

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 7 July 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

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Memoirs of a Patchwork Life

Maneeta Kahlon, Ph.D.



Jerry Pinto's *Leela*

A biography is generally assumed to be a complete biographical detail of an individual. The word comes from the Greek - "bios" meaning "life" and "graphein" meaning "write." But the book under consideration here is not a biography in the conventional sense of the term but Jerry Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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Memoirs of a Patchwork Life

Pinto's *Leela* comes across as a refreshing change. The book in the prologue clears this misunderstanding.

At the outset Leela says, "Literary critics have now come to the conclusion that no one can give a full account of their lives any more than anyone can document every moment in the life of a universe." (1) So, we are prepared to read about episodes in Leela's life which have influenced her life rather than the chronological details.

Samuel Johnson said, "Biography has often been allotted to writers who seem very little acquainted with the nature of their task, or very negligent about the performance. They rarely afford any other account than might be collected from public papers, but imagine themselves writing a life when they exhibit a chronological series of actions or preferments; and so little regard the manners or behavior of their heroes that more knowledge may be gained of a man's real character, by a short conversation with one of his servants, than from a formal and studied narrative, begun with his pedigree and ended with his funeral."(Johnson:Rambler 60(Oct13,1750)

Jerry Pinto and Leela in this book believed in the above refrain because *Leela* the book is far more than just a chronology because detailing of facts sometimes is not necessarily the truth and definitely not the complete picture of an individual. An accumulation of stories and anecdotes would reveal the real person. Then this is no biography in the traditional sense. It's a string of anecdotes that speckled her life, so the book is aptly titled *A Patchwork Life*.

The book is elegantly written and has in-depth information. The narrative style helps us to look at her life objectively and what I feel most strongly is that it helps us to be non-judgmental. Had the narrative been chronological, we would be sitting in judgment over how she lived her life despite the opportunities she got but at times the episodes remain just episodes and it becomes difficult to understand the link with her life.

Interesting, Selective Focus

For example, we respect the authors' decision not to talk of her first marriage but the wish remains to know about her children and how they coped with her absence, their growing years, their life, their marriages and what role as a mother did she play in their lives. It comes as a shock when she talks of her daughter's death but not how and when she died. Also the book does not talk about the love or closeness, or for that matter, rivalry between the twins. This aspect of motherhood has been dealt with from Leela's side but not from her daughter's angle, but then it is her biography, not her daughters'.

Two Narrators and Two Points of Views

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The fact that there are two narrators, one Leela Naidu herself and the other Jerry Pinto remind one of Nelly Dean and Lockwood in the gothic love story *Wuthering Heights*. Jerry introduces the book like Lockwood, and then Leela like Nelly Dean, using a stream of consciousness, in the non-linear narrative style. The narrative moves backward and forward, talks of the enigmatic past. Both the books are gripping and intriguing and *Leela* is no less captivating than *Wuthering Heights*. Essentially the book is in Leela's own voice artfully handled by Jerry Pinto.

Between Two Stools, But Not Falling!

Leela was born to a distinguished Indian scientist Dr. Ramaiah Naidu and French journalist Marthe Mange, who was half-Swiss. She was privileged in the sense not that she was born to affluence but because she was lucky to be born to parents who never pressurized her to follow a particular direction. They rather allowed her to follow her heart's desire with only one condition that she see it through completely. Perhaps it was this that allowed her the freedom to be the master of her own destiny and perhaps that is why there wasn't the desire to succeed as in her own way. She thought she was accomplished enough, never ill at ease anywhere: "I'm between two stools but I am not falling. I can understand the Europeans and I am at home in India. I can grow roots anywhere". (107) Her cosmopolitan upbringing did not leave her ill at ease, rather she comfortably straddled both the worlds.

Great Contacts with Persons of Repute and Disrepute

Leela talks of all the famous and enigmatic people of the last century, from Madam Curie to Prince Yousouppoff famously known for killing the infamous Rasputin to Benito Mussoloni who showed a cruel streak even when he worked with her grandfather in his factory and for the people that she personally knew. The list is as diverse as chalk and cheese and yet she had a special rapport with each one of them. In fact, one is constantly surprised at all the great people she knew.

Leela talks of a Mickey Mouse who is devouring chocolates with great delight and we are startled to know that the Mickey Mouse is none other than Gandhiji. Sarojini Naidu is her aunt, Mother Teresa and she prayed together, Imelda Marcos showed Leela her famous shoe collection, Salvador Dalí, the Spanish painter, sketched her, Jean Renoir the famous French film director, Alfred Hitchcock, David Lean, the man who made *Dr Zhivago* and wanted to give the role of Tonya to Leela, Eugene Ionesco, French playwright whose works she translated, Monsieur Cartier who restrung her pearls without a fee, Gunter Grass, the acclaimed writer, Ingrid Bergman, the famous Swedish actress, Ravi Shankar, the sitar player, Satyajit Ray, the most famous movie director, wanted to make a film with her and Marlon Brando, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, the director, who launched her in *Anuradha*, J Krishnamurti, the philosopher guru, B K Iyengar, the yoga guru, J R D Tata, the business baron, was her uncle Jeh, Ramnath Goenka, the press baron, Raj Kapoor, who wanted to sign her up for four films, Dilip Kumar, Balraj Sahni, actors she knew and worked with, Merchant-Ivory, the film producing duo, who made

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Ruth Praver Jhabvala's novel 'The Householder' into a movie with Leela and Shashi Kapoor, Shyam Benegal, who directed her in Trikal, Dom Moraes, Arundhati Roy, etc. An amazing list!

So Close and Intimate – A Great World of Experience

The list is endless. The feeling I got was of Alice in Wonderland, having one adventure upon another. The manner of introducing each great personality is so matter of fact that one gets the feeling that she knew these people intimately. The style of writing is so subtle and humorous, the sarcasm is ironical and not hard hitting. For example, she makes us laugh and I was giggling reading about the deflectable bra that the heroines had to wear along with the layers of pancake which was actually unnecessary given her porcelain peaches and milk complexion. Also she talks about a client who had commissioned her to do an advertisement for a sari, and the client wanted the bodice to be glistening "so I got her a bodice made of metal scales. It glistened." (93)

Her life as an actress is how we would characterize her profession yet she was so unlike the actress of her time, daring in her acting skills and even more so in doing only those films that appealed to her, she is extremely candid about her leading men and how they won't be averse to her beauty. Leela Naidu was crowned Miss India in 1954, and the same year was featured in Vogue magazine's list of the world's ten most beautiful women.

Many and Diverse Facets of Leela

Yet she yearned to be known for other things than her beauty. She makes us see the filmy world realistically devoid of the rose tinted glasses that others wear when it comes to the movie industry. She also made films both as director and as a producer unofficially by following her heart's desire and when the budget wasn't forthcoming or had fallen short she spent money from her own kitty but insisted on having the best people on her team. There are various episodes wherein we see her as an activist, especially her role in the blood donation documentary that she made raising awareness to save lives or making a movie about special children called 'A Certain Childhood' which was screened at the Leipzig International film festival. She had a sensitivity which made the audience empathise with the children depicted in the movie.

Asansol coal mines and the sub human working conditions was the subject of her next documentary. She did her best to get and give equal status to the marginalised and the subaltern, the spot boy who injured himself, the extra girls who would continue to stand as there were no chairs, the Dalit farmers whose land was occupied by the upper class mafia goons, even to the animal used in her film, Rani the elephant.

Magnanimity

Most of all is her magnanimity which comes to the forefront especially when talking of her ex husbands, she doesn't mention the abusive and violent relationship with her first husband, Tikki Oberoi nor does she degrade her second husband and more importantly her friend, Dom Moraes.

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All that she says of him is that he “lived under the misapprehension that anything could be improved by the addition of alcohol in good measure”. (127) That indeed is magnanimous, especially when he left her for a younger woman with whom he was collaborating on a book on Bombay. Rather it is through Dom Moraes’ biography, ‘Never at Home’, that we come to know that Leela was unhappy, or so he presumes she was, because of his incessant drinking and socialising. Leela, however, does not want to talk of her ‘trials and tribulations,’ because they serve no purpose other than becoming ‘another narrative of feminine pain’. Perhaps what her father told her, “You never attack, you are always on the defensive” (108) is the way she lived her life. But despite all the pain and suffering in her life, she was the epitome of all dignity, grace, and elegance.

Language Use

Leela the book uses a language of understatement. For example, she talks of a lunch with Renoir, an amazing menu, an equally exciting guest list she tells us one should kick oneself if one doesn’t make notes and then promptly says, “Excuse me while I kick myself.” In another incident, she says, “An overenthusiastic maid had polished the granite stairs with mansion polish and three dinner guests slipped and fell in one night. One of them was me.” (132) Notice the humor in these lines. “Inside it were three bras with rubber baggies tucked inside them. They were equipped with little nozzles so that they could be blown up to the appropriate size. She wondered who blew them up and who decided the appropriate size. Did the heroine herself blow them up and then came out of her dressing room? She imagined an assistant director telling her: “No, Madamji, in this film, you are a 38B cup, remember?” At which she would say, “Oops!” and go back to the nozzle, to deflate or inflate her measurements. (53)

One Liners

Also her use of one liner is fantastic, like the following lines:

“I don’t think we understood each other, the Hindi film industry and I.”

“Beauty is one of the most subjective abstractions and standards change.”

“Violence to me is a lack of imagination.”

“And somewhere in a mural in Spain, I became a holy mother too.”

“Beauty is just a happy accident of DNA.”

“The poor are an abstraction for whom we can all feel an ambiguous benevolence.”

“To know a city one must walk its streets.”

“I wonder whether it is easier for us to sympathise with anonymous masses than with the actual people we are confronted with in real life.”

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‘Leela The Princess of Kuchh Nahin.’

Intriguing Chapter Titles

The title of the chapters of the book are also intriguing like the very first chapter. It is called, “The Naked Count on the Lawn.” “Three rubber bras and a yellow nose,” describes her experience as a leading lady. “A man possessed” is the chapter about Ismail Merchant and James Ivory. “She has no bad angles” is a tribute to her beauty as these were the very words used by Bert Stern, the great photographer for Leela. “Have you stopped acting” was the question she was repeatedly asked and to which she never did have a suitable rejoinder as she wanted to do roles of quality which interested her and not just film after film. The next chapter is also mysteriously titled “The British on a hunger strike in the land of the Mahatma” and the last chapter so aptly titled ‘Seasons of mist and mellow Fruitfulness’.

No Sensationalism, Here

Most celeb biographies deal with excessive and lurid details about their subjects’ lives to make the book sensational like the very publicized ‘Unlikely Hero’, Om Puri’s biography but this is one book that does not talk of the sensational stuff rather it “makes the reader of different ages, smile, chuckle and laugh, and sometimes feel the sadness of humanity, past and present”(179) Cultural historian Navina Jafa says, “The functionality of a biography is to focus on a person’s achievement. It’s a report card on how a human life created social change.” Leela too in the epilogue talks of telling Jerry that her book would “have funny anecdotes and the sad historic ones I came across” (179).

Let us not get into the conflict whether it is an autobiography or a biography or a memoir or a string of anecdotes, collection of stories, a unique collaboration, or episodes, beautiful reproduction of Leela’s words by Jerry Pinto. It is said the memoir or biography should be enlightening and shed light about the person being written about. One should be able to place events and issues in perspective and in the context they emerged while presenting them in the manner that will be lively and helping to the reader - that is getting the reader involved in the process. Indeed, this book is all that and much more and, like Jerry Pinto, we too can say, “There is a Leela-shaped hole in my life.

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