



SECOND LANGUAGE:

A CAPTOR OR A LIBERATOR?

QUAZI MOSTAIN BILLAH

It was a pleasant morning. The summer sun without its usual needle-sharp rays had brightened the vast airport. Very likely last night's shower had liquefied its pricking rays. I was standing in the middle of a line of passengers waiting to board a domestic flight. Things moved leisurely and systematically. The flight was on time and it appeared from the line of the passengers that the aircraft was full and the fixed crowd proceeded calmly. There was no pushing and shoving for seats common in our country. After all, everyone in the line was sure of his/her place; any rush was unnecessary.

Suddenly, my ears caught parts of a conversation from the head of the line. A suave female voice was giving to the speaker at the other end her reason for choosing the carrier she had chosen to fly. "No, no, I am not flying airlines A because its seats are too narrow to accommodate my big ass." I got curious. Did the speaker really have a big ass? You may consider my interest rather indecent but I think most of you would agree with me that certain interests are irrepressible. Anyway, I could not see the speaker's face but it was evident that she had exaggerated the dimensions of her posterior. A woman clad in a sari! Though I could not calculate her age, it was evident that her figure had hardly anything disproportionate about it. Then why blow up? Trying to remind the other speaker of their closeness? But by referring to too private and personal and rather negative facts? There was no point in trying to read her mind as I did not know anything about her. Just a fellow passenger!

But what kept me mulling was her relaying personal biological fact over telephone in hybrid Anglo-American English. For example, could she have passed the same physiological facts in Bangla with several pairs of ears before and behind her without missing a single word of that

juicy report? How would she have worded her message in Bangla? Well, let me not attempt that as anybody with basic competence in Bangla and English would in a flash be able to transfer it from one language to the other. What struck me was her choice of English to say what she said though 90% percent of her expressions were in hybrid English. I would like to guess that she did not choose English to talk about her physical dimensions consciously. It just came to her. She was floating between Bangla and English freely.

It seemed to me that the second language came to her unconsciously and as a kind of liberator in the sense that she could say in it what she wanted to say without any caution. This makes me wonder whether a second language can't also act as a liberator. The issue is not which language comes first- first language or second language. The place of one's mother tongue is always secure. No language can take its place; its importance will never diminish. The question here is the use of a second language. In my view, it's not just a captor that imprisons users within its set rules but can also give us some degree of freedom as well.

Usually, we have a negative attitude towards a second language. Most of us learn it when we have to. After all, do we not learn our mother tongue effortlessly? There is a romantic view that argues that one's mother tongue comes to the user as leaves come to a tree, unless the person is physically handicapped. In Bangladesh the learning of English is compulsory up to post-secondary level though its status i.e., whether it's our second language or a foreign language, has not been spelt out. But it's universally known in Bangladesh that without knowledge of English one becomes a lame duck in the job market. The matter of learning additional languages in Bangladesh does not end there. Learners also need to learn the language of their faith.

Though there are strong advocates for second language learning, skeptics of its necessity are not too few. There are many who consider it as a burden on young learners. Moreover, some people argue that for creative purposes the best choice is one's mother tongue. True, but it doesn't have the whole truth. A second language does not essentially stem the creative flow. It cannot always be a captor by binding us to alien rules of syntax or elocution. Some people express themselves better in a second language. For example, in a Dhaka Tribune interview a South African poet Vuyelwa Maluleke highlighted the point. Her schooling kind of 'wiped off' her mother tongue. She said in her interview: "... in a way I think I exist as resistance... And those contradictions of identity and language, come through in the poems. I write only in English though it is a second language to me- I have more control over it than I do my mother tongue. This is the result of the colonizing nature of the English language in South African schools; it was the only language you were permitted to speak... So I use this borrowed language as a tongue to write my blackness for myself on my terms." She was speaking from her own experience about the value of using a second language which allowed her the opportunity as well as the freedom to talk of her 'blackness'. If experience is a test for truth, can we deny the merit of her case, illustrating the liberating potential of the second language?

I think the airline passenger I mentioned earlier chose a second language to let her speak without any additional caution. A sense of modesty would not allow her to use her mother tongue to say what she said. Doesn't her choice tell us that a second language can also act as a kind of liberator which allows a speaker necessary freedom to utter what can't be uttered in the first language?

The unsolved mystery of Elena Ferrante

JOE TREASURE

Elena Ferrante is an Italian novelist in her 70s who has been producing published work for about 25 years. But it was only four years ago with *My Brilliant Friend*, a novel about growing up in a poor and sometimes violent neighbourhood in Naples, that Ferrante achieved international fame. At the heart of that story is a bond between two girls in which love and enmity mingle in constantly surprising ways. Three further novels have traced that relationship through adolescence and into adulthood. The last of this series, *The Story of the Lost Child*, was judged by *The New York Times* one of the 10 best books of 2015.

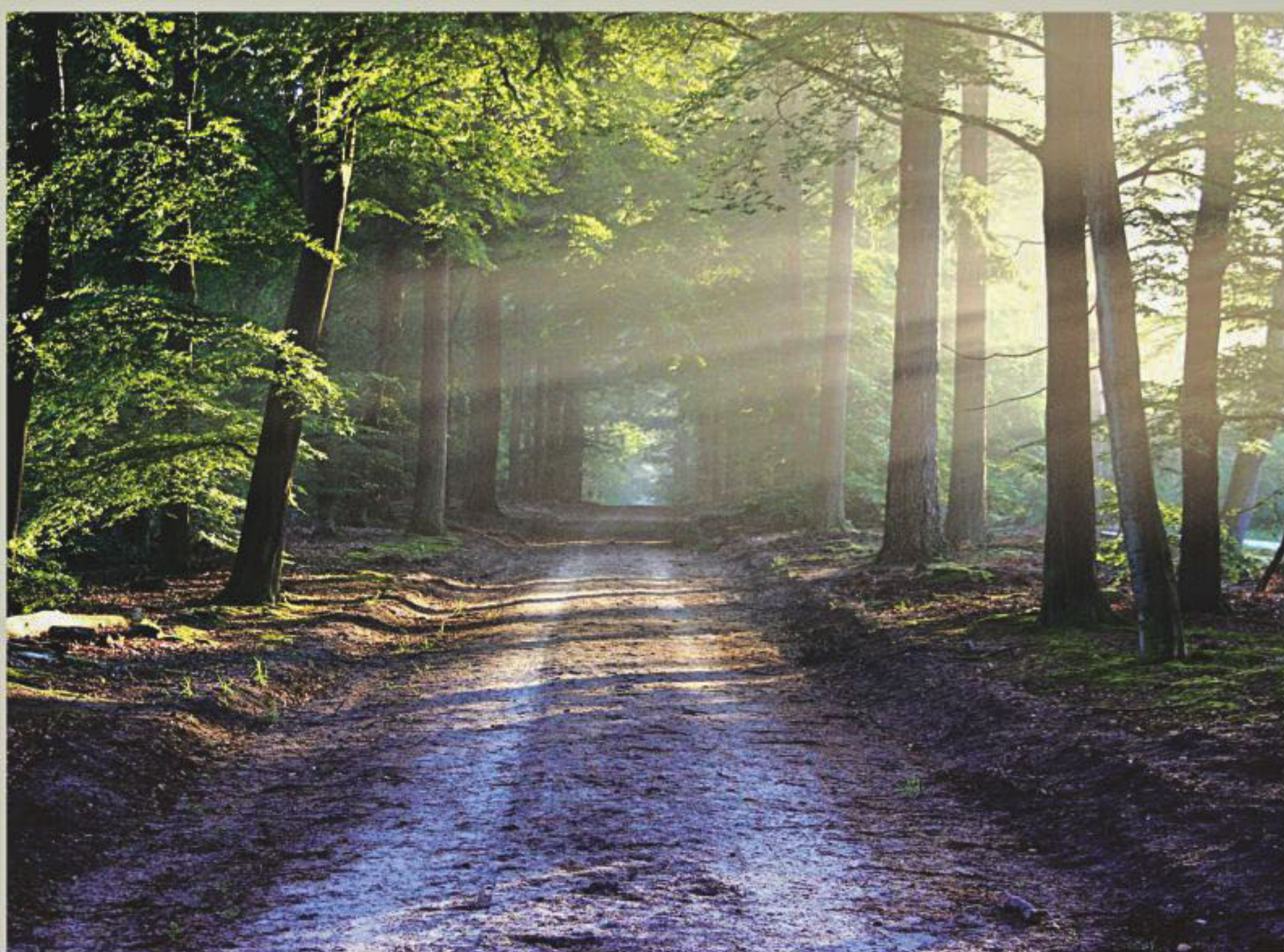
Ferrante is a pseudonym. What little is known about the author has been gleaned from interviews, and a volume of correspondence with editors which appeared in 2003. She insists on anonymity, explaining that she finds it necessary for her work. In an email interview with *Vanity Fair* in 2015 she said, 'I feel, thanks to this decision, that I have gained a space of my own, a space that is free, where I feel active and present. To relinquish it would be very painful.'

In spite of this, two controversial attempts to unmask her were published during 2016. The first drew on internal textual evidence to prove that Ferrante was in fact Marcella Marmo, a professor of contemporary history at the University of Naples. The author of this paper, a Dante expert, said that he had conducted a philological analysis 'as if I were studying the attribution of an ancient text'. Even in the face of such scholarly evidence, however, professor Marmo insists that it isn't her.

An investigation by Claudio Gatti for the Italian newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore* received wider circulation when it was reprinted in the *New York Review of Books*. Using investigative techniques that might be more usefully applied to exposing the corruption of politicians and corporate executives, Gatti followed a trail of payments from the publishers to a freelance translator of German texts, Anita Raja. Raja has also denied authorship. Bizarrely, Raja's husband Domenico Starnone, a screenwriter and journalist, has previously been identified as the real Ferrante, as has the male writer and critic Silvio Perrella, as if only a man could show such a confident grasp of late twentieth-century Italian social and political history.

But to anyone who has actually read the 1,700 pages of the Neapolitan quartet – a slow-burning study of female friendship and rivalry and the struggle to achieve autonomy in a patriarchal society, punctuated by intense love affairs, abusive marriages and intimate explorations of the trials of pregnancy and motherhood – the idea that this is an extended act of male ventriloquism must seem implausible.

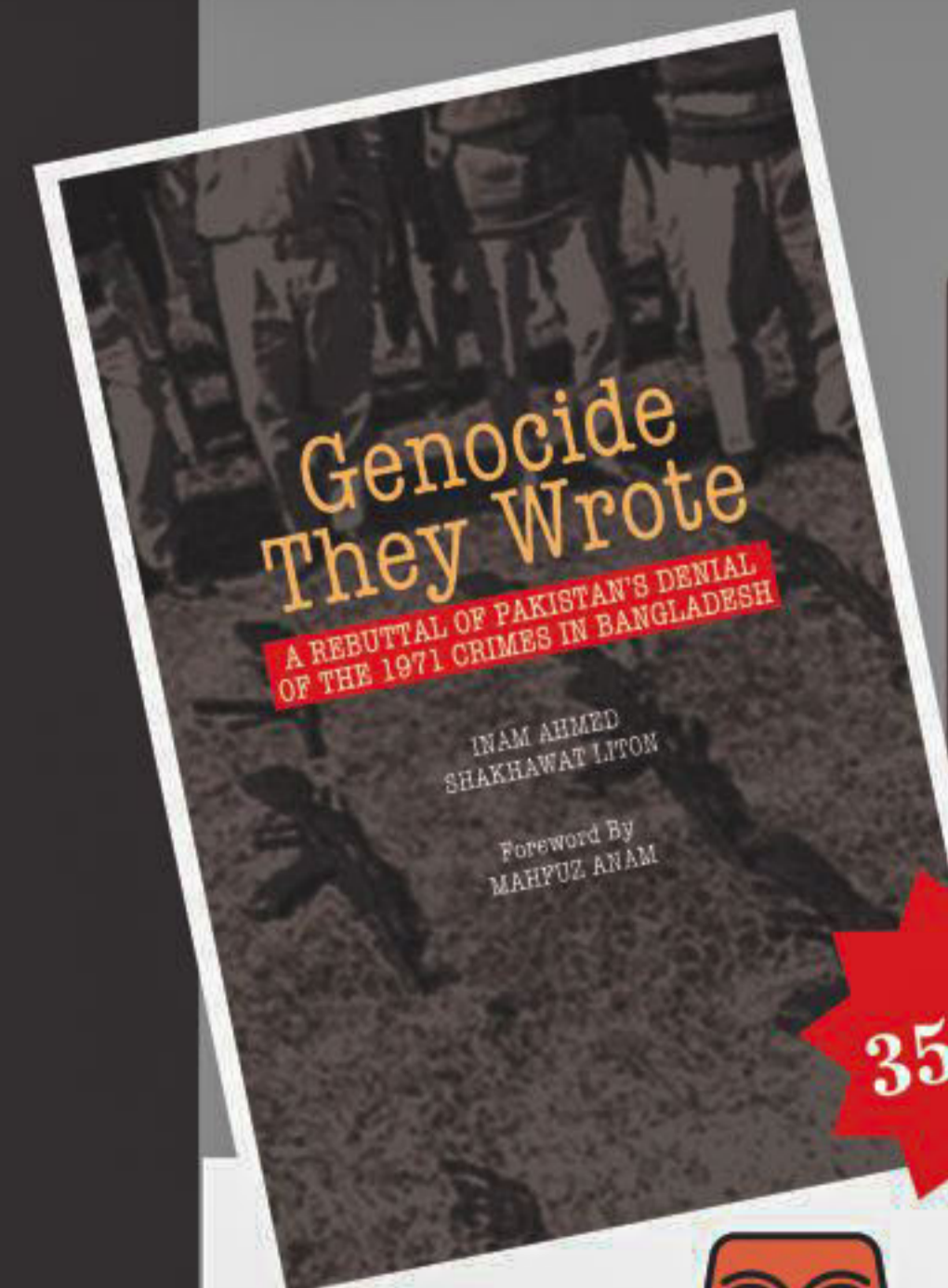
A recent convert to the Ferrante cult having just read this series, I find the author's identity the least interesting question about it. Sprawling, loosely constructed, with too large a cast and too many tangled plot lines, it shouldn't work but it does – magnificently. That's a mystery worth investigating.



THE DOME OF SILENCE

MM HAIKALHASHMI

We all are confined, In the dome of silence, Where the noiselessness spreads Like a white linen; Spotless, starched, wrinkle free. Avoid the deep refreshing breaths, For it may break the silence, The silence of our inner dome, The tranquillity of our last steps.



Genocide They Wrote

INAM AHMED
SHAKHAWAT LITON

Foreword By
MAHFUZ ANAM

350/=



Home Delivery Service

www.rokomari.com

16297

Our books are available at:

Aziz Super Market, Shahbag; Prothoma (9664825), Pathak Shamabesh (01713034440) New Market; Book Web (01712533330) Dhanmondi; Gyankosh (8623251), Baily Road; Sagor Publishers (9358944), Gulshan; Gloria Jean's Coffees (01970008989), Banani; Ananya Crafts (9882542), Old Airport; Bookworm (9120387) Airport; Omni Books (8901808). Chittagong: Batighar (01713304344) and Prothoma (01711649422)