

**Before the Story: On David Albahari's
"My Wife Has Light Eyes"**

Dejan Ilić

Central European University, Budapest

Within the context of contemporary Serbian narrative fiction and literary criticism, the short stories and novels of David Albahari are usually considered, described, and interpreted as a clear example of what postmodernist fiction, or metafiction, is. However, the meaning of such interpretative statements is far from being transparent. Furthermore, a close analysis of these claims, followed by a careful reading of Albahari's texts, will demonstrate that they are grounded on terminological confusion as well as on an overinterpretation of Albahari's fiction. For example, it is obvious that the terms "postmodernism" and "metafiction" in those descriptions are used as if they were synonyms. Furthermore, both terms are used—one would say, at least, imprecisely—to denote a particular type of fiction whose main characteristic is self-consciousness. In other words, "postmodernism" and "metafiction" are used as labels for certain poetics that deploy those narrative strategies and literary devices that lay bare the very structure of the literary work. This makes room for the claim that postmodernist fiction or metafiction makes its own devices its only subject. Consequently, those novels and short stories written solely with reliance on such poetics are viewed—wrongly, indeed—as being nothing else but formal experiments, fiction upon fiction, pure aestheticism without any interest for the so-called "real world." Finally, if we assume just for a moment that such a conceptualization of "postmodernism" and "metafiction" is acceptable, it is still impossible to construe Albahari's fiction within the framework that is established using the concepts of "postmodernism" and "metafiction" thusly defined. In other words, any interpretation that reduces the meaning of Albahari's stories and novels to the level of a discussion of narrative poetics fails to notice and construe the wide range of other topics and motives through which Albahari's fiction represents and comments—one could even say overlaps with—the so-called real world.

In the text that follows, I will argue very briefly for the more appropriate definitions of the both terms—"postmodernism" and "metafiction"—implicitly relying on the critical and interpretative insights of Patricia Waugh, Linda Hutcheon, and Brian McHale, on the one hand, and on Aleksandar Flaker's

theories on the main concepts of the history of literature on the other hand.¹ My assumption is that such a reconceptualization provides a much better ground for construing contemporary fiction, and, consequently, Albahari's fiction. I will try to demonstrate this by analyzing Albahari's short story "My Wife Has Light Eyes."²

1. "Postmodernism" and "Metafiction"

Indeed, one often comes across the usage of the terms "postmodernism" and "metafiction" as if they were synonyms. However, some distinctions between the two concepts marked by these terms can be stipulated. Speaking strictly in terms of literary criticism, it is possible, and has already been done, to define "postmodernism" as the periodical term that denotes a particular stylistic group. Namely, "postmodernism" can be seen as a stylistic group of narrative literary works that is part of the broader stylistic formation of the narrative fiction of the second half of the twentieth century. Within the context of Serbian literature, it is possible to say that the stylistic formation of the late twentieth century Serbian fiction consists of the two major stylistic groups: realist fiction—or, new realist fiction—and postmodernist fiction. Then it is possible to distinguish "metafiction" as the dominant feature of the latter stylistic group. This means that "metafiction" could be used—actually, sometimes it is used—as a term that denotes a certain type of narrative strategy or a set of narrative devices, namely the strategy or the set of devices that lay bare the basic structure of the work of literature, or, in other words, that lay bare the artificiality of narrative fiction.

2. The Poetics of Postmodernism

To put it simply, it is possible to distinguish and discuss two different aspects of all poetics: one aspect is an overall view—explicit or implicit—of the world outside the text, or the "real world," the other is a description of the means by which literary texts could or should represent the world.

¹ I relied on the following books of the mentioned authors: Aleksandar Flaker, *Stilske formacije* (Zagreb: Liber, 1976); Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988); idem, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989); Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989; first published in 1987 by Methuen); Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1984).

² In: David Albahari, *Words Are Something Else*, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursac (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

The poetics of postmodernist fiction operates with the theoretical assumption that the so-called real world is constructed through various discourses. That is, that there is no such a thing as a directly approachable and conceivable reality. We can perceive reality only through different representations of the “real world” forged by the different types of discourses. Thus, there is no one single truth, that is, one single representation of the world, but there are as many representations as there are possible discourses. Moreover, our perception is biased by our own set of assumptions that are also derived from a certain discourse. Thus, the world is viewed as a construction, and this view is itself a construction as well.

Then, the question is: how is it possible to represent such a world in a work of literature, that is, in narrative fiction?³ Obviously, the answer is using the narrative strategies denoted by the term “metafiction.” There is one assumption that makes this possible. Namely, according to postmodernist poetics, there is a parallel between the world and the work of literature. That parallel is established through various means and literary devices. That is the first step. The next step is to lay bare all of these devices in order to underline the artificiality of the work of literature. The final effect would be the revealing of the ways in which the “real world” is constructed through various discourses.

Thus, a kind of a metonymical shift is at the core of postmodernist poetics: the work of literature that represents the world is taken metonymically as the model of the world itself. And this is the cause of certain ambiguous effects of postmodern narrative strategies. On the one hand, it is true that postmodernist metafiction makes its devices its own subject. Yet, they are not its only subject. By discussing its own devices, postmodernist fiction actually discusses the ways in which the world is constructed for and perceived by us. At this level, we are in a way instructed to read postmodernist fiction as realist fiction. Furthermore, there are a number of writers who deliberately use such ambiguity to achieve some particular effects: namely, to emphasize the point of intersection between the world outside the text and the text itself, thus

³ Here I would like to note that, as far as their references to the world are concerned, it is obvious that I am making an analogy between the poetics of realist fiction and the poetics of postmodernist fiction. At this level, I would say that there are no differences between these two poetics: they both strive to represent the world in the most appropriate way, according to their own views of the world. So, both of them presume that there is something outside the literary text that precedes the text and can be represented by the text. It is possible to say that the outer world is still a point of reference of the work of fiction within the frameworks of both poetics. We could trace differences at the level of understanding, description, and representation of this world.

blurring the very distinction between the text and the world. David Albahari is certainly among those authors.

3. “My Wife Has Light Eyes”

It is possible to say that there is one exception that cannot be encompassed by the previous description of postmodernist fiction: namely, what happens to the ambiguity—the specific characteristic of postmodernist metafiction—when the subject matter of the work of fiction is the very work of fiction.⁴ In such cases, one could say that we are not considering postmodernist fiction, or, if we are, that a careful analysis would trace, eventually, the effects of postmodernist fiction’s ambiguity. Albahari’s story “My Wife Has Light Eyes” is, in my opinion, a good example of the latter.

“This will be the simple story,” the narrator claims—actually, it is rather his thought than his claim—at the very beginning of his story he is about to start.⁵ Thus, we have something from the very beginning that could be described as a fictional comment on the very fiction, that is, on itself. However, the next sentences prevent us from reading this claim merely as a metafictional statement. The whole first sentence goes like this:

“This will be a simple story,” I think, “and it will have no compound sentences.”⁶

If we construe this utterance only as a metafictional claim, the middle part of it—“I think”—would be of no importance for its meaning. Yet, the suspense of the next sentence of the story, as well as the plot of the whole story, is grounded, or developed, exactly on, or from, this—“I think.” The writer’s wife responds to his thought as follows:

“Don’t be silly,” says my wife. “That sentence is already pretty compound.”⁷

On one level, we can certainly read this dialogue as a metafictional discussion. However, at another level we can read it, in terms of Tzvetan Todorov,

⁴ Strictly speaking, this is in fact the meaning of the term “metafiction.” That is, metafiction is fiction about fiction: fiction that articulates, verbalizes, and narrates its fictionality, or its consciousness of being fiction.

⁵ Albahari, 119.

⁶ Albahari, 119.

⁷ Albahari, 119.

as a sequence of utterances that would perfectly fit the context of a fantastic story. This means that we can place, following Todorov's discussion on fantastic literature, the interpretation of Albahari's story on the border between natural and supernatural. In the third paragraph this ambiguity is suggested by the authors question:

“What are you,” I say, “a mind reader?”⁸

By this question, the narrator shifts the reader's attention from the metafictional issues and focuses on certain fantastic motives. Furthermore, I would say that the dramatic tension of the story is raised by the intersection or overlapping of these two levels, which is emphasized in the following questions of the author:

“Who is protagonist in whose story here? Or are you,” I shout, “really a witch?”⁹

The fantastic nature of Albahari's story is also stressed by the wife's story, which could be read as a story within a story, with all possible implications. Usually, a story within a story offers a key for understanding the encompassing story. I would say that Albahari's story—the encompassing story and the wife's story within the story—follows the same pattern. The wife's story about a man who is ringing the bell at the door of an empty apartment he has just left could be read as an anecdote. However, by the narrators comment—a metafictional one, indeed—it becomes a kind of a fantastic story:

There is something to that last scene: the man in the hallway ringing the bell with no one in his apartment.¹⁰

By repeating the last scene, the narrator gives a hint to the reader to relate the last scene to the scene from the middle of the wife's story when someone is ringing the doorbell at the front door: when the man opens the door, the hallway is empty. Obviously, the narrator suggests that there is a kind of time overlap that allows the possibility that the person who is ringing the doorbell and the man who opens the door are one and the same person. Construed like this, the wife's story should be read, beyond any doubt, as a fantastic story.

⁸ Albahari, 119.

⁹ Albahari, 120.

¹⁰ Albahari, 123.

Yet, as mentioned, it is also the key for understanding the whole story, that is, it should at least add something to the metafictional meaning of the story.

I am inclined to read it as a kind of allegory. The man who is, as it turns out, the only character in the wife's story could be seen as the author himself, who is at the same time in and out of the story. Furthermore, one could say that it is an allegory on the identity of the author and the narrator, who are supposed to be, within the story, the same person, but actually are not the same. If we proceed in this direction, we could read "My Wife Has Light Eyes" as an allegory on the death of the author. If that is the case, it would be interesting to construe why the wife of the narrator—or the author in the story—has such an important role. To explain this, first I am going to offer one hypothesis: the wife, as a character in the story, and the story itself are the one and the same. Indeed, this hypothesis could be rephrased much more cautiously. Namely, it could be said that there are traces of analogy between the wife and the story itself. The strong relation between the narrator's wife and the story itself—as well as between the man from the wife's story and the narrator, or, in fact, the author—is explicitly established at the end of the story by the narrator's question:

"If I were that man," I say, "and if the door were closed, and if you were sitting inside, here, where you're sitting now, and if I were to ring the bell, would you open the door?"¹¹

If we accept that the wife's story is an allegory in which the man is the author, and the door is the border between the author and his story, or the threshold of the story, then the wife, who has the power to decide whether the author is allowed to enter the story, could be seen either as the story itself, or as the person who is, considering the story, more powerful than the author himself. However, in both cases the wife is placed above the author. And that is the reason why she can read the author's thoughts.

It is possible to say that the wife, in a way, personifies the language. It is also possible to say that she embodies, on the level of the characters in the story, the written work itself, in opposition to speech, according to the analogy between the hierarchical binary oppositions: man–woman; speech–writing. Thus, it is obvious that Albahari tries to deconstruct these oppositions by changing hierarchical places of their elements. On this level, his story could be read merely as metafictional or, even, metatheoretical. However, both readings would be incomplete—even impossible—if they did not take into account the real relations—in the context of the story—between the author

¹¹ Albahari, 124.

and his wife. As I said, these relations are presented on the level that I called, in Todorov's terms, fantastic.

At this point one could add something about the way in which the wife is presented in the story. Speaking about this, one is actually speaking about stereotypes that are the main topic of postmodernist literature. First, it is obvious that the wife of the author is placed within the fantastic context: it cannot be clearly decided whether or not she is a witch who reads her husband's mind. So we are dealing with an at least one century old cliché of women being incomprehensible, or, to use Freud's term, being the dark continent of humanity.

However, it seems that men, or, at least, the male author of Albahari's story, finds a way to deal with the female incomprehensibility. Namely, he copes with it by using stereotypes. Therefore, the wife in Albahari's story can say or do only those things that she usually says or does, or those that we "all" already know, "and have long known" that she would do.¹² Thus, the wife cannot have her own authenticity and individuality. The author's claim

I see her as I've never seen her before, but she doesn't know it.¹³

can be read as the author's explicit confession that he himself deliberately deprives his wife of her originality. Her ungraspable nature is constrained by established patterns without which her existence would be impossible. In this way, Albahari creates a particular ambiguity by depicting the author's wife. She is the person dependent on social patterns and clichés, and, at the same time, someone who is more powerful than the ultimate creator of the world in which she exists, that is, the creator of herself. As I argued in this text, this ambiguity is the consequence of metafictional strategies that Albahari uses in creating "My Wife Has Light Eyes."

¹² Albahari, 124.

¹³ Albahari, 119.

