

***A Song, Half & Half* by Nandini Sahu (Amazon's Bestselling Author, 2022)**

**Black Eagle Books, Dublin, USA, 2022. pp.124, Rs.250**

Reviewed by Dinesh Kumar Mali,

Independent scholar, India.

Email: [sirohi.dkm@gmail.com](mailto:sirohi.dkm@gmail.com)

With 65 poems written from her 'Covid bed', *A Song, Half & Half* by Nandini Sahu came to me as a pleasant surprise, with a beautiful cover photo clicked by the poet herself. I rather read the Editorial and most of the poems at one go, each one in tandem with the other, and each piece addressing the very important theme, femininity, and feminine power with sublime love. The book has the art of winning a heart incline. The poems have a predisposition to the theme of love as a panacea, and as a reader, I felt this seminal book is the need of the hour. In the midst of so much of odium and abhorrence in the planet, love is the answer to all our existential questions—Nandini understands that, being a devotee at the altar of love.



The intriguing title, *A Song, Half & Half*, says half the story—a song of love, a life of love written/shared half and half by two persons in love. The Preface by Nandini herself talks about a beautiful world with the touch of Muses and the free flow of melody and euphonic poetry. About this collection, Nandini herself says, "All the poems are about my moods, modes and mores; they are about the roller coaster rides that I had, and of course about the most complex human emotions. My readers and researchers may find these poems very different from my earlier poems. Mythical poet and folklorist Nandini wrote romantic, jovial, humorous, light poems while talking about existential issues simultaneously! I have always advocated social mobility literature, Witness Literature, backed with myth and folklore as my poetic tools. The mood of these poems is unlike my other collections." (Preface, *A Song, Half & Half*)

Nandini Continues to write social mobility literature even here, through a poem like "Ahalya's Waiting", where the personae Ahalya waits for a benevolent touch from her lord/lover, but not to redeem her of any sin that she never committed!

For thousands of years in Indian history or mythological works, poets have created strange inequalities between man and woman, while the poetess Nandini's 'Ahalya's Waiting' gives the message about the fundamental rights of womanhood and equality. Nandini's 'Ahalya' is a symbol of the ever-marginalized women.

For the first time in Indian literature, a poetess has fearlessly expressed the voices of feminism through the Ahalya myth with an open mind. In her poem, Ahalya embodies the women whose parents marry them to their unmatched husbands. Nandini's Ahalya was married to a husband selected by her parents; then, it is natural for her to look for fulfilment. The poetess considers this step and advocates in favour of 'woman's body, woman's right'. In other words, the concept of sin-virtue/ purity-pollution is completely wrong in the name of celibacy. A few lines from her poem 'Ahalya's Waiting' can be quoted here:

My redemption lies not just in your touch  
but in zero tolerance of  
any marginalization.  
I need a rejoinder from the society  
and from you, oh the most knowledgeable one,  
for my quintuple patriarchal relegation.  
Father presented me, the puppet, to my husband on his free will.  
Husband couldn't fulfil me as a woman.  
Indra tricked me to satiate his desire, not mine.  
Inept, impotent husband cursed me  
with what right, oh, with what right,  
to become a stone exactly at a moment  
when I was satiated as a woman!  
And now why do I need yet another man, you, oh Ram,  
to touch me and cleanse me of my uncommitted sin?  
  
Touch sensitive, touch deprived,  
touch-craving, I would rather wait till eternity.

I prefer to reject your offer of touching me  
on the condition of taking me  
into the snares of purity-pollution.  
I am my own possessor, proprietor; I am my woman.  
Let me remain ethically upright on my own terms—  
this is my ultimate liberation. (Sahu, 28)

Writing poems on a subtle subject like 'love' is no less than walking on a double-edged sword in modern times. In the world of this formidable loveless society, diving into the ocean of distortions and inconsistencies and making effort to collect the oysters and corals of love, converting them into literature, specifically into poetry, is certainly a very difficult task. Now the question arises whether the poems of love can create a world of peace by sowing the seeds of love on the planet of the modern era. No, poems are not the tools, weapons or guns that can convey the message of reform, repair, maintenance and revolution in society. Yet, love poems have honied feelings embedded within to create a better, positive society. Valmiki had also said that the Ramayana was composed by the sigh of the Cronch; this pain is the mother of all poetry. This pain may be due to opposing social discrimination or passing the uncountable ruthless moments in search of the 'self'.

Many poets have written poems on different forms of love-- the tangible and intangible, material and immaterial, divine and spiritual, in different surroundings, cultures and languages. Though their concepts are other, the human mind has a wonderful ability to hold the ultimate surface firmly. Love has been the enduring theme of poetry since time immemorial. Love is an important theme in Nandini's poems. Not to exaggerate, her love poems are completely different. After reading her love poems, it becomes crystal clear that the concept of Nandini's love is not the love that has been conventional and redundant. Her love creates ambiances in the human mind, originates the process of making a man into a human, combats hatred and saves the lives of people on the verge of death. That way, she is an architect of destiny, a lifesaver.

It is very difficult to count how many stages can the yearning of a woman's mind cross until she does not find true love. One can curb desires to some extent due to the pressure of society, but she is the only empress of her dream empire. Where her own rule goes on, free wills are born, and there is no obstacle of any kind. In the modern era, the expansion of love is necessary, but the expansion of love should not be abstract, it should be based on realism. Abstraction

always connects love to spirituality. When the poetess tries to give an expansion of love in her poetry, the love automatically becomes limitless. That means there is no boundary line of love, and it cannot be accommodated in a narrow groove of the human brain. Love that is complete surrender and renunciation is the tone of many poems in the collection, like 'A Man Like You', 'To Laugh Like You', 'Touching You', 'You Are Another Me', 'You Can Never Unknow Me', 'You Before Me', 'You Own a Piece of Me' etc. In the poem "The Sea of Pedigrees", the woman sounds erotic and romantic at once, when the poet writes:

I whispered, 'take me as you like me,  
it's a complete surrender.'  
You assumed I was right,  
and you preferred the act of capitulation.  
As I merged with you in you  
and mocked to be asking for clemency  
you smiled honored.  
You said, 'you ain't seen nothing yet lady!'  
That was my triumph! Making you the man,  
the elemental man, was my resolution.  
Now the memory of that moment is my safekeeping.  
Ah, I have to rather safeguard it  
lest time's talon corrupts it  
in my myriad day long mundane action. (Sahu, 100)

In the poem "You Before Me", the poet gives the indefatigable logic that the lover can love his lady only when he loves and respects himself to the utmost. In this poem, artificial or forged love is shown to be different from true love. If love is artificial, hate is a thousand times better than that because it will be true. The poetess's first condition is the honesty of love. Love determines the shape of the relationship and the foundation of the friendship, when you love yourself, then you are able to love your beloved. If you hate yourself, how can you love the other? If your love is artificial, the edifice will look like a rugged place. There will be experiences but no vibrations. To live in such a world is also equivalent to die every moment. Nandini wants honesty in love. Fake crocodile tears may be a trick for getting love, but after sometime, it will automatically vanish. So, the poignant selection of imagery in her poems are influenced by the best sublime of material love equipped with a compassionate mind. That's

why her love spreads widely as infinity and becomes timeless. According to Sitakant Mahapatra, religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Sikh and Christianity all have the same purpose to achieve the Ultimate Reality and replies to life's main three questions, Who am I? Why am I here? And Where I have to go? In Sufi poems, the answer to all three questions is the same - love. Love and happiness have almost disappeared from life in our difficult time; the main aim of Nandini's poems is to bring that love and happiness back to life. There are some powerful lines in the poem "You Before Me":

In the Bhagavad Gita, it's deliberated, you were born to be real,  
and not to be perfect. Realize that you are not made for anyone else.  
You are complete when you are autonomous. You are your own.  
Let me get stimulated by how you are in agreement with imperfections.

The real human struggle is to avoid being overwhelmed  
with how you think about yourself.

No one is you and that is your influence, your supremacy,  
that is your relationship with fair play and justice.

You before me—this sets the tone for every other  
affiliation you have. Falling in love with yourself  
makes you indestructible, imperishable, therapeutic, miraculous.

That is the narrative of our extreme insurgency. (Sahu, 118-119)

One poem caught my immediate attention where Nandini makes herself "The Lotus Leaf", with complete detachment to happiness and sorrow. Although Nandini's love poems are traditionally strong, she is rebellious in nature. Those are neither concerned about worldliness nor care about being ignored. The poetess swims in the braids of the musical waves. She sings chorus from the bottom of her heart. I believe that consciousness in her love poems are strategically associated with ascetic life. She definitely mentions breath or breath with consciousness in her new poems. Due to their connection with life, her pain underlines the best conditions of loneliness, and separation. Even in this state, her love poems reflect her higher elevated consciousness by detachment from worldly materials. The body is worldly power. Love cannot take its original form unless it reaches beyond the body. This condition is only possible when the feelings of 'giving' are given more importance. These feelings expand the boundary of love.

I am the lotus leaf. I am ardent.

Nothing can hold me. And

I want to hold on to nothing. I have ultra-hydrophobicity  
as unveiled by the leaves of 'Nelumbo', the lotus!

Drop something on my peripheral, it floats and cascades.

I have been making the mountains float since decades.

I am the backwaters of Kerala, I recede  
as much as I ensue and proceed.

My lotus-effect denotes to self-cleaning.

Dust particles picked up by water droplets  
by the micro-and-nanosopic architecture on my shallow  
diminishes the droplet's adhesion to my surface.

I am conceited being seamlessly unsoiled.

My heart is impeccable, and so are my passions and my soul.

I hold on to no anger, no greed, no jealousy, no callousness  
and no love, no desire for that matter. (Sahu, 96)

Again, love is the real tone of her poems, the original sound whose echo is present in all the verses. She, the Ecofeminist, is also a conformist with Masculinity Studies when she backers the struggle of men to fit in, to make a point in a society like ours. According to Om Bharti, ritualism and love affairs are major themes of Ritikaleen artists. Kati, Kuch, Kelly and Kaya are everything for them. Behind it, there may be their frustrations, distortions and preoccupation. However, there is spontaneous love in the progressive poetry of Nandini. The mainstream of poetry is the love poem "When I Wiped Your Tears" to discharge the ideology and fill the energy of love in a few lines:

Somewhere I read, if you let  
other people's problems be your entire focus,  
you are co-dependent. Love, is it fact?  
However, all you silently did was

you transformed pain into ecstasy, with your Midas touch.

No man is an island.

Now who says, 'men don't cry'?

The calendar of wisdom doesn't. (Sahu, 113)

Nandini is an existentialist poet. She wants to live in the present moment. The future is full of uncertainties. She has a deep sense that human life has come only to live with a particular purpose. There is no guarantee of whether the next life will be there or not. She has no faith in religious traditions, heaven-hell at all.

The poem "My Tranquil City, Tonight" talks about the multi-layered love where the woman is waiting for her love who she puts in the highest esteem. The expansion of her love is so vital; she loves geographical places of the beloved in tranquillity so much that the color of the earth also becomes iridescent. After elevation from the body, love begins to enlighten humanity. The love expansion of the poetess is manifested through the images of the battlefield and the unusual moth. The battlefield is such an extension, which is the basis of existence of humanity and life, so the moth symbolises love as the sweet shadow of happiness, peace and mutual harmony, where love is physical and spiritual. In this modern era, when the whole world is engaged in extinguishing the flame of love, the conscious poetess is engaged in a campaign to save love on this planet. Let me quote a few lines from the poem "My Tranquil City, Tonight",

To love you is like going to  
the battlefield.

One comes broken, bruised  
from the battle, for sure.

Still I feel like a lepidopterist, who has  
Gloriously peeved an unusual moth.

We couldn't have been written out of the past, right?

I know that you know that I know.

The untold and the told, I know it all.

Predictable, comforting, heartening sorrows,  
but trustworthy, consistent ones. (Sahu, 80)

This bleeding time needs love and love poems the most. For the sake of future generations, the poetess has created deep insights of love. The children of the future generation are not just beautiful innocent beings, but they have sprouts of struggle. While the Odia poet Sitakant Mahapatra nurtures love in nature and his sensibilities towards the country, Nandini seeks love in the breakdown of taboos. In this context, she is more realistic. Completely different from the traditional and mystic poems, she establishes her love for contravention of redundant traditions. In the entire collection, the most intriguing poem, to me, is "Half of Her Lovers are Half the World Away", where the persona talks about her erstwhile lovers who adored her but could never subsist in the hidden chambers of her heart, her innermost crust:

Men who loved their wives and those who did not  
all fell in love with her  
when she was simply out and about in the world.

Her 'men' knew, she was the brimming vessel with an eternal capacity to pour.  
Well, she didn't think much about love,  
neither of the 'safe' love-loves, nor of any loves in the conflict zone.

Her dry sardonic wit made them only fall in love more with rationality.  
Lost in time, with the audacity of hope, she was found in eternity;  
turning her wounds into wisdom, an expert at the law of diminishing marginal utility!  
(Sahu, 58)

Now let's talk about modern poems. What are the features of these poems? Is modern poem a random game of words or the 'stream' of consciousness'? The moment, any thought perceived into your mind, you have to write the ideas by resorting to some new images in your style. Nandini's poems meet both these criteria, there are always new images as well as meaningful inclined words that arise in her mind carving out her innocence, helplessness.

Modern readers are basically readers of smart phones, internet, their fingers would catch various information from all over the world in a fraction of second. It does not matter whether they contain elements of beauty or not. Therefore, it is a general perception is that modern readers run away from modern poems, but It would be wrong to say that modern readers do not appreciate such poems. In the true sense, to understand these poems, curiosity, emotion and



one's own experiences earned from life are especially needed. Anyway, the concluding lines of the poem are capable of piercing your heart with a heartrending tonal quality:

Her 'men' every so often left her drained, high and dry.  
Some other times they cared to say a proper goodbye.  
In any case, she didn't judge them, she just did low lie.

Her self-introspection and serious reflection were a caricature of living-loving.  
Her faith was bigger than fears with time's intoxicants in her hands.  
There was no wind in there—just air to protect her 'men' from fading.

Above her outer skin, there were wordless walls  
with a fistful of sky. With time, invariably,  
her men turned into distant memories.

She wrote the stories of many a life, but  
her own story lay buried at someplace in a vault.  
One day she lost the keys to that treasury that she had carefully concealed.

She had that habit—  
save the best for the last.

But much cared-for-stuff from her wardrobe were always lost. (Sahu, 59)

The anthology 'Discovering the Inscape: Essays on Literature' written by Dr. Sitakant Mahapatra compiles an article 'Love in Time of Plague' depicting various concepts about love. In this article, he raises some questions how does a book or novel remain in mind of a reader for a long time? He gives an example of Dr. Bernard Ricks, an unforgettable character of Camu's novel 'The Plague', representing a person, who loves life immensely, knowing everything about the anomaly of life and the tragedy of his fate. The poem "Dreams these Days" is Nandini's dream of a better world post-covid:

Dreams, these days, are of the moon and moon-manufacturer!  
The gripe translucent skies in the night  
the mood swings of solitude, the cognizance of the air, purer,  
the memories of missing moon motif, a vanished delight.

Dreams, these days, are of the sea and the seafarer.

The uncluttered, sweeping ocean epitomizes much more  
than an unbiased body of water; it embodies a malicious elegance  
that never hesitates to induce the narrator.

...

Dreams these days are of a long life-- glorious, happier, healthier, better.

Still, if you succumb, the show goes on even minus you, so don't despair.

Dream anyway, love anyway; you shall soon find your 'home' awfully closer!

The marvels of the mourned sound colossal; they may, as well, entice and lure.  
(Sahu, 42-43)

The collection advocates humour in Indian poetry through poems such as "A Parody of Love", "To Laugh Like You", humour which is sadly missing from Indian English literature. The novelty of the collection is, Nandini experiments with unique genres here. Her powerful expression in spontaneous language, completely different from the mystic and modern English poets, Nandini has fearlessly completed her inner journey through separate flights of the human mind. Even today, Indian society does not value and respect the aesthetic sense of free feelings of any poetess, but it is also true that still our generation is not so dead that cannot feel the value of love. It is the responsibility of modern writers to make an environment for overcoming negative forces such as fear, hatred and despair and promulgating positive forces such as hope, love and peace. According to her, love is 'super natural', which violates the basic law of nature-- the more you give, the less you will retain. In love - the more you give, the more you will have --- the saying is meaningful. Feeling this harsh reality, the poetess believes that modern poets should write more and more poems on human and divine love. Medieval devotee poets Narsi Mehta, Dnyaneshwar, Namdev, Eknath, Kabir, Surdas, Shukdev, Madhav Dev, Panch Sakha and Jagannath Das of Odisha are the pillars of love. Love is intangible. She filled all the philosophy of her life in the following two lines of her poem 'Isn't Love Enough?', which is necessary for curing our deprived lives of love and solace.

"With true love, either you forget everything or

You evoke who from the who".

It's only apt to conclude the discourse with Nandini's own words from the Preface, "Words have their own culture. They are independent. Once they are written, they have their own path. But before creating those words, the writers form their own course under the guidance of some

divine agenda called love. Of late, I have been thinking a lot about love and God as counterparts working towards eternity-- a love that is unrequited, a love that has no boundaries. The saplings come out gloriously only when the earth cracks open; thus, life culminates only when love happens. Love is the touchstone to deify life. Now I sense I am the apex of love, and this is my state of being. I would rather go with this quest for love till my last breath."

It is commendable that Black Eagle Books from Dublin, USA, has published this formative book with an admirable appearance and high quality. The book has the worthiness to adorn the collection of any individual reader and any library. It's a welcome aspect that the book has been Amazon's Bestselling book for months since its release early this year.