

An absorbing autobiography of a playwright

BY RAVINDRA WIJewardhane

drenched herself in tears for days.”
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Title - Sailed I on Life like a Lark in the Sky

Author - Namel Weeramuni

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‘Sailed I on Life like a Lark in the Sky’ is autobiography of veteran artist Namel Weeramuni. Namel Weeramuni has a remarkable life behind him as an actor, playwright, writer, journalist, respected lawyer and senior counsel, and more importantly, he is an eyewitness to socio-political and theatrical evolution during the last century in the country. So this book is of high value not only as an autobiography of the author, but also as a resource book which recorded recent history, especially in the artistic field of the country.

Big book

The book has 556 pages with 99 chapters except foreword by former Deputy Director General United Nations Nandasiri Jasentuliyana, preface by veteran writer Aditha Dissanayake, and author’s note. Though the book is big, it is very readable and absorbing. As the back cover of the book suggests, “You cannot help laughing, crying, sympathising and marveling at the successes, torments, victories recorded here.” The reason behind this is that he opens up his heart to the reader willingly and heartily. He has no intention of hiding the facts, though they are revealing of his dark side too. Because of this sincerity, the book is no more boring, on the contrary it asks for more pages to read.

Poignant details

The main characteristic of the chapters is that they are very moving and absorbing. For instance, the book starts with a very poignant detail about losing the sister of the author. There, he describes the sister’s last moments in this world:

“Why do you pretend to be asleep, after hitting your brother, saying you are not angry with any of us?” Amma gently shook my sister. She did not open her eyes. Nor did she move. Amma touched her forehead.

“Oh, my God! What has happened to you, my dear child?” Amma screamed.

“Placing me on one side of the bed she grabbed my sister’s shoulders with fear in her eyes. Her ceaseless pleas asking the little girl to wake up went unheeded. My sister bid farewell to life and to all of us that day. Amma

Namel, Namel, Namel

Then the author describes how his name was come about. As she mentions, the lucky letters for the name given by the fortune-teller were ‘K’, ‘Na’ or ‘Naa’. With the two letters of ‘Na’ and ‘Naa’ his father named him Namel:

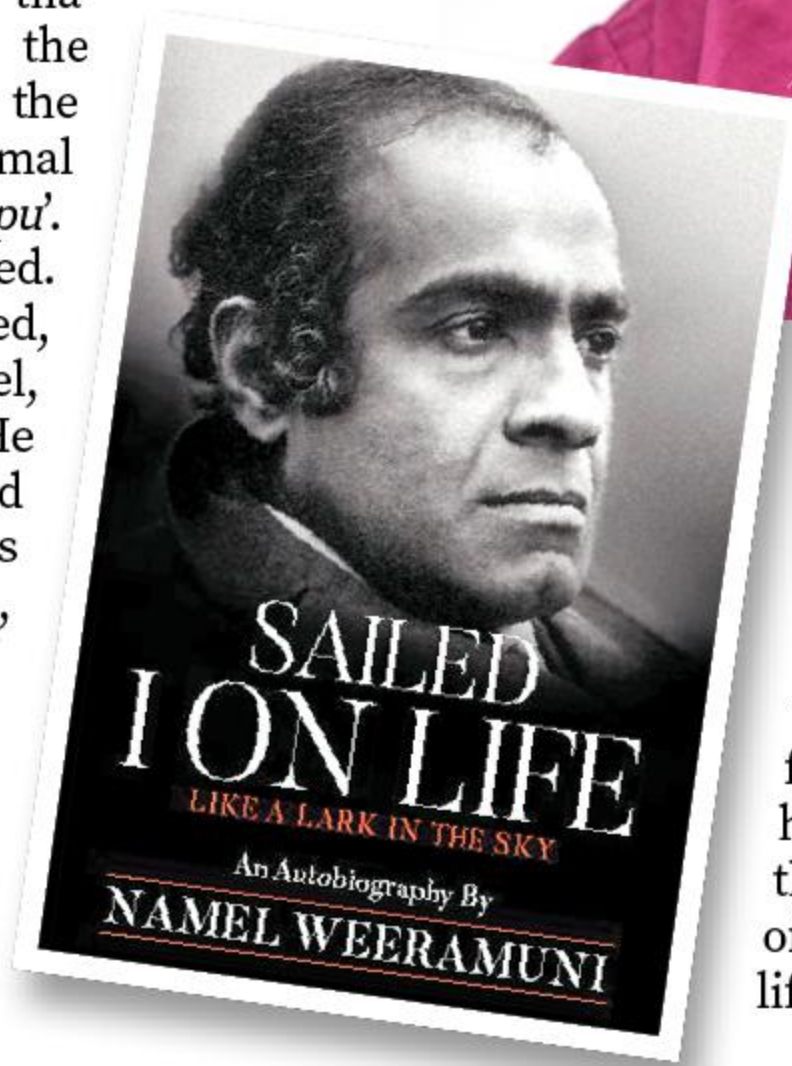
“It seems that tha-tha had repeated the two letters with the words, ‘Namel’, ‘Namel Mala’, ‘Namel Appu’. Then he smiled. Appu, he repeated, mulled over, Namel, Namel, Namel. He muttered the word a number of times and suddenly said, “Call him Namel.”
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Though Namel Weeramuni now lives in a wealthy suburb of Colombo, during his childhood it was not so. After his father’s untimely death, at the time he was just 4 years old, his mother, sister and he had to live in poverty. Father had a cinnamon boutique at Balapitiya, but it was closed down after father’s death. Then they lived at Ahungalle, and father’s parental house was at Kosgoda. As the only son in the family, he grew up with mother’s great love. But that was also soon ended. His mother died when he was sixteen or seventeen years old.

In the 19th chapter ‘Saddest Spell in Life’ he describes the mother’s tragic death. It was caused by a mad dog’s biting. To recover from it, she required a number of injections for 14 days, but it was in vain: “She ultimately had to give way to the wishes of the damsel of death.”

She recalls the lasts breaths of his mother as follows:

“The day she breathed her last, is a day of memorable recollections that come alive constantly as if it happened a few minutes ago. I will never forget the numerous expressions she conveyed through her glistening eyes with the drizzle of tears as if she was asking, ‘what is the destiny that awaits you and your sister when I am no more?’ The look in her eyes held a lot of unfathomable feelings that I never could resolve. I felt totally lost. Overwhelmed by grief, I ran to the back of the house and cried. I felt I had lost my whole life.” (Page 63)



Through these poignant details he keeps the reader continuously with him, and touches the reader profoundly. In the end, he could enlighten the reader with a lot of insights into the life.

Defects

One can learn many things about the author’s life through this autobiography, but one of the main defects of it is that the most of the facts he presents are only valuable for him. For instance, he poignantly describes how he was expelled from Galvehera primary school, his first village school at Ahungalla. Then he relates the life with village friends and neighbours; his new schools at Peradeniya and Ratnapura; seeing Kandy perahera; life in boarding houses; his marriage; Slushna’s birthday party; wonderful London; arrival in Canada; in Washington, in New York; in London and odd jobs; working at a petrol station; working in different firms; travels in Europe; meeting Nandi in Vienna.

These chapters are very absorbing but no importance in the country wise - as an icon of one era readers expect facts far from his personal life. However, there are some records where he describes things in a wider angle. Seeing a play for the first time, getting into reading, entering the University of Peradeniya, meeting Dr. Sarachchandra and fruits of Nirmana Panthiya or creative class, theatrical experiences, life and times of semi-government teacher, Law college days, embryo of Virupi Ruupa and Ape Kattiya, Aadunika Nalu Nili Sangamaya (Amateur Actors’ Union),

working with Sugathapala De Silva, entering the cinema, visit to the Law society are amongst them.

Freelance writing

Namel Weeramuni’s journalistic experiences are also recorded in the autobiography. Despite the fact that they are sporadically included in as minor details, they are of high value:

“I looked for steady employment in Colombo of the kind that wanted without disrupting my Law College attendance. I approached Lake House, *Lankadeepa* and *Dawasa* Group of newspapers and met the editors of the papers. By this time, I had earned somewhat of a name in the field of writing since I had already written articles to various newspapers and journals on numerous occasions....

“At Lake House, the Editor of ‘*Silumina*’, Subasinghe and its Features Editor Benedict Dodampegama were very supportive and encouraged me to write feature articles for their paper. For *Silumina* I wrote only a few articles including some film and theatre reviews, for which I received payments. I was also paid for what I wrote for *Sarasaviya* a weekly during the Editorship of Wimalaweera Wettasinghe. It ran as a column purely on the suggestion of its Editor, which I very much enjoyed doing. The other was *Dinamina* for which I wrote regularly for more than five years. I was the regular reviewer of theatrical performances for *Dinamina*.

“Some months four to six theatre reviews I wrote appeared in *Dinamina*.” (Page 150)

In this way, ‘Sailed I on Life like a Lark in the Sky’ is an autobiography full of little anecdotes about life, historical records, literary occasions as well as full of emotions that absorb the reader throughout the whole 556 pages in the book.