Amanda Michalopoulou

God's Wife

Η γυναίκα του Θεού (I gynaika tou Theou)

Presented by: Niki Sioki

An intriguing and bold “what if” question serves as the starting point for this novel. By asking “What if God had a wife?” Michalopoulou exploits the possibilities of fiction and stretches its boundaries. From this imaginative premise, she offers an alternative view of a female character in an unexpected marital relationship. The protagonist stands apart from the common submissive females depicted in the Bible. While the novel’s title may allude to a theological treatise, reading the book solely in this way would offer a rather limited interpretation and undermine the breadth of issues the story explores. Instead, meditations on religion and spiritual life, based on the author’s extensive reading of philosophical and theological texts, interweave with the exploration of norms and virtues such as faith, love, devotion, disbelief, freedom and redemption that define marital relationships. As the story unfolds, the blurring boundaries between reality and imagination allow the reader to “travel” to a world far removed from everyday existence. At the centre of the narrative emerges the story of a marriage, a woman’s search for identity and autonomy, and the act of reading literature as a subversive practice.

The main character is an unnamed female narrator who, in a direct voice, writes a letter to the unnamed reader who reads the novel and, thus, becomes a witness to the plot. The opening line of the novel, “It may sound like a lie: I am His wife” [15], prepares the reader to enter an alternative and unsettling world. Evoking Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the book is divided into three sections: “Inferno”, “Purgatory” and “Paradiso”, though events unfold as an inverted metaphor. “Inferno” recounts the protagonist’s childhood and the beginning of a new, romantic and welcoming marriage. In “Purgatory”, the couple returns to the human world as tourists visiting a foreign country; the narrator, having forgotten how to be a human among other humans, experiences life anew and begins reading literature. In “Paradiso”, she ultimately discovers her true self.

God’s wife is depicted as a woman raised in a conventional family struck by a tragic event that overturned her childhood: her parents’ death in a car accident. God chooses her to become His platonic partner due to her qualities of being “accommodating”, “mild-mannered” [31] and “inconsolable, open-hearted” [162], and she accepts His proposal without hesitation. She marries at a young age, after completing high school at seventeen. Along the trajectory from daughter to wife, she relinquishes her ambition to study medicine. The Almighty appears to her as an “embodied being” [28] and the marriage between a wise, older and omnipotent husband and his young wife unfolds as a seemingly ordinary human relationship. Irony and humour are skillfully employed to highlight the unusual nature of this couple.

Initially, she learns to love, admire and respect Him. She believes in Him and trusts Him completely,

without ever feeling the need to ask any questions. However, as she grows up, her inquisitive mind begins to rebel, and she is overwhelmed by questions. It is the quality of her questions, not the quantity, that creates the first ruptures in the relationship. He typically responds with silence or by leaving the room, offering only brief statements such as “I do not say anything” and “I love” [72]. He chooses to suggest philosophical and theological texts from His remarkably extensive library, where even heretical texts are collected. She thus becomes a reader of useful texts, as they are the only ones available to her. Notably, what is excluded from this library is literature, because her husband “is not a fan of […] the absurdity of fiction and poetry” [90], considers literature useless and fails to understand why fiction writers “need to invent things that don’t exist” [90]. When the time comes, and she requests a pencil and paper to take notes, she encounters another restriction: “There are no pencils here”, nor paper [90]. Her desire to write is not recognised, making her increasingly aware of the constraints within their relationship and the limitations imposed on her freedom. In the environment where she lives, “writing has no place” [91], creation belongs to the husband’s realm.

For much of her life, the narrator remains a passive reader. It is only in middle age, when she decides to share the story of her marriage with an unknown reader, that she finally asserts her role as a creator. By creating something of her own, both a text and a reader, she reclaims her sense of self. The imagined reader serves as a means for her to recognise her own humanness: “There is madness in solitude, but community in two” [92]. The act of writing becomes her “carefully planned rebellion” [43]. To write, she must conceal herself “in the small, windowless laundry room” [20], a private space of her own. When she finally acquires a pencil, the ultimate symbol of freedom to create, she keeps it hidden in her body where nobody will ever search. Over the years, the marriage remains outwardly harmonious. However, a growing need for self-expression unsettles her: she wants “to tell […] this story without anyone correcting me […] interrupting me” [98], finding her own voice.

After she falls severely ill, God consents to her request to travel together to the human world, where they live by the laws of material reality. She experiences life among humans anew and, due to an unexpected twist in the plot, she begins reading literature passionately, rediscovering that humans are creatures of sensibility and imagination. She realises that in literature all things are permitted and comes to understand her life through reading novels, finding her “own answers” [148], and a sense of self-reliance. However, literature remains accessible only in the human world; upon their return, she continues her life without it and resorts to writing in secret. When her husband discovers her writing, He asserts that fiction and their return to the world “irrevocably damaged her” [204], dismissing her work as merely “meaningless mumbo jumbo” [205]. Thereafter, the marriage comes to an end.

This is the story of a marriage from the wife’s perspective. It is also a broader commentary on marriage as evidenced by the presence of two women who are important in the narrator’s life: her married mother, who represents marriage as a suffocating and oppressive convention, and her religious aunt, who embodies the option of leading a life without marriage and children, but at the cost of being deprived of the right to dream. An avid reader herself, Michalopoulou crafts a philosophical novel and offers a feminist allegory. Her choice to present us with two unexpected spouses explores marriage as a field of asymmetric power dynamics that confines the woman’s agency. For the narrator, reading fiction constitutes “a practice of human freedom” [169], and writing to an imagined reader becomes an emancipatory gesture of self-realisation. The novel is a quietly radical work that invites us to imagine not only a different kind of marriage but also a different kind of storytelling, and to contemplate the relationship between life and fiction.

LANGUAGE: Greek/Ελληνικά

This title was not censored before publishing