

## Book Review Essay: The Lying Life of Adults

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**Book Review Essay: *The Lying Life of Adults*<sup>1</sup>**Ashmita Chatterjee<sup>2</sup>

Elena Ferrante's Naples is a space to be left behind, a centrifugal vortex which propels characters outwards by instilling in almost all of them a desperate desire to leave. The narrative stratification of the city along clearly demarcated social and economic lines creates a claustrophobic experience, compounded by the fact that the desire to leave is not always supplemented by the material means to escape. The characters most preoccupied with this feat – Lenù, the writer-narrator of the Neapolitan Quartet consisting of Ferrante's four novels *My Brilliant Friend*, *The Story of a New Name*, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, and *The Story of the Lost Child*, and Giovanna, the writer-narrator of *The Lying Life of Adults* – share more than their proclivities and professions. Both use their writing as a clarifying means to wade through the sludge of violence in Ferrante's Naples. At the implied time of writing, both women have moved on and away; yet their narratives begin at the beginning, marking a decisive return to the oppressive bell jar of Neapolitan life. Like the Neapolitan quartet, Ferrante's latest novel is a return to the origin story.

*The Lying Life of Adults* (translated by Ann Goldstein) is bleak, turbulent and forceful. Lined with people who are socially successful and ethically bankrupt, Ferrante's twisted bildungsroman is an incision into another kind of Neapolitan squalor, the obverse of the Naples of *My Brilliant Friend* (2011). It charts the growth and largely isolated journey of Giovanna Trada from ages twelve to sixteen, where her initiation into adulthood is characterised by isolating experiences and humiliating realisations. For Giovanna, the life of adulthood is marked by the recognition that the authoritative and intellectual adults in her life are ordinary, opportunistic liars, steeped in boilerplate marital drama, scrambling in the wake of the unpleasant consequences of their own callousness.

At the very top of Via San Giacomo dei Capri, Giovanna lives within the circumference of a comfortable bourgeois social circle. With her closest friends – sisters Angela and Ida – she shares an education, a cultural milieu and political ideology. The narrative events snowball when Giovanna overhears her father Andrea say she is taking on the face of her aunt Vittoria, who works as a maid. The word 'ugly' is absent, but the association is immediate because Vittoria is a woman in whom "ugliness and spite were combined to perfection" (14). As the word litters the narrative, its reception evolves dramatically. Ugliness becomes the glue between characters separated by social hierarchies, and cuts through the sheen of affected sophistication over Giovanna's nuclear world, drawing her into the vastly different socioeconomic space of the Neapolitan industrial area. Giovanna decides to see her aunt to assess the truth of her father's barb, and this meeting becomes the needle which unthreads the entire tapestry of the bourgeois Neapolitan life she has known.

Ferrante's new novel is a desolate departure from the Neapolitan Quartet: at its heart, the latter is about the inextricable trajectories of its protagonists Lila and Lenù, bound together, each taking turns to decide who amongst the pair is the eponymous brilliant friend. *The Lying Life of Adults* on the other hand is a journey undertaken alone. The novel reverses the trope of the overarching narrative ghost of friendship from the Neapolitan Quartet where the writer and her subject-friend remain conjoined till the very end. The relationships and friendships Giovanna forms are neither substantial nor inextricable from her. Her story is one of singularity, insularity

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<sup>1</sup> Ferrante, E. (2020). *The Lying Life of Adults*. London, U.K.: Europa Editions.

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and the struggle to navigate a world that is unreceptive to her evolving internal life and its unfamiliar processes.

Giovanna's solitary navigation through the tangles created by the adults in her life result in what Ann Goldstein translates as 'estrangement'. The focal note of this novel is this essential estrangement that Giovanna finds growing in her, a vehicle of self-discovery and at the same time, alienation. Her coming-of-age is mired in lies and familial disputes which exacerbate her loneliness and isolation. But estrangement also serves a clarifying purpose. The further Giovanna is removed from the recognisable coordinates of her life, the more clearly she understands her own insignificance within the internal drama of the adults who shape her reality. She becomes attuned to the ways in which power operates and shifts hands, across class and gender. "The power that we require must be so solid and active that we can do without the sanction of men altogether", writes Ferrante in an essay about female authorship for *The New York Times*. The discarding of this sanction is the teleology of Giovanna's narrative growth, mapping her rejection of the male gaze in its various forms. As a child who moulded herself into the shape of her parents' approval, the twelve-year-old Giovanna is anxious for her father's casual adoration because it is evidence of "how indispensable [she] was to him" (12). The anxiety of fungibility catalyses Giovanna's estrangement, disillusionment and ultimate departure, disentangling her from the phantasma of her superficially perfect life. She gradually gains perspective on her place within a broader socio-political matrix and begins to drift away from her desire for her father's affection. She no longer recognizes his scent when he embraces her, and this estrangement thrills her (42). Her father becomes the antithesis of her very being – she sets out to erase his footprint from her mannerisms and carefully crafts herself into an antagonistic model of defiance.

Giovanna has been brought up to be proud to have been born female (25), but one of the most brutal and transformative lessons she learns is how easily male authority makes women one-dimensional and the ways in which men occupy and modulate the lives of women. That men exert a distant control over women is metaphorised by the totemic bracelet, one of the more unsubtle motifs weaved into the narrative. This bracelet, stolen by Vittoria's married lover Enzo from his mother-in-law and given to Vittoria, is actually intended by Vittoria for Giovanna. Instead it travels from Giovanna's father Andrea to his lover Costanza, who returns it to Giovanna, from where it travels to Vittoria and then Giuliana and so on. This bracelet weaves together wives and their husbands' lovers and children into a single a web monitored by male authority that operates from below the surface, leaving Giovanna to ponder upon the power that men have, "even the most small-minded, even over courageous and violent women like [her] aunt" (273-4). When Andrea charms her school principal, the emptiness of his edict about holding men responsible for their actions is jarring. Giovanna feels the force of the futility of her upbringing, and she is "ashamed to have been born female, to be destined to be treated like that by a man even if [she] was well educated, even if [she] occupied an important position" (210). It is not her mother Nella, Enzo's wife Margherita or even Vittoria but Giovanna who sees with blinding clarity what even the best of men, including her father, are capable of, and how their sharpest betrayals are excused as products of a mythical, grand passion. This is the destination *The Lying Life of Adults* concerns itself with – the rusting of the shining armour that these unknighly men wear as their "dazzling authority" is steadily dulled (49). What is apotheosized as transcendental suffering at the altar of men's whims is simply women suffering because men are wanting in integrity. To Giovanna who returns to write her story, these men probably wouldn't matter; an important formative aspect of her becoming an adult is leaving these men behind, physically and emotionally.

One of the ways in which power manifests in the novel is through the rotating and amorphous idea of ugliness. Ferrante's narratives are riddled with archetypal men – the distant and feckless father, the intellectual love interest, the prurient neighbourhood boys. In *The Lying Life of Adults*, renditions of these men contribute in varying degrees to Giovanna believing herself ugly or otherwise. Strung along between men who find her ugly and beautiful, Giovanna is left “hovering between the two superlatives, puzzled.” (58). In a striking divergence from the robust duo of Lila and Lenù whose trajectories are intricately wound together, Giovanna and her self-worth appear to be at the mercy of the whimsical judgement of the men in her life.

Ugliness becomes the dominating leitmotif in Ferrante's version of Naples – the callous violence, the moral and physical squalor that suffocates anyone who fails to leave it behind, parents and acquaintances who become manacles around aspirations of social mobility. The central complication of the narrative springs from the fact of a father finding his daughter ugly, a complexity Ferrante has previously meditated upon. Struck by Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Ferrante claims to have found herself reflected in Emma Bovary's daughter Berthe.<sup>3</sup> The insecurity of an adolescent Giovanna who overhears her father comment on her ugliness is an echo of Ferrante's superimposition of Emma's disgust for her child on to Ferrante's own mother, “All my life since then, I've wondered whether my mother, at least once, with Emma's words precisely—the same terrible words—thought, looking at me, as Emma does with Berthe: C'est une chose étrange comme cette enfant est laide! ('It's strange how ugly this child is!')” (*Frantumaglia* 196). Emma Bovary finds herself echoed in *The Story of a New Name* (2013). “Nothing ever works out for me, look how ugly he is, it upsets me just to look at him, let alone touch him”, Pinuccia complains grimly about her baby.<sup>4</sup> She believes her son's ugliness is an inheritance from the Cerullo family because “that whole family is ugly” (*New Name* 311). Like Pinuccia, who locates the cause of her child's ugliness not in herself but wholly in the Cerullo side of the family, Andrea locates Giovanna's ugliness in Vittoria. He doesn't see himself as a possible agent of the ugliness which manifests in his daughter, even though he is the direct link between Giovanna and Vittoria.

Like the Neapolitan Quartet, *The Lying Life of Adults* too draws a clear thread between beauty and the utilization of talent. The supposed onset of ugliness overlaps a fall in Giovanna's academic performance. The scholarly girl who is adjudged pretty is quickly stripped off of all adulation when she cannot fructify her talent within the blueprint of scholastic merit. When Giovanna overhears her father imply that she is ugly, she clamours to find ways to reverse that judgement. She believes that if she can improve her grades, she “would be pretty again, too, and good” (22). Vittoria bitterly explains, “For [Andrea] if you haven't gone to school you're nobody” (54). Andrea's reliance on institutional education is so extensive that he equates individual attributes of beauty or goodness with the acquirement of education. It deludes him into thinking himself not only exceptional but also ethical, even when carrying on an extramarital relationship with his wife's friend for fifteen years. The pronouncement of ugliness becomes a function of meritocracy, and is reserved not for those who demonstrate it most obviously but for those without scholarly aptitudes or opportunities.

Ugliness surpasses simple physicality; in the novel, it functions as a composite manifestation of emotions or moods. Angela reassures Giovanna that she is not ugly but only appears so when under a certain emotional marquee. In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai (2005) theorizes that emotions like envy, paranoia, disgust, anxiety, irritation, and what she calls ‘stuplimity’ serve

<sup>3</sup> Ferrante, Elena. *Frantumaglia*. Translated by Ann Goldstein, (New York: Europa Editions, 2016) 195.

<sup>4</sup> Ferrante, Elena. *The Story of a New Name*. Translated by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2013) 311.

as moments of critical insight into the larger machinery of social disquiet from which sprouts personal disquiet. They are diagnostic of intricate levels of social injustice and alienation, but since they are also liminal to objective political materiality on the one hand, and subjective emotional terrains on the other, they have traditionally not been considered grandiose enough to be examined or memorialised in literature.

In the *The Lying Life of Adults*, these supposedly minor emotions find no literary or political catharsis, and therefore on a microcosmic level, they burst forth on the faces of the characters who have to confront and manage them. It is no surprise then that Andrea summarizes these complexities as ‘ugly’ – the teacher who is immersed in grander passions and whose actions are attributed to “his grand reasons, his pain and suffering” does not have the vocabulary to compute the smaller indignities of becoming an adolescent, or the sensitivity to understand the effects of Giovanna’s pubescent changes on her mental landscape (162). His lack of receptivity and complete self-absorption nurture Giovanna’s estrangement, which leads her to realise what a “small frail man” he is, and how little integrity the adults in her life are capable of (243).

This realisation, although freeing, is also painful, that the people she admires and emulates are the seeds of the rot. The more estranged Giovanna becomes, the more readily she befriends her ugliness, wielding it to cut through the murky tint over her cultivated perception of the world. After meeting with the principal, Andrea remarks again on how beautiful Giovanna’s hair is, but she is no longer enthralled by that approval. It clangs jarringly, a narrative checkpoint that traces the full depth of Giovanna’s movement away from her origins and the weight of “the judgment of relatives and friends, their values, their wanting [her] to be consistent with what they imagined themselves to be” (259). Giovanna’s abstracted ugliness is a fount of clarity. Her world and its people are demystified, and she accepts that her face has “no harmony, just like Vittoria’s. But the mistake had been to make it a tragedy” (258).

Ferrante’s examination of the structural machinery of class and gender has always been ferocious, and her latest novel is no exception. Her scrutiny does not spare her characters – irrespective of gender, they are complicit in patriarchal power structures, which posits Ferrante as a crucial writer and critic whose feminism disentangles systems of power rather than facile distinctions between genders. *The Lying Life of Adults* enables Giovanna to find the one thing she doesn’t have, in the midst of all conceivable material comfort – a voice. While ugliness is a major preoccupation in the novel, Ferrante uses Giovanna to unfold the ways in which to understand what constitutes ugliness, investing it with power and individualism. Giovanna is the one who comes to understand what the lying adults in her life do not – ugliness is not skin-deep.

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