

Cachalia, Amina. 2013. *When Hope and History Rhyme: An Autobiography*. Johannesburg: Picador Africa. Illustrated pp.i-xiv & 1-434, ISBN 978-1-77010-318-4.

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After having read Ismail Meer's fascinating *A Fortunate Man* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2002) and Ahmad Kathrada's captivating *Memoirs* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004) a while ago, I was extremely curious like everyone else to know about Amina Cachalia's intriguing lifestory as a staunch political activist who stood up against the South African apartheid regime throughout the 1950s and beyond. Aminabehn, if I may call her by this affectionate appellation throughout this review, was one of two politically minded daughters – the other was Zainab (b. 1920) - of Ebrahim Asvat (d. 1941) who was a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi (d.1948) in the 1910s. For much of Aminabehn's eventful life that eventually came to an end on the 31st of January 2013, she demonstrated her loyalty and dedication towards the African National Congress (ANC). So when I purchased and read my copy of Aminabehn's autobiography, I thoroughly enjoyed her insights into and interpretations of various past developments in which she was an important actor. But apart from enthusiastically reading it and absorbing its contents, I also silently questioned why she conveniently missed or rather skipped some significant ones that were, for me, quite crucial.

I intend to comment on these gaps and raise a few questions as I go through selected parts of this attention-grabbing autobiography. Even though critical comments are made and vital questions are raised, I am aware that these might not receive any responses or answers since Aminabehn is sadly not around to answer them. Nonetheless, allow me to comment on some of the contents of Aminabehn's chronologically presented memoirs; an autobiography in which she depicts her hectic, fruitful and wonderful life. Aminabehn neatly divided the autobiography into seven overlapping parts and one that contains a short preface and a brief epilogue. And she further divided each part into shorter (sub-titled but unnumbered) chapters that narrated sequentially issues and events that occurred over the seven decades; each portion covered a specific decade and at the end of each Aminabehn inserted a set of appropriately chosen photographs and correspondence that reflect upon the decade that had passed. Aminabehn approached Nadine Gordimer, her Nobel Laureate friend who gladly wrote a three page foreword in which she glowingly stated that, "Of all Amina Cachalia's distinctions and achievements, the greatest is her identity, lifelong, active in past and present, as a freedom fighter, now needed as much, believe me, in the aftermath of freedom as in the struggle" (see p.xi and the back-cover of the publication). Before going any further, I wonder whether the Nobel Laureate had Aminabehn (or perhaps her sister Zainab) in mind when she wrote her 1960 short story 'A Chip of Ruby Glass' in which the fictionalized character Zanip Bhamjee features prominently as an activist (see Nadine Gordimer's *Six Feet of Country* [New York: Viking Penguin, 1986] and Pearl MacHaney & Renee Schatteman's 'Women's Literature from South Africa and the American South' in *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*. 5(4):1-16, 2004]).

For the record, Aminabehn, like many other popular personalities who had written their memoirs, solicited the assistance of her son Ghaleb Cachalia (b. 1956) and Hedwig Barry (with the assistance of Rory Bester) to edit and piece together this autobiographical text. Barry acknowledged when he was tasked to help in this project he immediately observed that she was an 'archivist' who had a 'deep memory for things' (p.419). Indeed there is abundant evidence throughout this text that illustrates to what extent she possessed a 'deep memory' and to what degree she succeeded to clearly recall and narrate the events that had taken place. An interesting aspect of this memoir is that it weaved into it a variety of comments from individuals, among them, her grand-children who basically confirmed some of the events that she narrated. Besides telling her own story, Aminabehn inserted the (partial) memories of two individuals that played a pivotal role in her beautiful life: the first was her loving companion and husband, Yusuf (d. 1995) who was the son of an extremely close friend of Mahatma Gandhi and someone who firmly subscribed to Gandhi's philosophy of satyagraha (i.e. non-violence); and the second was Nelson Mandela (b. 1918), one of the leading young charismatic stalwarts of the ANC with whom Amina (and Yusuf) had developed since the late 1940s an exceptionally close relationship. In Tom Lodge's publication titled *Mandela: A Critical Life* (Oxford: OUP, 2006: 49) mention was made of the fact that Aminabehn, who did not state this in her memoirs, met Madiba during 1949. Be that as it may, Aminabehn struck an affable association with Madiba since then and this relationship developed into what may be described as a fairly platonic rather than a romantic one.

Aminabehn captured her story in a fairly flowing and light-hearted style; a style that revealed that she was not of the intellectual kind in spite of the fact that she was in the vanguard of public protest marches and was involved in the formation of organizations such as the Women's Progressive Union (see p.56) that subsequently became an affiliate of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW est. 1954 – see pp. 94-95). From this reviewer's vantage point it appears that Aminabehn was not intellectually precocious as Zainnunisa 'Cissy' Gool (d. 1962) and Fatima Meer (d. 2010). In fact, Aminabehn did not say a word about Cissy Gool who had been a key figure in the formation of the Non-European United Front (est. 1938); an organization that she briefly mentioned since her father was one of its ardent supporters (p.39). And nor did Aminabehn have much to say about Fatima Meer who like her had been banned on numerous occasions and who, along with her husband, namely Ismail Meer (d. 2000), was close to Madiba.

Interestingly, Ismail Meer (2002: 228-229) acknowledged in his autobiography that during the latter half of 1976 when Fatima Meer was detained at the Fort in Johannesburg he was forced to each week travel from Durban to Johannesburg where he usually stayed for two days with the Cachalias; somehow Aminabehn's memory seemed to have failed her to record this in her autobiography. What she appears to have intentionally included in her memoirs was the questionable account about Fatima Meer's apparent keenness and odd desire to support three young (Indian) Congressmen to join the 1983 Apartheid Tri-Cameral regime with the idea of fighting the system from within! According Aminabehn, Yusuf – her husband and others - confronted Fatima Meer on this matter but his efforts came to naught; and the issue was subsequently raised with Dr. Yusuf Dadoo (d. 1985) as well as with Fatima Meer's husband, Ismail Meer who, as a matter of information, did not record this at all in his memoirs. Aminabehn intimated that Fatima Meer was eventually dissuaded from pursuing this path by Dadoo. It is

rather unfortunate that she opted to insert this absurd story in her thin chapter on 'Botha's Tricameral Parliament' (pp. 275-277) of which she did not say anything substantial. Though it is unlikely that this mysterious anecdote will ever go away or be satisfactorily resolved by either the Cachalias or the Meers, the onus to find about its accuracy and truth lay squarely in the hands of the enthusiastic social historians who are thoroughly acquainted with the historical developments at that time.

Broadly speaking, Aminabehn may be described as a devoted freedom fighter and an excellent organizer; this may be attributed to the fact that she was not only an extremely sociable person whose kitchen was always open to everyone who wanted to eat. Apart from being a down-to-earth lady who mixed and consorted with all and sundry, she was also a no-nonsense person; someone who expressed her feelings openly and forthrightly. She was among the few (Indian) woman that succeeded to freely exercise her mind in a predominantly patriarchal Muslim (and non-Muslim) society; a society in which women encountered many difficulties in making decisions for themselves and on behalf of others. She thus challenged them in the socio-political arena. Perhaps it is also because of her free social spirit that she managed to communicate her feelings about individuals and personalities that she loved or disliked publicly. When Aminabehn, for example, tied the knot with Yusuf whom she loved dearly all her life and to whom she dedicated her memoirs, she briefly mentioned how Yusuf's brother, Molvi Ismail Mohamed Cachalia (d.2003) who was a leading member of the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC), negatively reacted when he came to know of the romantic relationship that developed between herself and Yusuf (pp.71-72, p.101 & p.182); and soon thereafter – a week after the Congress of the People adopted the Freedom Charter (pp.96-99) – when Aminabehn and Yusuf got married on the 2nd of July 1955 Molvi Cachalia chose not talk to them for years. Besides recording Molvi Cachalia's bad attitude towards their marriage, one wonders why Aminabehn decided in passing to add that Molvi Cachalia mistreated his nieces and mother (p.182).

The other prominent person who Aminabehn quietly criticized was Ahmad Kathrada (b. 1929); another close companion of Madiba on and off Robben Island where they were both incarcerated for years. Since Ahmad Kathrada like Molvi did not approve of her marriage to Yusuf, she averred that Kathy – as he was often referred to - kept at a distance from them. She seemed to have continued harbouring suspicious feelings towards Kathy for having had a hand in them (i.e. the Cachalia couple) for not having been invited to a major Lenasia pre-election meeting during the post-apartheid period (see p. 360-361). Amusingly, these short episodes in her life is absent from Kathy's enthralling earlier mentioned memoirs; it could be that Kathy had too many other tales to tell that it escaped his mind but it was, of course, deeply etched in Aminabehn's memory and it is for this reason that these tit-bits found their way into her book. Whilst one noticed that Kathy did not feature much in this text, other names appeared on more than one occasion in her book. Even though she avoided going into any detail about her association with the women in the South African Communist Party (SACP) and those in the ANC's Women's League, she mentioned them in an endearing and warm way since these women shared their trials and tribulations along with her. She, for example, did so about Helen Joseph (d. 1992) and Albertina Sisulu (d. 2011); two individuals with whom she had a good working relationship in FEDSAW and other related organizations. She demonstrated her love towards them because of their integrity and resilience against apartheid.

Unfortunately Winnie Mandela (b. 1936) was one of the well-known ANC women of whom Aminabehn said very little about in her text. Aminabehn, I think, conveniently left out her comments that were recorded by Anthony Sampson in his *Mandela: The Authorised Biography* (London: HarperCollins, 1999) about Madiba's promising relationship in 1958 with Winnie who was much younger than him. Sampson (1999: 112) recorded that when Aminabehn heard about the romantic rapport that Madiba struck with Winnie she ironically intimated that Winnie was indeed 'innocent and naïve'. Momentarily, when Aminabehn blurted out these unwanted remarks did she forgot that she was herself a flirtatious young lady when she courted Yusuf, who had been many years her senior and who was still 'married' to Bettie du Toit, the trade unionist (d. 2002). She, however, devoted a few paragraphs about Winnie during the time of the latter's indirect involvement with the tragic 'Stompie' case; an incident that caused Madiba much hurt and that ultimately led Madiba to break his marriage ties with Winnie on the 17th of April 1992 (Lodge 2006: 185; Sampson 1999: 447); this, of course, happened just about two years before Madiba was to be installed as the first democratically elected president of post-apartheid South Africa. Despite these happenings, Aminabehn publicised that when she was celebrating along with many others Madiba's 85th birthday in 2003 she looked out for Winnie and expressed that even though their paths no longer crossed that she somehow still felt a 'soft spot' for her since she was a pillar of strength during the years of Madiba's incarceration (p.397).

As Aminabehn turned towards her autobiography's closing pages in which she narrated about how she celebrated her 70th birthday in 2000 and what transpired at Madiba's 90th in 2008, she silently lamented the fact that she and Madiba were gradually losing touch with one another; this, she noted, was as a result of family factors and his deteriorating health. Before Aminabehn brought her enlightening, readable autobiography to a close with a short epilogue in which she stated that she was more than blessed to have had individuals such as Yusuf and Madiba in her well lived life (p.415), she shared her thoughts about the 'last contact' (pp.407-413) that she had with Madiba. Anyone who has picked up and read Aminabehn's engrossing, vivid autobiography would concur that Aminabehn deserved - despite her own imperfections and frailties - to be praised for her unwavering participation in the anti-apartheid struggle (e.g. the 1952 Defiance Campaign) and for her preparedness to unselfishly assist others (e.g. the well executed 1963 prison escape of Harold Wolpe [d.1996], Mosie Molla [b. 1934] and others) without thinking twice about how it would (negatively) affect her personally.

It is indeed because of Aminabehn's determined acts of bravery and feistiness against the apartheid system that she was conferred in 2004 an Honorary Doctorate in Law by the University of Witwatersrand for her contribution towards social justice and human rights; and in the same year Aminabehn received the prestigious 'Order of Luthuli' in Bronze award for her struggle in establishing a non-racial, democratic South Africa. Even though one of South Africa's iconic spirited figures have passed on, her autobiography – overlooking some of its anticipated shortcomings - is indeed a testament to how she lived her life. Perhaps it is worth concluding this review by recalling why she wrote it; she said that, "One day I realised it was time to go beyond dwelling on the past, which I did from time to time in a few stolen moments, and jotting down notes here and there, and get down to serious business. I wanted my grandchildren and their children to know their roots, and I wanted to

travel back as far as I could remember in order to record my extraordinary journey.” And this was indeed an extraordinary (biographical) journey ‘*When Hope and History Rhyme*’!

Works Cited

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