

# FEMALE RIVALRY IN ELENA FERRANTE'S *MY BRILLIANT FRIEND*: A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the phenomenon of female rivalry in Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*, focusing on the complex relationship between the two protagonists, Elena "Lenu" Greco and Raffaella "Lila" Cerullo. Employing a qualitative descriptive method and the sociology of literature approach, the research explores both the contents and underlying factors of their rivalry. Data were collected through close reading and analyzed based on theoretical frameworks concerning female competition. The findings reveal that the rivalry between Lenu and Lila centers on three main dimensions: attractiveness, encompassing Lila's intellectual brilliance and magnetic personality; beauty and physical appearance, which create deep insecurities for Lenu; and similarity of interests, particularly their shared passion for learning and recognition. These dynamics are further intensified by two driving factors: competition for male attention and Lenu's persistent lack of self-confidence. The study concludes that female rivalry, even within a deep friendship, functions as both a source of motivation and emotional struggle, reflecting broader societal expectations surrounding women's beauty, intellect, and desirability.

**Keywords:** *female rivalr; Elena Ferrante; My Brilliant Frien; sociology of literature*

## 1. Introduction

The slogan "*women support women*" has become a central mantra in contemporary discussions about female relationships, promoting solidarity, empowerment, and collective advancement. This ideal is institutionalized through various organizations and movements advocating for women's rights and welfare. However, the optimistic narrative of universal sisterhood often contrasts with the more complex realities of social interaction, where jealousy and competition among women persist across diverse contexts (Nova, 2018). Such rivalry often stems from the desire for affection, attention, praise, and the fear of being surpassed by others (Kartajaya & Mahatristi, 2010).

Rivalry, defined as a state of ongoing competition between individuals or groups (Thompson, 2001), is not inherently negative. It can serve as a catalyst for self-improvement, ambition, and personal growth. Yet, when embedded within intimate relationships such as friendship, rivalry may create an intricate psychological tension—simultaneously fostering admiration and resentment. In female relationships, this duality

of affection and competition reflects broader cultural expectations and social hierarchies that shape women's self-concept and interpersonal behavior.

Elena Ferrante's acclaimed novel *My Brilliant Friend* offers a rich exploration of this phenomenon. Set in a poor and violent neighborhood in post-war Naples, the novel follows the lifelong friendship between Elena "Lenu" Greco and Raffaella "Lila" Cerullo. Their bond, established in childhood, is characterized by deep affection, intellectual companionship, and an unrelenting sense of rivalry. They constantly measure themselves against one another—in academic performance, beauty, and their ability to attract male attention. Ferrante's narrative thus provides a nuanced literary space to examine the complex intersection of admiration, envy, and social conditioning that defines many female friendships.

This study investigates the dynamics of female rivalry within Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* through the lens of the sociology of literature. Specifically, it aims to: (1) identify the central contents of the rivalry between the two protagonists, Lenu and Lila, and (2) analyze the underlying factors that sustain their competition throughout the novel. By addressing these objectives, the research seeks to answer the guiding question: How does Elena Ferrante depict the anatomy of female rivalry in the friendship between Lenu and Lila, and what social and psychological forces sustain it? This study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of female relationships in literature. It challenges simplistic depictions of women as either natural allies or adversaries and instead highlights the coexistence of affection and competition as fundamental aspects of female experience. In doing so, it illuminates how societal pressures, personal insecurities, and shared ambitions intertwine to shape women's identities and emotional lives.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Sociology of Literature**

To analyze the social phenomena within a literary text, this study adopts the lens of the sociology of literature. This approach posits that literature is a reflection of society; it is multidisciplinary and can be understood through perspectives like sociology, psychology, and politics (Suhariyadi, 2014). Literature expresses human life and social realities, often packaged in a fictional context (Suwardi, 2011). As Ian Watt suggests, literature can act as a mirror of society, allowing us to examine human adaptations to social environments (in Golman, 1981). *My Brilliant Friend*, set in a specific socio-historical context of Naples, serves as a perfect mirror to reflect and examine the universal yet particular dynamics of female rivalry.

### **2.2 Female Rivalry**

Female rivalry is a well-documented social phenomenon. It is described as a state where women engage in intense competition with one another, often more so than men, whether in social, professional, or romantic contexts (Elizabeth in Kartajaya & Mahatristi, 2010). This competition can be emotionally draining, as women may feel threatened by friends who outperform them in domains they value (Tesser in Bleske-Reчек & Lighthall, 2010). Benenson (2013) notes that women often employ subtle competitive strategies, such as disguising competition or using social exclusion, from a young age.

The contents of this rivalry, as identified by scholars, often revolve around traits highly valued in social and mate selection contexts:

- Attractiveness: This includes physical appeal and personality traits that make an individual desirable (Bleske-Rechek & Lighthall, 2010; Shimp, 2007).
- Youth and Beauty: Physical attractiveness, often synonymous with youthfulness, is a key axis of competition, driving behaviors aimed at enhancing appearance (Campbell, 2004).
- Similarity of Interests and Values: Friendship and rivalry are often strongest among those who share similar backgrounds, intellect, and values, as this creates a direct frame for comparison (Bleske-Rechek & Lighthall, 2010).

The factors affecting this rivalry, as outlined by Agustina (2018), include:

- a. Competing for the Hearts of Men: The desire to attract male attention and secure a desirable partner is a primary driver of inter-female competition.
- b. Lack of Confidence: Insecurities and a negative self-perception can lead women to perceive other women as threats, fueling jealous competition.
- c. Lack of Attention and Less Grateful: While these are noted factors, this study found them less prominent in the primary text compared to the first two.
- d. This theoretical framework provides the structure for analyzing the complex relationship between Lenu and Lila.

### **3. Research Method**

This study utilized a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for producing descriptive data from written texts (Creswell, 2009; Ismawati, 2012). The aim was to describe and interpret the phenomena of female rivalry within the novel's narrative.

The primary data source was the English translation of Elena Ferrante's novel, *My Brilliant Friend* (Europa Editions, 2012). Secondary data sources included books, journal articles, and scholarly works on female rivalry, sociology of literature, and literary criticism to build the theoretical foundation.

Data collection was conducted through the documentation method (Koentjaraningrat, 2002). The process involved:

- a. A close reading of the novel.
- b. Identifying, highlighting, and extracting relevant quotations, words, and phrases that illustrated the contents and factors of female rivalry.
- c. Classifying these extracts based on the pre-established theoretical categories.

Data analysis involved qualitative descriptive techniques (Bogdan, 1982). The classified data was analyzed by:

- a. Interpreting the quotations in relation to the theoretical concepts.
- b. Explaining how the textual evidence exemplifies a specific content or factor of rivalry.

Synthesizing the findings to draw coherent conclusions about the nature of Lenu and Lila's competitive relationship.

### **4. Discussion**

The analysis of *My Brilliant Friend* reveals that the friendship between Lenu and Lila is fundamentally structured by a powerful rivalry, the contents and drivers of which are detailed below.

## 4.1 The Content of Women's Rivalry

### a. Attractiveness

Lila's attractiveness is not solely physical but profoundly intellectual. From childhood, Lenu is acutely aware that Lila is "terrible, dazzling" (Ferrante, 2012, p. 34). The teacher's hierarchy, which places Lila at the top, forces Lenu to "devote myself to studying... just so I could keep pace with that terrible, dazzling girl" (p. 34). This intellectual rivalry is the engine of Lenu's academic drive. Furthermore, Lila possesses a dangerous personal magnetism. Lenu observes an "essence not only seductive but dangerous emanated from Lila" (p. 124), a charm that makes her irresistible and intimidating to others, thereby intensifying Lenu's sense of competition.

### b. Youth, Beauty, and Physical Appearance

As the girls enter adolescence, physical beauty becomes a central arena for rivalry. Lenu painfully notes the disparity in their looks: "I looked at her white, smooth skin, not a blemish. I looked at her lips, the delicate shape of her ears" (Ferrante, 2012, p. 110). This comparison leads to deep insecurity. Even when Lenu briefly feels beautiful after a summer away, she quickly concludes, "Lila now had retaken the upper hand... while I... was growing ugly again" (p. 231). A poignant symbol of this is the glasses that make Lenu feel ugly but inexplicably suit Lila, making Lenu wonder, "why is it that they look nice on her when she doesn't need them and they make me, who can't do without them, look ugly?" (p. 232). This perceived gap in beauty is a constant source of anguish and competitive jealousy for Lenu.

### c. Similarity of Interests and Values

The very foundation of their rivalry is their shared brilliance and thirst for knowledge. Their connection is strongest when they are intellectually matched. Lenu admits, "what I did by myself couldn't excite me, only what Lila touched became important" (Ferrante, 2012, p. 84). This similarity makes the divergence in their paths—Lenu continuing school, Lila being forced to leave—a source of complex emotions. Lenu uses her academic opportunity as a point of superiority, telling Lila about high school to "emphasize my value and my indispensability" (p. 112). When Lila independently begins studying Greek, Lenu is devastated by the threat to her academic domain, thinking, "Would she always do the things I was supposed to do, before and better than me?" (p. 122). Their identical interests create the perfect conditions for lifelong comparison and competition.

## 4.2 The Factors Affecting Women's Rivalry

### a. Competing for the Hearts of Men

The competition for male attention is a significant factor driving a wedge between the two friends. Lenu lives in constant fear that Lila will effortlessly attract any man she desires. She worries about "learning from her melodious voice that now she was making love with Peluso. Or if it wasn't him, it was Enzo. Or if it wasn't Enzo, it was Antonio" (Ferrante, 2012, p. 136). This is most acute with Nino Sarratore, Lenu's great love. She deliberately hides that Nino attends her school for fear that "he would immediately recognize Lila and be vanquished" (p. 137). Later, she even enters a relationship with Alfonso primarily to have a fiancé and rebalance their relationship after Lila's engagement to Stefano, dreaming of how "it would be lovely to go out as

four” (p. 228). This highlights how their rivalry for male validation directly influences their personal choices.

### **b. Lack of Confidence**

Lenu’s pervasive lack of self-confidence is the internal engine of the rivalry. She constantly feels inferior. Early on, she resigns herself to being “second in everything. I hoped that no one would ever realize it” (Ferrante, 2012, pp. 38-39). Her sense of self is so tied to Lila that she feels “fragile, exposed” without her as a benchmark or a follower (p. 122). She believes she cannot shine on her own; without Lila’s intellectual stimulation, her studies seem “less evocative than the finish of a pair of shoes, and that depressed me” (p. 84). This deep-seated lack of confidence ensures that Lila’s every achievement is perceived not just as a success, but as a personal failure for Lenu, perpetuating the cycle of rivalry.

## **4.3 The Content of Rivalry: A Multidimensional Contest**

The rivalry between Lenu and Lila is pervasive, extending beyond simple jealousy into a fundamental struggle for recognition and self-definition.

### **a. Attractiveness: Beyond Physical Allure**

While physical beauty is a component, Ferrante masterfully portrays "attractiveness" primarily as a function of intellectual charisma and formidable will. Lila’s attractiveness is her radical and uncompromising intelligence. Lenu’s description of her as a "terrible, dazzling girl" (Ferrante, 2012, p. 34) captures the awe and fear Lila inspires. This intellectual rivalry is the cornerstone of their relationship. Lenu’s entire academic journey is a response to Lila’s innate brilliance; she studies not for pure love of knowledge but to "keep pace." Furthermore, Lila possesses a dangerous, almost mythical aura. Lenu notes that an "essence not only seductive but dangerous emanated from Lila" (p. 124), a power that makes her irresistible to others and intimidating to Lenu. This combination of intellectual and personal magnetism makes Lila an unstoppable force and the ultimate benchmark for Lenu, transforming admiration into a relentless drive for competitive emulation.

### **b. Youth, Beauty, and Physical Appearance: The Body as a Battleground**

The novel meticulously charts how the female body becomes a site of contestation, especially as the girls enter adolescence. In their impoverished neighborhood, beauty is a currency and a weapon. Lenu’s obsessive comparisons are heartbreakingly precise: "I looked at her white, smooth skin, not a blemish. I looked at her lips, the delicate shape of her ears" (Ferrante, 2012, p. 110). Ferrante uses Lenu’s gaze to highlight the perceived disparity. Lenu’s self-image fluctuates wildly based on this comparison—she feels beautiful after a summer in Ischia only to conclude upon her return that "Lila now had retaken the upper hand... while I... was growing ugly again" (p. 231). The symbol of the glasses is particularly potent: they are a marker of Lenu’s intellectualism but also a source of insecurity, and their ironic enhancement of Lila’s beauty perfectly encapsulates the cruel and arbitrary nature of this physical competition. This relentless scrutiny reflects the immense social pressure on women to derive their value from their physical appearance, a pressure that deeply warps their sense of self.

### **c. Similarity of Interests and Values: The Double-Edged Sword of a Shared Worldview**

The most profound aspect of their rivalry is that it springs from a place of profound similarity. They are the only two people in their world who see reality with the same sharp, critical eye. This intellectual kinship is the bedrock of their friendship and the source of its most intense friction. Lenu admits that without Lila, her pursuits feel empty: "what I did by myself couldn't excite me, only what Lila touched became important" (Ferrante, 2012, p. 84). Their shared passion for learning makes every achievement a direct challenge to the other. When Lila begins studying Greek on her own, Lenu doesn't feel inspired; she feels threatened and usurped: "Would she always do the things I was supposed to do, before and better than me?" (p. 122). Their divergent paths—Lenu toward formal education, Lila toward entrepreneurial and intellectual autodidacticism—do not end the rivalry but rather transform it into a bitter comparison of different forms of intelligence and success, questioning which path truly leads to freedom.

#### **4.4 The Factors Affecting Rivalry: Internal Insecurities and External Pressures**

The drivers of this competition are a toxic blend of internal psychology and external social forces.

##### **a. Competing for the Hearts of Men: The Architecture of Patriarchal Validation**

In the patriarchal structure of post-war Naples, male attention is the primary measure of a woman's worth. Consequently, men become both prizes and pawns in Lenu and Lila's rivalry. Lenu's anxiety is palpable; she fears Lila could effortlessly captivate any man, from Enzo to Stefano (Ferrante, 2012, p. 136). This is most acutely focused on Nino Sarratore, who represents intellectual escape for Lenu. Her decision to hide him from Lila is a strategic move in their competition, born of the fear that "he would immediately recognize Lila and be vanquished" (p. 137). This isn't just about romance; it's about validation. Lenu's acceptance of Alfonso as a fiancé is a desperate attempt to "rebalance our relationship" after Lila's engagement to the wealthy Stefano (p. 228). Ferrante thus exposes how patriarchal systems pit women against each other, forcing them to seek value through male approval and view each other not as allies but as obstacles to their own social survival.

##### **b. Lack of Confidence: The Internalization of Inferiority**

Lenu's pervasive lack of self-confidence is the internal lens that magnifies every aspect of their rivalry. She internalizes the hierarchy established in childhood, resigning herself to being "second in everything" (Ferrante, 2012, pp. 38-39). Her identity is so entangled with Lila's that she lacks a stable sense of self. Without Lila as a rival, her own pursuits lose meaning, and she feels "fragile, exposed" (p. 122). This profound insecurity means that Lila's every success is experienced by Lenu as a personal diminishment. It is not merely that Lila is better, but that Lenu believes she herself is inherently lesser. This lack of confidence is the fuel that keeps the rivalry burning; it prevents Lenu from simply admiring Lila and instead compels her to engage in a perpetual, exhausting game of catch-up that defines her life.

## **5. Conclusion**

Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* presents a profound and multifaceted exploration of the complex relationship between female friendship and rivalry. Through

the intertwined lives of Elena “Lenu” Greco and Raffaella “Lila” Cerullo, Ferrante reveals that admiration and jealousy are not opposites but coexisting emotional forces that shape women’s sense of identity and ambition. The findings of this study demonstrate that their rivalry emerges from three central contents—attractiveness, beauty and physical appearance, and similarity of interests and values—and is driven primarily by two underlying factors: competition for male attention and Lenu’s persistent lack of confidence.

The analysis shows that female rivalry, while often perceived as destructive, can also be a powerful source of motivation and self-development. For Lenu, rivalry becomes the engine that drives her intellectual growth and academic achievement. For Lila, it reflects her defiance of societal limitations and her relentless pursuit of individuality. Their relationship illustrates that rivalry among women is not merely personal but deeply social, shaped by cultural expectations surrounding beauty, intellect, and desirability in patriarchal contexts.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how literature mirrors social realities and psychological struggles faced by women. By examining the dual nature of rivalry—both as a source of empowerment and emotional turmoil—this research underscores the complexity of female relationships in literary representation. It affirms that Ferrante’s portrayal transcends personal conflict to expose the subtle ways in which women internalize and resist societal norms.

However, this study is limited to a single literary text and focuses primarily on the sociological dimensions of rivalry. Future research may extend the analysis to Ferrante’s other novels or compare her portrayal of female friendship with that of other contemporary women writers. Such studies could further illuminate how narratives of rivalry, solidarity, and selfhood continue to evolve across different cultural and historical settings.

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