

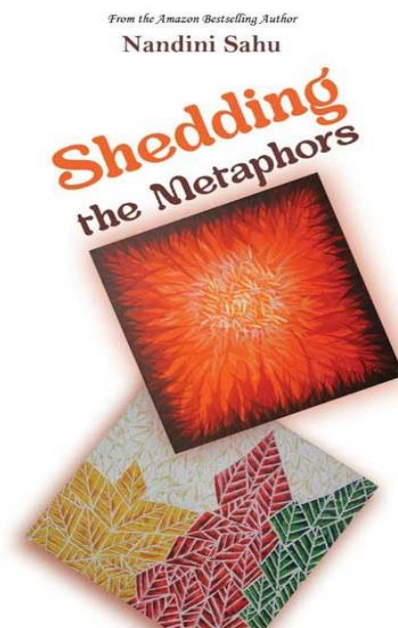
***Shedding the Metaphors* by Nandini Sahu, Publisher: Black Eagle Books,
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I have known Dr. Nandini Sahu for quite a few years. She's an accomplished poet, professor, Indologist, and folk-culturist. I've always been impressed by her deep writings that exude authenticity and sensitivity. She writes about feminist universal truths with a fearlessness that is rare among writers. Her latest book, *Shedding the Metaphors*, a collection of twelve short stories, is a prime example and beyond doubt an amazing assemblage of insightful, progressive, real-life situational short stories.

Each story in this collection can become an episode in a television series on women's lives. While most are situated in New Delhi or Odissa (the author's home state), however, these are general in their nature and intent and feminist to their core. These reminded me of the poet, short story writer, and memoirist Kamala Das, who did not hide behind any veneers and shared what her heart and soul felt and in which she intrinsically believed. Similarly, Nandini's stories are nuggets of rare, sincere literary craftsmanship expressed in unique ways with tremendous conviction, artistry, wordsmithery, and imagination.

Similar to Kamala Das and many other women writers, Nandini's writings are considered somewhat confessional. She herself acknowledges in the preface that six of the stories in this collection are as such. I wish to move away from the identification paradigm of labeling people, incidents, and happenings in our writings. Most writings are confessional and observational because we write best about what we have gone through or observed around us. As I grow older, I have come to hold that this identification might hinder the readers from truly appreciating the message of a poem, short story, novel, or memoir. Readers sometimes



seem keener to know why writers write what they write and less about the inherent beauty of the writing.

Consequently, despite the author's own acknowledgment, I simply sought connectivity with a definitive piece of writing that could be about anyone. And in that sense, each story with its pauses, its hints, its intrigues, its dramas, its specificities, and its nuances calls upon us to meander with its very credible characters. The strength, courage, determination, longings, weaknesses, mistakes, or successes of all the female characters in each story hold the potentiality of it happening exactly as such in life. Lakshmi Kannan's endearing female characters in her writings come to mind. Or as Shakespeare had said, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women are merely players." Indeed, playing our parts in our lives, willingly or forcibly, makes or breaks most of us, as Nandini skillfully portrays through her female personalities.

The overarching question that Nandini's stories address is, What is natural? Or, shall we say, can be considered natural? The subtext response is that anything in life can be, or not be, natural. It depends upon who is analyzing what, why, and when for whom? Within this subtext, Nandini deftly seeps in metaphors that people express, sometimes carelessly, about almost everything. She finds these confining and restrictive. Most folks don't wish to in fact recognize or own metaphors. They are merely blocks for space-fillers, like in the game Tetris. The difference is that in real life, these occupy, sometimes, non-essential space in our minds and hearts, contributing to our misconceived perceptions of others.

Therefore, as the title suggests, Nandini very astutely and prudently sheds the artificial "metaphors" and lets the heroines of her stories breathe and live the best possible lives they can for themselves. In a sense, the stories point ideologically to the notion of individualism over collectivism, however, not by way of being offensive to the requirements of others but by being true to one's own needs. Such a view is diametrically opposite to what many societies in the world believe and emulate in their daily practices. Having written these stories in the context of a South Asian setting, Nandini is giving a nod of acceptability to a paradigm of human relationships that may not be new but perhaps newly expressed.

The brave stories in *Shedding the Metaphors* approach headlong the myriad issues that confront women regardless of class, religion, professional standing, or where they live. Therefore, be it domestic violence, incest, lesbianism, single motherhood, professional women, homemakers, love, loss, divorce, and/or other issues that exist in the private and public spaces in which women reside, Nandini weaves these "naturally" in a no-nonsense

manner into the stories in this striking collection. These stories don't shy away from approaching uncomfortable themes. And it's done very maturely and sensitively. Shabana Azami and Smita Patil, heroines of art films, come to mind. Deepa Mehta's trilogy of films, *Earth, Water, and Fire*, come to mind.

While all the stories pull our emotions through a clothes dryer, there are some sentences strewn over the pages of this book that provide aha moments. Just to give examples from two stories, in 'The Shadow of a Shadow,' (p. 76), Sahu says, "Still she can be called a respectable married woman, feeding her limbs to a man whom she might not love, and drying his underwear proudly, lifelong, like the national flag." Again, in the same story, this sentence, "It was a scary echoing sound, as if a wild beast was gorging on some raw flesh and licking, relishing it." (p.98) Or say in the story 'Scarlet Fly—The Red Velvet Mite,' these lines, "There was also something peaceful about the way she sat there sipping green tea in the late nights as though it were the middle of the afternoon." (p.187) Again, in the same story on page 198, "The lights were dull, but that wasn't abnormal, because she didn't like bright lights when she felt low."

These lines could be indicative of reality or of dreams or nightmares—either way, these sound very credible and, therefore, draw the reader close to the book and its raw essence.

Yes, it's a raw book because it lays bare the desires of many women regardless of their situation. And therein lies the response to the question we started with: What is natural? Natural is not a rarity; it's very much omnipresent among millions of people; however, many folks might consider natural things as uncommon and not befitting "good" folks. Whereas Nandini revels in talking about the secrets that families and friends or strangers desire to hush, turn away from, or brush under the carpet. Nandini isn't suggesting any solutions or ways to react to or deal with natural emotions, feelings, and actions of love, loss, or lust. She simply employs tender yet strongly crafted language, making it difficult not to feel for each and every character in every story. There is no preaching, no judgment, just sharing. As Nandini herself says in the preface, "My stories do not preach at anyone. They wish to simply gather you together and grip you sans any verdicts." (p.9)

A noteworthy point is that Nandini takes up mental health issues in her stories as a serious challenge. In 'Being God's Wife', she mentions about her father's acute dementia towards the end of his life and his consequent detachment with her, leading to a love-hate relationship between father and daughter. She aptly quotes the poem "Daddy" by Sylvia Plath to contextualize the situation. She shows her concern about the attention paid to physical health

but not mental health in our country. In the story ‘Echoing in a Lullaby’, Nandini talks of the helplessness of Budhi Didi due to her mental health conditions. I was especially taken by the character Madhvi Lata from the story ‘The Scarlet Fly’, where the loneliness of a woman is curiously associated with her mental health issues. I am tempted to quote a few lines about the character Madhvi Lata which are very realistic as many folks might behave as such.

“Constrained to this shell of her home, these days Lata cultured some quiet and private pleasures. She liked, most of all, to organize things in decorum. To line things up in rows. Jars on shelves at a pageant, filling up peach holes at the crooks. When by some accident somebody scattered her rows, she was never irritated, for it gave her a fortuitous occasion to rearrange them. Whatever transportable variety she found, she systematized into neat lines, according to their size, shape or tinges of colour...She would clean, dust, broom everything—the floors, beds, chandeliers, almirahs, shelves, even the bathrooms. After Sid or I would come out after bathing, she would quietly go inside with a wiper to wipe the accumulated water and clean the floor, mirrors, soaps, just everything. Her pots and wash basins had to shine. She had written with her neat hands on a drawing sheet, ‘I understand how much you love me from the way you leave the bathroom behind.’ That caption was pasted on the bathroom wall, like a gospel from the Holy Bible.” (p.194)

Shedding the Metaphors is undeniably a short story book that reverberates with the beats of women’s’ hearts and the sighs of their souls or the quiet pain and joys in their expressive eyes. Once I started reading, I couldn’t put the book down. There’s an element of what’s next in each story, which clearly establishes Nandini Sahu as a master storyteller!