

A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF ANN- MARGRET: MY STORY

BY

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Abstract

*An autobiography is a compendium of a first-hand account of one's life experiences and achievements in our cosmic space. The essence could be to beam one's existential being from the first-person narrative that subordinates, to a large extent, some conjectured overtures of externally articulated artistry. It is generally perceived as boring owing to its lack of suspense. As permeating from the narrator, it is grossly demurred as subjective in that the narrator tells what s/he wants the audience to know. The need to debunk this notion motivated this book review. The researcher critiqued Ann Margret's, *Ann Margret: My Story*, to achieve this objective. Using the Qualitative Content Analysis Approach, the study reviewed the birth and times of a Swedish lady named after a star. The psychological theory was employed to analyze the work cum capture some socio-cultural values and their relationship with contemporary society. The study delved into a critical aspect of these socio-cultural values and practices that characterize a social group or society and how they positively influenced Ann Margret's stepchildren, to encourage a better appreciation and sustenance of culture. The findings revealed that an autobiography, just like fiction, reflects society. It is capable of refining one's social network and as a result, can make a perfect agent of change. In the end, it recommended that the book should be used in both high schools and tertiary institutions.*

Keywords: Autobiography, Society, Agent, Socio-Cultural Values, Relationship.

Introduction

An autobiography of Ann Margret Olsson Smith was published in 1994 by G.P. Putnam's Sons Publishers, New York. The (327) three hundred and twenty seven- page book with forty one (41) chapters was dedicated to her parents Mr. Gustav & Mrs. Anna Olsson and Roger Smith, her husband.

Synopsis

Ann Margret was born in Stockholm, Sweden. Her mother worked in her mother's (Moona) café in Valsjobyn also in Sweden. At the age of nineteen, Anna met Gustav Olsson in a party. Gustav had just come back from Chicago to Sweden to claim an inheritance his uncle left him. He was eighteen years older than Anna. They became best of friends. On Anna's twentieth birthday, Olsson proposed. Afterwards they married in Hotagen's white church. Later they moved to Stockholm where Olsson found some electrical jobs. Few months later Anna became pregnant. The parents were excited and agreed to name him Bo Lennart if he was a boy, but if the baby was a girl, she'd be called Ann-Margret – after a Swedish Swimming star that Anna admired (21).

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On April 28, 1941 a baby girl was born..... Ann Margret. In 1942 Olsson went back to the US where he worked with the Johnson Electrical Company. Anna objected but according to Swedish tradition, just like in most African countries, the man made the major decisions and the wife was expected to comply. Anna rather closed their apartment in Stockholm and returned with her baby to Valsjobyn. She moved in with Mooma (her mother) and went to work at her bakery (22).

By the age of four, Ann Margret started pestering her mother with questions about her father –

Why didn't he live with us? What'd he sound like? Was he strong? My relatives always told me I resembled Daddy. I had his nose, eyes and smile. But I wanted to hear more. Even better, I wanted to see for myself.

"Someday", mother said".

"Really?" I asked... (23)

Little did she know that her father had been pressing for them to join him in Chicago, but her mother did not want, in fact mother exchanged 'heated' letters with Daddy based on this issue. By the end of World War II, Daddy issued an ultimatum, either mummy came to USA or they'd divorce. Mother, who wouldn't end the marriage, now agreed.

A Trip to the United States of America

On November 29, 1946, Ann Margret and her mother travelled to America on a steamer Gripsholm (ship). It was a twelve day journey, and they entertained other passengers by singing. On arrival Ann Margret was thrilled and proud to be Gustav Olsson's daughter, he looked exactly as he did in his photograph. Her father took them to Radio City Music Hall on the same day they arrived. They watched a movie *The Jolson Story*, a classic biography of Al Jolson, an entertainer and a program titled *All in a Day*, a series of musical vignettes (27). He got a one-bedroom apartment just outside Chicago though they later moved to a two bedroom home on Lake Avenue.

She started school. She was popular because other children were fascinated, they had never met a kid from a foreign country who couldn't speak English. In her words:

I didn't understand a word of the language, and I felt lost still, I didn't protest or gripe.

That just wasn't the way Swedish children behaved. Just as you're taught never to boast, you're taught to grit your teeth and trudge ahead in the cold, knowing warmer days will eventually come. (31)

In her second year in school, her mother registered her for dance lessons at the Marjorie Young School of Dance, showing natural ability from the start and easily mimicking all the steps. Her parents were very supportive and her mother hand made all her costumes. She became a naturalized citizen of United States in 1949. At the age of ten, she went back with her mother to Sweden to visit their relations. She kept a diary of the trip in Sweden and read it her classmates.

In 1952, her father fell from two stories onto the pavement, landing directly on his back (Twenty years later Ann-Margret fell from a stage of similar height). Both were lucky to be alive. Ann Margret's mother worked as a funeral parlour receptionist, as the husband was out of job because of the severe injury. Ann-Margret later went to Grant Community High School

in Fox Lake, Illinois after which she attended North Western University, but she did not graduate.

Recording/Film Career

Mr. Hampton, her sixth-grade teacher, discovered that she could sing. He commended her voice and asked her to join the Glee Club. Not only did the Glee Club help her confidence, it also became the first outlet for her dreams of being an entertainer (37). As a teenager, she continued to perform in clubs and theatres. She had a wonderful singing voice. She recorded many songs like 'Lost Love', 'Heart Break Hotel', 'Bachelor in Paradise' etc.

In 1961 at the age of nineteen, she started featuring as minor character in films. In 1963 she played a major role in which automatically made her a star in *Bye Bye Birdie* at Radio City Music Hall, (16 years after her first visit to the famed theatre). She played the role of an All American teenager from Sweet Apple, Ohio, who kissed Comrade Birdie goodbye as he sings 'One Last Kiss; Birdie was a 'smash across the country'. It sold more than any film in Radio City's thirty year history (just like Michael Jackson's "Thriller" or Nigerian Nollywood Movie "Igodó"). Immediately after her performance in *Bye Bye Birdie*, President John F. Kennedy of the blessed memory issued a request for her to come and sing at his private birthday party in Waldorf-Astoria, at the end of May 1963. She sang "Baby, Won't You Please Come Home", one year after Marilyn Monroe's famous "Happy Birthday". Afterwards, she got another invitation to a private party at an Ambassador's East side brownstone. President Kennedy, Robert Kennedy among others were there. President Kennedy greeted her warmly and asked her to sit beside him. Six months later, November 22 1963, President Kennedy was shot in Dallas.

Marital Life

In 1965 while working on the film, "Once a Thief", she met Roger Smith. He was born in 1932 at Los Angeles. He was an actor and performed on television series 77 Sunset Strip. He was divorced and had three children. He later married Ann-Margret in May 8, 1967 despite her parents disapproval. He later became her manager. He encouraged her all the way and never intruded. He supported her to take a partial nude scene in "Carnal Knowledge" and other films. She performed for American troops in Vietnam (South East Asia) in 1966.

In 1972, while performing at Lake Tahoe, she fell 42 feet from an elevated platform to the stage breaking her left arm, cheekbone and jawbone. By around 1 a.m, Roger flew in a stolen plane from California with a lawyer friend Daniel to Lake Tahoe and back to California for treatment ignoring the protests of the doctors and nurses. She eventually recovered to normal and performed on that same stage, five months later. She starred in musical 'Tommy', 'The Train Robbers', 'Carnal Knowledge', TV specials – 'The Ann Margret Show', TV movies – 'Who Will Love My Children' etc.

Awards

She had won five Golden Globe Awards, been nominated for two Academy Awards, two Grammy Awards, a Screen Actor Guild Award and five Emmy Awards.

Highlights

Unlike Chinua Achebe, who used his literary works to restore the dignity of the black man by showcasing the beauty in his arts, the meaning in his rituals, the logic in his traditional system and the soundness in his healing ways (Nnolim 250), Ann-Margret opened the door to her private world, in a memoir that told her life as it really was. She was relentlessly honest, filling the pages of her book with wit and truth.

She was a catastrophe in the kitchen. According to her, "I've always said, I don't cook and I don't care" (18). Being an only child, she had so much attachment to her parents, this really influenced her love life – 'love me, love my parents attitude'. Her longtime relationship with Elvis Presley was narrated. She honestly and publicly related her battle with an inspiring recovery from alcohol abuse, her loss and reclamation of her self-esteem. Her readers also learnt about her harrowing twenty-two feet fall on stage, twenty years after her father had fallen from a similar height. Doctors feared she would never dance again. She also told the story behind her twenty-nine year love affair with her husband Roger Smith, and his battle with myasthenia gravis, a disease that forced Ann- Margret, who had always been protected by her husband and family, to take control of not only her life but her husband as well. Her relationship with co-stars behind the scenes was wonderfully detailed.

She carefully portrayed Swedish customs and beliefs – like the three goodluck kicks, which she used before going on stage. Humility is also stressed. That the man made the major decisions and the wife was expected to comply, said a lot about Swedish tradition. Swedish children were raised to be, "good, ever-so-polite.... avoid conflict and unpleasantness" (22).

Ann-Margret bristled at bad language and loud words. The girls were raised to be reserved. In fact, no sleeping with a man before marriage. No wonder her parents were very furious when they drove to her house and discovered that Roger had spent a night (even after their engagement). She found it difficult and vehemently refused to play a part of partial nudity in "Carnal Knowledge" until Roger intervened.

She meticulously raised their three children. She cracked down on homework and tried to apply the same rules her parents had used with her. "... children didn't speak unless spoken to, they respected their elders, they studied diligently, they said 'please' and 'thank you' (265-266). Such 'old fashioned Swedish concepts' were difficult for American children to comply with but Ann-Margret insisted believing her mother's advice, 'there is nothing you can't work out with a lot of love and patience' (264). She tactfully frowned at the America's permissiveness to children.

Try teaching two active hungry, mischievous teenage boys table manners. They'd rather plow through a meal like wild animals breaking a fast. I kept at them and kept at them. We reached a point where they didn't want to come to the table anymore fearing their wicked step mother's rule. (275-276)

At times, instead of saying a firm no to children's plans, she offered alternatives. She really succeeded as the children later appreciated her. One wrote the father and asked, "Do you think it would be okay with Ann-Margret if I called her Mom?" (266), the other two came home one day thanking her for teaching them table manners, because they had gone somewhere many times where they needed those impeccable manners. They really made her proud: Tracey is a graphic artist and mother of three, Jordan, a video recordist and a parent while Dallas is a doctor.

Weakness

Like a non-fiction, autobiography can be likened to photograph, "the camera cannot lie" they said. The writer could naturally be restricted, even though that a photograph taken from a particular angle may reveal everything about its object. There is no suspense. The reader can easily predict what would happen next.

Strength

The length of the book made it easier for the writer to chronicle most of the events. The language was simple and straightforward for better comprehension. She used short and pungy sentences. Her descriptive powers and sense of observation were superb.

Some outstanding events that coincided in peculiar ways made the story very unique. Like the fall of father and daughter from almost the same height from their different places of work. Ann-Margret had a surgery that lasted **five** hours. It was very interesting to note that she performed on the same stage **five** months after. She played a major role that automatically made her a star, in Radio City Music Hall, the **very first place** her father took her to (sixteen years back) the **very first day** she came with her mother to United States of America.

What could have been a minus in her personality, elevated her and made her popular in her early years in the school just because she could neither understand nor speak English, the school children had never seen such a girl. Furthermore, her marriage to Roger Smith, a father of three, against her parents wish became a blessing. She inherited those children, raised them properly especially when she could not bear a child of her own. Her relationship with her stepchildren was very instructive. In child-hungry societies, like most African countries, where childlessness is synonymous with failure, where the yardstick for measuring a woman's relevance is motherhood, and where a "successful woman is the one whose home is filled with children (Shodepe quoted in Nweke 205); stepchildren or adopted children can comfortably accord a childless woman with personal satisfaction, sense of success, hope and also "be her insurance against old age insecurities" (Chukukere 192).

Despite the Swedish custom of three good-luck kicks which may sound superstitious, its cultural values and efforts towards ensuring the children's holistic formation from childhood by inculcating sound morality and etiquette in them is commendable and may be adopted by all parents.

Conclusion

The story of a Swedish electrician's daughter, named after a star, (who even though dropped out of the University, later became a star), could be described as a very exciting one. The book entertains and edifies the readers and therefore should be in common usage. *Ann Margret: My Story* can be recommended for high school students, university undergraduates, graduate students, teachers and parents. From the story line, it could be observed that the name given to a child seems to positively or negatively determine his or her destiny. Parents may be compelled to encourage and help their children develop their talents early in life because given enough opportunity every child is a potential achiever. There is strong emphasis on socio-cultural values which promote overall wellbeing of both the individuals and their societies.

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