

“Being God’s Wife” is No Easy Matter

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ABSTRACT

This article studies Nandini Sahu’s short narrative fiction entitled, “Being God’s Wife,” which comes at the end of her story collection, *Shedding the Metaphors* (2023). This piece of selective biography makes the central figure in the story, Baba, a kind of prism through which he, his times, and his society are viewed. The article studies this story as a feminist document that contains Indianness. What is under focus here is a textual analysis of “Being God’s Wife.” What emerges through the textual analysis is that Sahu makes frequent use of the literary device called, “flashback.” This gives her several advantages in the narration. The article shows the aptness of the title, “Being God’s Wife,” in which the wife is given barely three paragraphs. It is not just about the wife, but it is in fact about the godlike figure of Baba, her husband. This article analyzes the story with the help of theories of narrative fiction and the short story, given to us by scholars such as Claire Tomalin, Alice Hoffman, and James Stevens. The story reveals that when you love someone as much as the author loved her father, you expect them to be with you always, unflinchingly. And, if that someone fails to be with you in your time of need, you begin to hate him for that time. The author seems to be somewhat like Sylvia Plath in her relationship with her father. She even mentions Plath’s poem, “Daddy,” in which the author is similar to the American poet and novelist.

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Literature is born out of personal emotions, or as William Wordsworth believed, out of a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. Nandini Sahu’s short stories in *Shedding the Metaphors* live up to this basic trait of literature. In this monograph, an attempt is made to study “Being God’s Wife,” the last piece in the collection. The chief grounds on which this autobiographical narrative is examined are: (a) The study of Baba, the central character, (b) The author’s feminist concerns, (c) the Indianness of the text under focus, (d) The selective autobiography in this story, and (e) a textual analysis of the piece. A special place will be given to “flashbacks” as the story is structured around this literary technique.

The title of the story, or memoir, “Being God’s Wife,” makes the reader wonder about its aptness until, in the very last paragraphs, one learns about why it is the title. At the centre of the story is the author’s father, Baba. His character has been handled in a way that we see him as more than human, (unique, unworldly, detached, Gandhian, devoted, honest, and loving in an unusual way); but the significant thing is that he is human too. One can see that a character that is all good and godly will not make an interesting person; it is his human side, for instance, his weakness for a particular daughter (just because of her love for English and writing) that makes him likeable. Nandini Sahu achieves this remarkable feat by combining his extraordinariness with some very down-to-earth qualities. Baba’s wife is not godly and yet she

is able to adjust beautifully with him and that is what makes her so exceptional. This literary piece is all about love on the one hand and adjustment on the other; the factors behind a successful relationship.

The fact that it is purely biographical, a memoir, makes this text a different kind of story. It is not literary fiction because of the way it makes use of language. Its language is as unadorned as it possibly can be. It is literary fiction because it is character-centric. The reader has little or no plot to worry about. It is the family, particularly, the father, that hooks the reader. This character draws our attention because of his unique individuality, and his unusualness. He has his flaws and therefore is quite true to life. With a number of positive qualities, he has some negative too. For instance, he is described as edgy, which means that he is a nervous kind of person. Besides, he was also sentimental. This is the quality of the man that the author tends to romanticize. He was with “zero understanding of adulterations and ways of the world”. (252) Despite the seeming flatness in his character there is a hidden rotundity. He is interested in poetry and literature, is honest to the highest degree, is strict, is able to forgive people for the wrongs done to his family, and the list goes on. We are shown so many aspects of the man.

What a unique man Baba was to have induced so much love in a wife and six daughters. He must be universally liked and recognized because a colony (Krushna Nagar) is named after him. (238) He spent time thinking of the future of his daughters rather than himself and went to great lengths to see them develop correctly.

Alice Hoffman informs us that every character in a dream is born of the dreamer’s consciousness and, similarly, every character in fiction arises out of the author’s consciousness. What Hoffman has to say about a character, their trauma, and about how a character is close to the author who creates them, will give us an insight into both the author of this story and the character of Baba:

In concentrating on what’s inside a character at the deepest level, there’s often a story within the story about the character – one that the reader may never know. A character’s interior trauma or past experience is the core around which everything else is built. By writing so closely to a character’s spirit, the drafting process needs to be free enough to allow the writer to enter into another person’s consciousness. In a way, this is the greatest accomplishment for a writer in building character. When it’s possible to “think inside someone else’s head,” we know that we’ve succeeded in breathing life into a fictional person. Once this happens, we can stand back. The character can control his fate. (80)

The above quotation tells us much about the author and her father because it gives us a lead into the consciousness of the author wherein Baba resides in a somewhat stable fashion. She

does not only enter into Baba's head but takes the reader along with her to see what it is to be Baba.

A special mention of Baba's companionship with his wife should be made because it is this that kept him healthy and it is this without which Baba became ill. Being six years older than his wife, Bab retired six years earlier than her. During this period, he lived alone at home as his daughters were also away from home when their mother was at her place of work. He grew lonely without his wife. In his loneliness, for the lack of anything better to do, he began to eat with vengeance the sweet pethas supplied by a man who brought them home to him. This led to his getting high blood sugar and then to psoriasis. From Sahu's narrative, it may be possible to draw the conclusion that a man so passionate about life, when left alone, can indulge in things that can ruin or destroy him.

The problem with a number of authors can be that they do not keep a sufficient difference between the characters they create. In life, every person is different from every other person in some way or the other, but the creator of character often lacks the ability to make this distinction between characters clear. Sahu has an eye for this distinctiveness and this is visible in her character creation. Baba is so different from his wife and his wife is different from the daughters. She achieves this by making the dialogue or the speech of the authors significantly different from one another. By using the language actually used by people of that time, place and age, she is able to build a highly realistic picture of the man, quite distinct from everyone else. She does not create stereotypes as some authors do. Her characters stand out as different from the run-of-the-mill. Her method seems to be to choose a core personality, that of Baba, and then concentrate on the type of person he is. After filling in all the details in making her character rounded, to look like an individual, she makes her other characters, each different from the others. The differences lie in their attitudes, temperaments, emotions, their likes and dislikes, and then there are other finer layers of difference.

Baba's significant difference lies in the status Sahu gives to him. That status accrues from the roles he plays in the family, that smallest unit of society. Steven James emphasizes the special role of "status" in characterization. He writes:

Simply put, in every social interaction, one person has (or attempts to have) a more dominant role. Those in authority or those who want to exert authority use a collection of verbal and nonverbal cues to gain and maintain higher status. But it's not just authority figures who do this. In daily life all of us are constantly adjusting and negotiating the amount of status we portray as we face different situations and interact with different people. (106)

This is how Sahu's protagonist becomes such a distinctive personality. We see him playing social or familial roles, few people play. He thereby gets a rare kind of status in his family and society. Status and the social respect that accompanies it is a realistic fact of society. Baba becomes so real and life-like that the reader begins to see him as a convincing and actual human being. Sahu seems to understand well that as in life so in fiction people become convincing if their roles and statuses are laid bare before the reader.

Claire Tomalin, author of several biographies, has made some significant statements on biographical writing which show how suited Sahu's writing is to biographical narration. Tomalin says that good biographical writing is driven by the curiosity of the writer. This means that the writer should have a passion to get as close as possible to what is going on in another life. Besides, the central figure in a story can become a prism through which a whole society or period can be viewed. Tomalin goes on to say that the author must not only like but love the person who is the subject of the biographical writing. That Sahu has been passionate about Baba's life is obvious in her depiction of his character. The minute details she gives about him make this evident. Baba does become the central or pivotal point through which we view his times and the society around him. Her love for her father is seen in the way she mostly shows even his faults as though they were virtues.

"Being God's Wife" is an Indian piece of writing, Indian particularly in spirit. It foregrounds a rather conservative Hindu family looking for advancement while living a traditional life. In India, people are sometimes made into gods. There are god-men in this country in a large measure of course, but there is also the tendency to make our parents and ancestors godlike. This latter quality is sometimes seen in a positive light by Indians. In this narrative an apotheosis is at work most of the time. Baba is being made into a demigod or even God:

To understand my father . . . I read, re-read many ancient texts, under a new light, trying to find new directions for explorations of his character. Objectively thinking about him, not as Nandini, but as a devotee of the Deity, or as a seeker, I can draw the hypothesis that Demigods actually do exist and I can prove that. (237)

She can think of her father as someone who has a mixture of human and divine traits. This can be called a very Indian way of looking at people. A Hindu tends to see one's parents and ancestors, as one would deities fit for worship. But her father is not only to be seen through Indian eyes because he is not a typical Indian. She writes of a father who never missed having a son (238), a quality that is rare in an Indian father indeed. But then, it must be remembered

that the author is trying to paint the picture of a man who cannot be described adequately as merely Indian or human if he is to be seen as a god.

The story can be called a selective biography. It is a memoir that picks out certain incidents from Baba's life. It is not a simple, chronological, narrative that has a clear beginning, middle and end. There are flashbacks that keep taking the reader to earlier parts of the biography; flashbacks give a story more depth by revealing details that help readers understand the character's motives. A memoir, in any case, is not a complete biography but a selection of events required to make an impact on the reader's mind. Such a selection helps the author to achieve a target of constructing a particular picture of the subject under study. Sahu's "Being God's Wife" achieves its goal.

Every good story makes its own rules and goes about solving problems of its own making. This is true of "Being God's Wife." Nandini Sahu is one of those distinctive and easily recognizable story-telling voices, capable of finding the mysterious and magical within the most ordinary human acts. She doesn't describe life; she exposes it.

Flashback (also known as "analepsis") is an interjected scene that takes the story back in time from the current point in the story. Flashbacks also add tension and help advance the plot. They are often used to report events prior to the narrative's primary sequence of events. This helps to fill in crucial backstory. Flashback can be an important technique in a short story and can be particularly suited to a personal narrative in which a person rather a plot occupies the author's mind. In "Being God's Wife," the flashback technique fits in perfectly because it interjects the chronological sequences of events that have been earlier spoken of. The author can pick and choose events from a character's life without having to arrange them in the order that they occurred. What matters in such writing is the psychological patterns in a character's life as well as the psychological perceptions of the reader rather than the chronological development of the story. The flashback technique helps the reader to see Baba and his family better from various psychological angles. This technique is as old as Homer's writings and can be found in texts such as The Odyssey where psychology rather than chronology seems to matter.

In "Being God's Wife," flashbacks occupy a central position. It is through them that the author manages to achieve so much. Flashbacks, in any case, incorporate varied time periods. People have layers of moments in their lives that influence who they are in the present. Just following the chronological sequence of a storyline can leave a plot feeling flat. Flashbacks break up the chronological flow of a story, making it more interesting and realistic. Besides, flashbacks

make readers more connected to the characters, as they do in Baba's case. Effective flashbacks provide a deeper insight into who a person is. Maybe a villain thinks back to the parents who abandoned him—a past event that has directly impacted his bad behavior. Though readers might not excuse the character's actions based on his past experiences, the flashback helps them feel empathy and make sense of the antagonist's behavior.

This story, if it can be given that name, should not be evaluated by placing it beside stories of masters such as Katherine Mansfield or O. Henry. The purposes of this story are entirely different. First, it tries to bring back the memory of a much-loved father. The second purpose relates to the author's feminist tendency. It brings to light the fact that an exceptional man should be one who does not only maintain no distinction between sons and daughters but has the capacity to love his daughters to the point of living for them. Such a man has no gender bias. The author, it seems, wants to say that men should have this positive quality because being unsympathetic to women is no longer anything to be proud of.

There is forthrightness in the author's art of narration. She sacrifices everything to a truthful portrayal of a man who happens to be her father. There is objectivity in the portrayal which the reader immediately recognizes. The love of the author for her father is unquestionable and yet there is a visible effort to keep the narration as close to the real as possible. Even the romanticizing of the man never makes him appear unreal. This piece fits in well under the title of *Shedding the Metaphors* not only because the style is not figurative but because metaphor tells lies. Plato banished the poet from the ideal state because he tells lies through literary devices such as metaphor. When you use a metaphor such as, "He was a lion in the battlefield," you lie clearly. Nandini Sahu is not metaphorical and therefore closer to the biographical truth.

The POV in this narrative is not really of an omniscient narrator; instead, what we see is a particular internal perceiver. The author has been observing Baba from within his family and therefore knows him too well not to be able to tell the truth about him. She can see him and know him inside out by making an effort. These lines for instance:

Baba believed in secularism to the true sense of the term. Baba and Maa were with me in 2014 to celebrate Diwali in Delhi, in my university campus government quarters. . . I tried to engage Baba elsewhere. . . Baba was excited to see that my Hindu, Muslim and Christian friends celebrated Diwali with me, cooked in my kitchen. Baba patted my shoulder with appreciation and gave the example of Mrs. Indira Gandhi's family where there were people from all religions. (248-49)

Sahu's narrative moves between realism and something which for the lack of a better word can be described as an absurdity. Absurd portions may be seen in lines such as, "I felt insulted and

cried the whole day, my feminine ego was hurt, and I behaved in a way as if my kidney was given away to someone without my permission.” (242) This movement from realism to absurdity and back gives to the story a substantial and provocative power.

There is pathos and hidden humour in this story. A man like Baba, not being like others, invites humour. Humour arises out of oddness and he is definitely not a run-of-the-mill figure. He has values that some people several generations earlier may have had. His actions and deeds create both humour and pathos in this story. He can forgive a domestic help for continuously being dishonest and compel his wife to forgive this woman in the most comic manner, by tearing all evidence of her dishonesty. His dealings with his bank manager also show his honesty but then such an unworldly man has to go through the suffering of diabetes and psoriasis. He is the emblem of a man having to go through his *janma-chakra*.

To write a story of this kind, the author has to be totally engrossed in her subject; engrossed emotionally and feelingly. Nandini Sahu seems entirely one with Baba:

Baba lives in my blood's flow. Baba lives all over my home, he follows me everywhere – to the university, to the libraries, to my lecture halls, to my TV sessions, to the interviews, to my book launches. And even to the kitchen, when Sonu, my son, looks and talks like him while eating. In my basic habit of keeping things spic and span, Baba echoes, replicates. So does he, in my edginess, ambition, motivation, sentimentality and optimism. (236)

When you love someone as much as the author loved her father, you expect them to be with you always, unflinching. And, if that someone fails to be near you in your time of need, you begin to hate him for that time. This is what happened with the author. Her changed behaviour towards her father only goes to prove how much she loved him:

After a few years, after all of us were married and had left the village, Baba became kind of detached from us; his TV characters and their issues took over our issues at home. When I was going through domestic violence, miscarriages, both my parents were offhand. 'He doesn't romanticize sorrow' – Maa put it this way if I was angry with his callousness. Whatever might be the issue, I was broken. I hated Baba for being so apathetic to my pain. That is when one of the books that Baba introduced me in his library came in handy. I felt connected to his poem: (249-50)

The author then understands the real implications of Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," a poem that shows Plath in a similar relationship with her father.

A good story moves from moment to moment either chronologically or in flashbacks. Good storytellers reveal information in a manner that mimics life's seeming importance in the moment. Some moments are undone or underplayed, undercut, or somehow changed by the different perspective the future will provide. In "Being God's Wife," the moments and the

small scenes are of vital importance. How we weigh the story's moments and small scenes decides how heavy the story seems to us when it concludes, since serious stories don't seem to end with a punch line. This narrative does not have that punch line in the end because it is a story of a different kind.

The ending of this story needs special mention. It deals with the period when the exceptional Baba is no more. He has left a vacuum in the house. Even after his death, he is the chief subject of conversation. For Meera, the author's mother, it is not easy to remain normal. She cries daily, even when five years have passed since his death. She has to learn how to exist without him. This dear daughter of Baba has now to worry about how her mother is faring without her husband. The last few paragraphs may not be about the hero-like father but they are about his wife struggling with his spirit to be reborn in her new existence.

Shedding the Metaphors is a short story collection par excellence. It is a book of personal narratives in which the author seems perpetually present. It uses narrative techniques that make the experience seem real rather than fictional. It could be considered one of the most original story collections of the last few decades, both with regard to the form and content. It shows the reader Nandini Sahu's experience of womanhood at a personal level and "Being God's Wife" is a good example of this. The fact that "Being God's Wife" comes at the end of the story collection is not without its significance. The author wants the reader to leave the book with a powerful narrative that says so much about her father and her family in general. Though she has been almost silent about herself, the few sentences she has written on that account say a lot about her. We learn that her life has something missing; a husband. She therefore looks elsewhere to fill that void. By not saying much about herself, she comes out as a strong woman, one who will not be defeated by her circumstances. She presents herself as a feminist would; one who does not cringe before the world for being a woman.

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