



Irrawaddy Tango

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IRRAWADDY TANGO is a worthwhile successor to Wendy Law-Yone's acclaimed first novel THE COFFIN TREE (1983) about growing up in Burma (present-day Myanmar) and migrating to the United States. Although IRRAWADDY TANGO is set mainly in fictitious "Daya," the country is recognizably Myanmar, replete with repressive military dictatorship and rebel guerrillas.

The novel details the picaresque career of its protagonist-narrator, Irrawaddy Tango, who seems to develop through four phases of popular archetypes of female identity: first, an Evita-like phase during which the small-town girl Tango becomes a dance champion and a dictator's wife; second, a Patty Hearst phase during which First Lady Tango, now a wealthy socialite, is kidnapped by guerrillas and brainwashed into bonding with, bedding with, and speaking for her abductors; third, a joyless-luckless Asian American woman phase (à la Amy Tan) where she marries her American rescuer and emigrates to America only to discover anomie and alienation; and fourth, a spider woman phase in which Tango returns to Daya, empowers herself sexually, mates with the dictator (her former husband), and destroys him.

Through these phases, Tango's character develops, like the dance itself, with exhilarating dips and lifts of fortune, dizzying reversals of plot, and in movements charged with sinister power and unassuaged sensuality. IRRAWADDY TANGO is a tale told with brilliant flashes of detail, psychological penetration, and erotic candor. It is not flawless, however, having its longueurs of plot and a self-centered protagonist with whom it is difficult to empathize. Nevertheless, it does perform the signal service of shedding light and focusing attention upon the political plight of an often ignored area of darkness in the heart of Southeast Asia.

Sources for Further Study

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