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Kalki Koechlin on the Stories We Inherit

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We all carry stories that aren't entirely ours. Some come from our families, others from the people we meet along the way. And sometimes, without really noticing it, we begin to see parts of ourselves in someone else's life, and the lives they touch.

That is something Kalki Koechlin explores in Her Song, a film that is as much about the stories we tell as it is about the people who inspire them.
Directed by John M. Keller and executive produced by James Ivory, Her Song follows Olivia, a writer who travels to a small village in southern France, a place connected to her grandmother's experiences during the Second World War. What begins as an opportunity to write gradually becomes something more personal when she meets Madeline, a woman whose independence and unconventional way of living capture her imagination.

It is an interesting relationship, particularly because Olivia is not simply observing Madeline. She begins borrowing from her experiences, bringing elements of another woman's life into her own creative work. But does finding inspiration in someone else eventually mean taking something that was never yours to begin with?
For Koechlin, it isn't quite so straightforward.
“I think Olivia has no bad intentions, it's just something that happens,” she explains. “Her intentions are not to, sort of, plagiarise or do something wrong.”

It is an important distinction. Olivia isn't deliberately setting out to take ownership of Madeline's experiences. Rather, she becomes fascinated by someone who seems to possess qualities she herself might be missing. Madeline can forage in the forest, cook with unfamiliar plants, rewire electricity and fix a car. She is practical, resourceful and seemingly comfortable in a world that Olivia is still trying to understand.
“I think she admires and is completely in awe of Madeleine as a person who can do so many things,” Koechlin says. “Definitely a desire is there, I think, to... or at least an admiration for that.”

Perhaps this is what makes their relationship particularly interesting. Sometimes, the people who inspire us are not necessarily those we understand best. They are the ones who show us a way of living we hadn't considered for ourselves.
But Her Song isn't only concerned with the stories we discover in other people. It also looks at the ones we

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inherit, even when we weren't there to experience them.

Olivia's connection to the village is rooted in her grandmother's wartime history. It is a past she cannot remember personally, yet one that inevitably shapes her relationship with the place. When asked whether emotions and unresolved experiences can pass from one generation to the next, Koechlin is clear about her own beliefs.

“I personally definitely believe in generational trauma,” Koechlin says. “I definitely believe that we carry certain anxieties and certain unknown traits which are genetically transmitted to us from the horrors or the traumas that our grandparents or parents have gone through.”

It is a subject that also has a personal connection for the actress. When the screenplay was sent to her, she was already researching her own grandmother's experiences during the Second World War.
“So it was a really strange coincidence,” she recalls.
She goes on to describe how, when we become particularly interested in something, it can almost feel as though we begin attracting similar experiences into our lives. “It feels like you're attracting the thing that you're really focused on.”

There is something rather fitting about that observation coming from someone playing a writer. Olivia is constantly trying to make sense of the world through stories, while Koechlin herself recognises how easily real life can begin to resemble something written.
Of course, she also understands that we aren't always discovering patterns. Sometimes we're creating them.
“I think we always impose the meaning to make it make sense,” she says. “The brain always picks up a pattern and then tries to make sense of it.”

It is a simple observation, but one that says quite a lot about the way we experience our own lives. We like things to connect. We look for reasons, coincidences and explanations, even when there might not be any particular meaning behind them.
For Olivia, that process is also complicated by language. Throughout the film, she moves between French and American English, and the difference becomes particularly noticeable when her husband arrives. Koechlin sees this as an important part of understanding her character.

“When she's with her husband, when her husband arrives, you kind of see a transformation in Olivia,” she explains. “She's much more open, and she's much more, like, with it, whereas when she's speaking in French, she's struggling to kind of get through to people, and she's still trying to find the words.”
Anyone who has ever tried to express something complicated in a language they are less comfortable with might recognise the feeling. You know what you want to say, but somehow the words don't quite arrive. It

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can change the way you behave, the way you connect with people and even the amount of yourself you're willing to reveal.

“When you feel comfortable in a language, then you're kind of able to express a lot more,” Koechlin says. “And for Olivia, of course, English would be that language.”
It is one of the more subtle aspects of her performance, but it gives Olivia an additional dimension. She is not quite the same person in every conversation, and perhaps none of us really are.
There is also something refreshing about seeing a woman whose ambitions and intellectual interests aren't simply there to support someone else's story. Olivia is a writer, and her creative life matters to her. Asked whether cinema has become better at portraying women as individuals with their own ideas and ambitions, Koechlin gives an answer that is short but rather telling.

“Oh, I really hope so,” she says. “It's nice to see a woman who has some opinions and thoughts on things.”
And rightly so. Women don't always need to be presented through their relationships, nor do their ambitions need to be explained away by the people around them. Sometimes they can simply be complicated, creative and occasionally rather self-absorbed individuals. Olivia is allowed to be all of these things.
But perhaps the most enjoyable part of speaking with Koechlin is hearing her talk about the film's pace. There is no attempt to pretend that every audience needs a dramatic revelation every few minutes. In fact, she hopes that Her Songoffers something of a break from that expectation.

“I hope we still have the attention span for that,” she says, when asked whether contemporary cinema still has room for character-driven storytelling.
She believes that the film's positive reception is encouraging, particularly at a time when everything seems to move so quickly.
“Everything is so fast nowadays that sometimes it's a relief to see something where you don't immediately have an enemy and a hero, and you don't immediately have, like, a plot to grip yourself onto, and you just experience something.”

It is probably one of her most revealing comments about the film. There is a difference between watching something happen and actually allowing yourself to experience it. Not every story needs to be built around a conflict that demands an immediate resolution. Sometimes the atmosphere, the people and the small things happening between them are enough.
And in Her Song, the village itself becomes a large part of that experience.
Filming in Antichan-de-Frontignes meant spending time somewhere that was considerably removed from the usual pace of production life. Koechlin remembers living in a house at the end of the village and walking to work each morning.

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“I used to walk to my work, so I lived in a house at the end of the village, and it would be a ten-minute walk,” she recalls. “I would see no one, no cars, nothing. I would cross a few fields, and then I would reach my work, which was just another beautiful view.”
She describes it as idyllic, and it is easy to understand why the experience stayed with her. The surroundings were not simply somewhere to film. They became part of the everyday experience of making the film.
“It was really quite spectacular, and yeah, a real treat to work there.”

Perhaps that is what Her Song ultimately does rather well. It doesn't rush to tell us what every encounter means or what we should take away from every experience. It allows its characters to be curious about one another, to make mistakes and to discover things they might not have been looking for in the first place.
And speaking with Koechlin, one gets the sense that she appreciates precisely that kind of storytelling. She is interested in the things that stay with us, whether they come from a language we are still learning, a place we have never visited before or a family history we are only beginning to understand.
After all, not every story begins with us. And not every story we encounter is ours to tell.

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