

## Book Recommendation

**The Three Layers of *Family Lexicon***

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In Natalia Ginzburg's autobiographical novel *Family Lexicon* we are introduced with the sociological layers of language, feminism, and self-understanding. These three layers represent changes within the post-war Italian society as it is through these three layers that Ginzburg tries to understand her identity and her family as she observes everything through the lenses of ethics, philosophical, and humanistic views which makes the author reminisce about the present, past, and future.

Natalia Ginzburg's memoir *Family Lexicon* written in the first-person narrative, and published in 1963, tells the story of a half Jewish and half Catholic Italian family whom the main characters are the father, the mother, and their children, as the story it is told through Natalia's memory who is the youngest of five. The author opens the Preface of *Family Lexicon* with the view that places, events, and the people that she encounters in the book are real (Ginzburg 2017, p. 4). Because the author is going back in time to retell a story which revolves around truth and memory, it automatically becomes an untrustworthy source therefore Ginzburg suggests reading the book like a novel instead.

This view however introduces the story as an anomalous autobiography which represents a text that the subject of narration it is missing and the author instead focuses on observing the lives of her family and friends (Francese 2009, p. 65) which means that the writer herself is not the center of attention and it is only seen at times when her presence is required. Ginzburg justifies the act of not being the center of attention in her own story by saying that this is her family's story which is why *Family Lexicon* is not an autobiography in the traditional sense which usually talks about the story of the author's life as it starts from childhood and leads to their adult life (Daly 1998, pp. 7-8). Although we find these elements in the story, they are not focused only at Ginzburg but also at the other members of the family as it captures their lives after World War I and during World War II. The book is an ode to her childhood, her parents, and her siblings because what Ginzburg highlights the most is that life happens to all of us therefore there is no escaping the bad and the good that comes with it. The good and the bad are part of the ride but one important lesson to keep in mind is that life goes on and so do Ginzburg's characters because they wait for life to happen to them (Thomson 1969, p. 17) just like Ginzburg herself tries to be understood by her parents and her siblings when she would sit at the table with her family reciting her

mother's poems and songs or when she would witness guests coming in and out of the house suspiciously but never dared to ask what is going on.

The language structure it is understood through the two most important figures in the family which are the father and the mother. The father, Giuseppe Levi, is a Jewish scientist who loves his job, is vocal about anti-fascism, dictates the family mountain vacations, and is strict about what the family eats and reads. He dislikes jokes, music, and he is annoyed with his children if they don't follow his rules. He doesn't like it when his wife disobeys him and is paranoid if someone in the family gets sick because he is afraid of incurable diseases and this paranoia leads the children being homeschooled by the mother.

For each different scenario, he uses a different word or phrase to describe his annoyance or anger in order to express himself. For example, when the children would drop a knife, he would say watch your manners (Ginzburg 2017, p. 5). He would sometimes call a new acquaintance a nitwit (Ginzburg 2017, p. 5) which is a nickname for stupid. The term jackass is reserved for someone who is rude or did not have any manners and he would call the children jackasses (Ginzburg 2017, p. 8) when neither of them would talk to him. The mother, Lidia Levi, is Milanese born and comes from a Catholic background. When she would talk about her memories, she would focus on phrases that she heard when she was growing up. She is obedient to her husband, but she also has a social life outside her family duties. She likes to meet new friends, go to the cinema, and tell stories about herself such as the times when she used to act, sing, dance, write her first libretto, and perform when she was attending boarding school. We see the mother illustrate these examples in the book when she recites the opera that she wrote about Don Carlos Tadrud and when she parodied Metastasio who was an Italian poet known for his librettos. In another example, she would begin her story with the reference that an uncle of mine used to be called Barbison (Ginzburg 1997, p. 22) and if the children told her that they are familiar with this story, she would not take offence but rather turn around to the person who is sitting next to her and retell the story again. She would continue telling her stories as we see in the example of Signor Lipmann, who is one of her cousins, and it is nicknamed the lunatic in the family because he treats patients with mental problems, although her husband makes it clear that he has heard the story many times before. The mother, being a better storyteller than the father, because he would confuse the facts and the details whenever he will tell a story, finds joy and happiness in storytelling whether she is telling a story about her family or her husband's family side.

Feminism is an important point when it comes to observing the role of the mother within the post-war society which constructs women based on their ideological duties that are found in taking care of the house, the spouse, and the children which leads the motherly views to be understood through the means of self-understanding and Natalia's adolescent stage in life. Natalia's mother is a middle-class woman but also an intelligent woman who has studied medicine with an interest in languages, culture, and the arts (Simborowski 2017, p. 95). But during this time, Fascism is not preferred as a statue for women's rights because the Fascist Party separated the male and female views as it created an ideal female on how it should act at home (Simborowski 2017, p. 96) and the author's mother is far from obeying any rules. She is outgoing, has her own hobbies, and goes to the cinema with her friends whenever she wants to see a movie. Her husband does not stop her, although she upsets him sometimes when they don't agree on the same things, or when she cuts her hair short without his permission. She detests Mussolini and the new regime of fascism that it is beginning to take over Italy and hopes that someone, someday, will take the power away from him and in a blink of a second all the worries will go away. Ginzburg approaches feminism through the eyes of a non-institutional basis (Daly 1998, p. 20) by focusing on her mother's character which resonates modernity, questioning, and skepticism, in order to understand a woman's place in the modern society. The author is approaching the sociological and psychological analysis through the means of the representation of the idea of femininity and masculinity in a modern society (Daly 1998, p. 29) which means that Ginzburg's mother represents the modern Italian woman, as we see in the example of Paola, the older sister, when she tells Natalia how she wishes their mother is old and has white hair but instead they have a mother who likes to go to the cinema and spend time with her younger friends, take piano and Russian private lessons because she is always bored therefore needs to entertain herself.

This view does not mean that the motherly figure is a heroic figure but instead, a real, humane person who attended boarding school and while she was there, she sang, acted, danced, and wrote an opera. This structure builds confidence in the mother which allows her to share this knowledge with her children because the things that she has learned have shaped her personality therefore she wishes to do the same thing for them. The sense of nostalgia in the narrator, which Ginzburg attributes to her mother as the primary constructive developer of her imagination, it is found in the stories that the mother tells about the great grandmother Dolcetta, her parents, Pastrengo which is the road where one of the apartments that the family lived is located, reciting from *The Daughter of Iorio* which is a poem that the mother learned at a charity performance, telling jokes which were referred to as little gags (Ginzburg 1997, p.

30), gossiping with the maids, learning Russian, and the enjoyment of having her friends over. Natalia by always being around these adventures, her imagination started to reproduce a world of storytelling as her mother's voice is the first transmitter in her life (Cantelli 2017, p. 181) which opens the door to Natalia's self-identity by introducing the observational importance of the author as it becomes an important commentary of the nature on the narrative itself (Cusk 2018, p. 25).

Self-understanding can be understood through observation. Observation reflects on the events that Natalia has witnessed as a little girl growing up before and after fascism in Italy. She is not close with her mother, father, or her siblings. They care and respect each other but she never makes it to the favorite list, like her sister Paola, who shares the same love for short French haircuts and shopping like the mother does or when her brother Gino is praised by the father because he is an amazing climber and shares the same passion as the father when it comes down to his favorite sport which is mountain climbing. The opposite happens to Natalia instead when the mother calls her the mistress (Ginzburg 1997, p. 76) one day because she is in charge of deciding if they are going to spend the day at the cinema although it is not Natalia's favorite hobby. The mother would say that Natalia doesn't talk because she is always quiet. This is because Natalia's main priority is to observe life around her and these observations revolve around the theme of parenting and the hierarchy of the mother figure as she observes the fate of society in relation to the institution of the family dynamics (Boyers 1992, p. 101) as it develops in a manner of acceptance and belonging.

While growing up in a house that was not religious and yet it supported socialism but not Mussolini or the fascism regime, Natalia feels lost inside and outside. On the inside, the family had to be careful who they let in when fascism was gaining power because everyone was seen as suspicious to the point that the mother started burning things in the house in case the police would come in for a checkup, and on the outside, there were spies who kept an eye on the targeted Jews such as Natalia's brothers Gino and Mario who is arrested at the Swiss border for being a conspirator against fascism. Natalia's father and her husband, Leone Ginzburg, are also thrown in jail for their antifascist views with the only difference that her father is detected for twenty days whereas her husband dies brutally at the hands of the German police. Such danger however does not stop the family to close the doors on those who needed help. The family becomes an escape for the persecuted people as we see in the year 1926 when they hid in their home Filippo Turaniti who was the Resistance leader and the co-founded of Italian socialism (Coburn 2007, p. 756). In another example, the family hides Paolo Ferrari who is trying to flee Italy in their house, but Natalia recognizes him right away as Turanti instead. She has seen him before when the family lived in

Pastrego street but even with this realization, Natalia cannot confirm her doubts because her mother tells her his name is Paolo Ferrari and she is not allowed to ask questions which shows that truth and lies mix together for the author to the point that they become her reality.

Natalia's adolescent stage in life begins when she gets married and becomes a mother. She is creating her new life based on the things that attract her as she has her own agency now. Once she moves out of the family home, Natalia, and her husband Leone, settle in Pallamaglio street. During this time Natalia hangs out with her friends Lisetta and the Tootsies (Ginzburg 1997, p. 122) who are nicknamed by her mother for having flirtatious characters. She reads Salgari's novels and Croce's *La letteratura della nuova Italia*, hires a maid named Martina whom she does not give orders unlike when she did when was living at her parent's house, and now that she is married, Natalia realizes the value of work. Her mother does not miss Natalia the same way she misses her sister Paola and although she is not as jealous as she used to be of Paola's friends, the mother cares for Natalia and her wellbeing.

In 1938 the racial campaign comes in power in Italy which restricts the Jews from the civil services and does not allow intermixed marriages. Her father loses his job, and her husband Leone is always arrested because he is seen as a precautionary measure every time an important politician or king came to visit Turin (Ginzburg 1997, p. 131). During these hard times Natalia becomes a mother, and her two children are born which leads Ginzburg in observing the theme of feminism even further in her other two literary works which are *La Madre* and *The Little Virtues*. *La Madre* tells the story of a young widow who is seen through the eyes of her two young sons (Giorgio 1993, p. 3) and *The Little Virtues* highlights the themes of conventional attitudes that are aimed towards children and the way they are raised (Cusk 2018, p. 25). Ginzburg highlights important of the self and how its moral function works in narrative therefore she wants to understand why we act the way we do and what made us the way we are as this aim it is focused on the role of the mother and how she can construct a safe environment for her children under hard life circumstances. The concept of the self via the motherly survival instinct can be recognized in *La Madre*, written in the third person narrative in 1963, when *Family Lexicon* was also published, with the representation of the patriarchy's discussion on the theme of motherhood through the children's views (Giorgio 1993, p. 3) but in this text, the mother is not a good example but rather a bad one because she smokes, goes out late, it is indifferent to the children's well-being, and the children always sleep on their own.

The people who become important in this case are the grandmother, the grandfather, Aunt Clementina, and Diomira the maid therefore they automatically become

trustworthy because they represent affection and protection because the mother represents tragedy as the loss of her husband takes her into a dark rollercoaster and she numbs the pain by neglecting the reality in front of her. *The Little Virtues* is a collection of eleven essays which Ginzburg writes between 1944 and 1953. These essays represent autobiographical episodes as they are presented to the reader as a view of virtues on how they should be lived (Francese 2009, p. 69). The period between 1944 and 1953 is connected to *Family Lexicon* and in one of the chapters called *Winter in Abruzzo*, Ginzburg is telling the story of how she is joined by her husband Leone in exile. Being happy that the war has come to an end, in 1944 Ginzburg connects this feeling to the Preface of *Family Lexicon* as it is connected to the realization of happier times which allows the author to grieve the death her husband as through this process the author associates the happy times that she spends with her family in the anomalous autobiography.

Another important example in connection to the motherly survival instinct is found in *My worn-out shoes* which tells the story of how Ginzburg it is saved after the war by a woman who helps the writer understand the theme of responsibility in connection to providing for her children (Francese 2009, p. 69) therefore it becomes evident that the motherly views for the author are represented by tragedy and hope as based on these two literary works, the mother becomes the pillar of stability for the household because she shapes the first psychological narratives for the children as we see in *Family Lexicon* how the mother becomes the primary constructive developer of Natalia's cognitive thinking.

By combining language, feminism, and self-understanding together, we can observe in the novel the values which highlighting the importance of identity and family. Through these factors, Ginzburg highlights the importance of these three structures that shape the ethical, philosophical, and humanistic views as they provide a clarity for the writer who finds herself and her voice through the sociological observations by reminiscing about her present, past, and the future.

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