in Elena "pull[ing] [her] dress away" from Immacolata, physically severing herself from her mother's clutches, and metaphorically severing herself from the neighbourhood. It marks a turning point; Elena's resolve to disconnect from the hated mother(land) and to pursue her own path.

In Elena's matrophobic severance from her mother(land), she exchanges Immacolata for a Northern maternal counterpart, Adele Airola, her mother-in-law. Adele represents Immacolata's opposite; what Elena runs towards following her matrophobic rejection of her mother(land). The contrast between these two mother figures represents a textual articulation of the North/South divide. The contrast in Elena's presentation of Immacolata and Adele reveals Elena's clear preference for Northern values, as she matrophobically rejects the 'backwardness' of her Southern origins. Adele represents the educated class, possessing money, social status, and intellectual respect. For Elena, she is a means to gain academic and literary success, symbolising what she has always striven for in opposition to the neighbourhood's economic and intellectual stagnation. In contrast to the repulsive image of Immacolata, Elena describes Adele as "a wealthy, cultivated wife and mother" who is also a professional "able to exercise power" (Ferrante, *New Name* 448). Adele's expansive presence, existing in social, professional, and domestic spheres starkly contrasts Immacolata's confinement to the domestic sphere under Elena's narrative gaze. In allowing Adele to take up more space in her narration, Elena demonstrates her greater level of respect for Adele than for Immacolata.

Furthermore, at Elena's debut novel launch, Adele, who recommended Elena's book to be published, "tried tactfully to calm [Elena]", who "struggled with words" and "had a bitter taste in [her] mouth" (Ferrante, *New Name* 470). Adele assumes the role of a calming maternal figure, assuaging Elena's anxieties. She later "took [Elena] gently by the hand, she praised the way [Elena] had spoken of [her] book" (Ferrante, *Those Who Leave* 34),

protecting Elena in this new literary environment with a gentle tone. This maternal ideal is the antithesis to Immacolata, who has “a word of contempt for anything that happened to [Elena]” (Ferrante, *Those Who Leave* 132). Similarly, Immacolata appears as crude in opposition to the Airola family. When Pietro Airola is introduced to Elena’s family, Immacolata “appeared last, the sound of her crooked gait could be heard right after that of the toilet flushing” (Ferrante, *Those Who Leave* 91). This reference to both the toilet and Immacolata’s limping gait, in an overt show of her corporeal limitations, suggests her as ungainly and embarrassing to Elena, in stark contrast to the “cultivated” Adele. These contrasting Southern and Northern mothers therefore represent opposing worlds to Elena, and her narrative framing of the two highlights her derogatory view of her mother, representative of the South, and her idealised view of Northern Adele. She matrophobically rejects her own mother(land) and adopts a new, Northern maternal figure, one rendered in opposition to the stagnation, primitivity, and limitations of her Southern origins.

The Internalisation of Constructed Southern Backwardness

Elena’s matrophobic feelings towards her mother(land) constitute a literary remediation of the fear of inheriting the social, cultural, and economic limitations that Immacolata symbolises; that is, Southern Italy’s perceived backwardness. Elena’s trajectory of physical displacement from the South to the North of Italy throughout the *Neapolitan Novels’* narrative arc mirrors contemporary migration patterns among Southerners, many of whom are young graduates that leave the Mezzogiorno in pursuit of educational and professional opportunities in the Centre-North of Italy and abroad (SVIMEZ). Whilst these migration trends are fundamentally shaped by persistent economic inequalities and limited opportunities in the South compared to the more industrious North, Ferrante’s representation of Elena’s matrophobic rejection of her mother(land), alongside the clear historic permeation of British constructions of Southern backwardness, suggests a complementary cultural dimension. I argue that, alongside material factors, longstanding constructions of Southern Italian backwardness have been internalised by Southern Italians, contributing to forms of shame and disidentification that render departure from the South increasingly desirable.

A SVIMEZ report from 2026 demonstrates the marked statistical trend of migration from Italy's South to its Centre-North or abroad. Between 2002 and 2024, almost one million under-35s emigrated from Southern to Northern Italy. Over one third of this figure possessed at least one university degree. Similarly, between 2002 and 2024, over 210,000 under-35s migrated abroad from Southern Italy, and again a third of this figure were university graduates (SVIMEZ). Other studies on internal migration trends in Italy have described "the Centre-North as the core and the South as the periphery of Italy", in keeping with popular rhetoric surrounding the South's apparently marginalised status as a 'backward' region in comparison to the more industrious North (Piras 571). These trends are due to a structural lack of opportunities for young people in Southern Italy; an issue that is only exacerbated by skilled human capital leaving the South (SVIMEZ 4). Elena's matrophobic journey away from her mother(land) mirrors these trends, particularly as she ascends further North as she progressively gains more educational qualifications, social status, and fame. Indeed, her first progression away from the neighbourhood is when she must travel across Naples for high school, followed by an ascension to the Centre-North of Italy, to Pisa, for university, and culminating in her final settlement in Turin as an established writer and academic.

That this SVIMEZ report notes the marked migration trends specifically from the South of Italy demonstrates a regionally-particular trend of rejecting the South as a place of future life and career opportunities. Despite these migration trends being rooted in material causes that define the economic divide between Italy's North and South, I argue that there is also a cultural component to the development of an abandonment mentality, whereby the historic constructions of Southern Italy as inherently 'backwards' by Orientalist British voices have been internalised into the Southern Italian psyche. Just as Elena has an irrational fear of turning into her mother's hated body and becoming the corporeal embodiment of the neighbourhood's stagnation and primitiveness, I argue that a facet of the Southern Italian mindset of migration is due to a matrophobic fear of becoming synonymous with these derogatory constructions of 'backwardness' of their motherland.

Indeed, a study on perceptions of British and Italian national identity states that national identity is "deeply rooted in the construing of others' constructions, achieved through relationship and comparison" (Burr et al. 63). We can thus posit that Italy's

reputation as “lacking in a sense of national pride and identification” is influenced by relentless British constructions of Italian backwardness (Favero 151). As this takes its most extreme form in cases of the Italian South, which is constructed as primitive, backwards, and barbaric (Dickie; Gramsci) by British voices, we can also suppose that Southern Italians in particular have internalised this regional shame. The very nature of the Orientalist construction of Southern Italian inferiority against British cultural superiority instils the belief that there is a better elsewhere to flee to, as reflected in these migration trends. Indeed, Elena too flees her mother(land) to a more educated life in the North, and to the more civilised mother figure of Adele Airota, who can give her the opportunities she lacked in her Southern neighbourhood.

Inheriting (or Appropriating) the Mother’s Legacy

Elena reveals her mother’s name at the end of the tetralogy by naming her own child after Immacolata. This represents another matrophobic act and an effort to paint over Elena’s Southern origins. Caputi argues that the religious connotations of the name ‘Immacolata’ suggest redemption, making Elena’s naming of her child after her mother a forgiveness of Immacolata (Caputi 652). This initially seems to indicate forgiveness or reconciliation, yet it is significant that Elena names her child after her mother during Immacolata’s illness and death in *The Story of the Lost Child*. Elena reveals this name when, in Immacolata’s proximity to death, she is “diminished almost to nothing” (Ferrante, *Lost Child* 221). Immacolata is too physically weak to restrain her, and in revealing her name at this point, Elena reframes her mother’s legacy to fit her own life. Immacolata is reborn by name, but Elena’s academic success, her reputation for themes of sexual promiscuity in her published novels, and her untraditional family life oppose everything Immacolata represented. As Elena takes control of her mother’s name and reframes it under her own terms, she performs a metaphoric act of matricide, erasing her mother’s values and identity with this new Immacolata, born from Elena’s flesh.

Despite freeing herself of her Southern neighbourhood through education, and finally distancing herself from Immacolata at the time of her death, Elena inherits her mother’s limp during her first pregnancy. Elena says: “I was afraid that my mother’s gait had caught

up with me, that she had settled in my body, that I would limp forever, like her" (Ferrante, *Those Who Leave* 237). This language evokes the unsettling image of Immacolata as a malevolent shadow over Elena's life, threatening her with this limp that has now "settled" inside Elena like a parasite. Wehling-Giorgi interprets the maternal body in Ferrante's work as a site through which the transgenerational trauma of a violent, patriarchal society can be transferred, marked through its disability or scarring, such as Immacolata's lame leg (Wehling-Giorgi 250). In this way, if Immacolata's limp is a symbol of transgenerational trauma and this maternal limp is allegorically synonymous with the constructed primitive South, Elena's inheritance of this limp is a literal marker of her Southern origins, despite her best efforts to escape them. This interpretation recalls the pessimistic view of Italy's ontological "backwardness" (Agnew 23) and the rhetoric which has historically depicted Southern Italians as "*naturally backward*", with their perceived biological inferiority used as the scapegoat for broader national difficulties (Foot 175; emphasis in original). As Neapolitan women, both Immacolata and Elena are genetic products and representatives of this constructed identity of Southern 'backwardness', and Elena's inheritance of her mother's physical defect therefore suggests the believed inescapability of the South's constructed destiny towards failure. This explains why Elena has always irrationally believed her mother's limp to be her future, and this literal internalisation of her limp symbolises a metaphorical internalisation of constructions of Southern 'backwardness'. The ultimate realisation of this matrophobic fear suggests why Elena's matrophobia is so vehement; she has become synonymous with the image of the mother(land) she so desperately wanted to escape.

The extremes to which Elena goes in rejecting her origins project her insecurity that they may still catch her up. Her matrophobia for her mother(land) does not dissipate after she escapes the neighbourhood, nor following her mother's death. The fact of her narration of this story, which can be understood as a continual assertion of herself as literally and symbolically above her mother(land), suggests that Elena will forever live in fear of her mother(land). This demonstrates the extent of her internalisation of the shame of her Southern origins.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that Immacolata functions as a successful allegory for dominant constructions of Southern Italian backwardness. British voices are especially prominent in constructing this identity, due to historical links between Italy and Britain with cultural and literary traditions such as the Grand Tour, and the global circulation of Anglophone media. I have argued that the mechanisms through which British voices have built Southern Italian identity reflect an Orientalist framework, whereby Southern Italy emerges as feminised, primitive, and barbarically ‘backwards’. Whilst the North/South divide signifies an instability internal to Italian identity, I have shown that scholarship widely acknowledges the impact external British voices have had on constructions of Southern Italian identity, which has exacerbated the problematics of the Southern Question within Italy. Immacolata’s character and body reflect these derogatory constructions of Southern Italian identity, revealing and reproducing notions of regional shame and perceived cultural inferiority. Immacolata’s archetypal female confinement to the domestic sphere through her limiting limp reflects constructions of Southern Italians as hyper-feminised, whilst her presentation as uneducated, violent, and, crucially, limping, reflects constructions of Southern Italy as an impediment in comparison to the modern civilisation of Northern Italy. I have also identified a parallel between Elena’s migration up the Italian peninsula throughout the *Neapolitan Novels*’ narrative arc, and contemporary youth migration trends from Southern to Northern Italy and beyond. Acknowledging that this paper’s scope focuses on constructions and perceptions of Southern Italian identity, I have suggested that a contributing factor to these migration trends is an internalisation of this ‘backwards’ identity by Southern Italians. I have argued that Ferrante deliberately reproduces stereotypes of Southern Italians’ constructed backwardness through Immacolata’s body precisely to reveal this internalised shame and its impact, as demonstrated through Elena’s disparaging narrative gaze upon her mother, and her ultimate flight from her mother(land).

The very fact that such constructions can be recognised and read through Immacolata’s body by a British scholar – myself – evidences their impact. This article contributes to Ferrante scholarship by re-positioning the marginalised maternal body as an active site of study within the *Neapolitan Novels*, and the allegorical comparison I have drawn calls for active engagement with how Southern Italians have internalised British narrations of Italy.

Indeed, narrating a nation through one body has its limits, as shown by how neatly Immacolata fits into these externally constructed stereotypes.

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