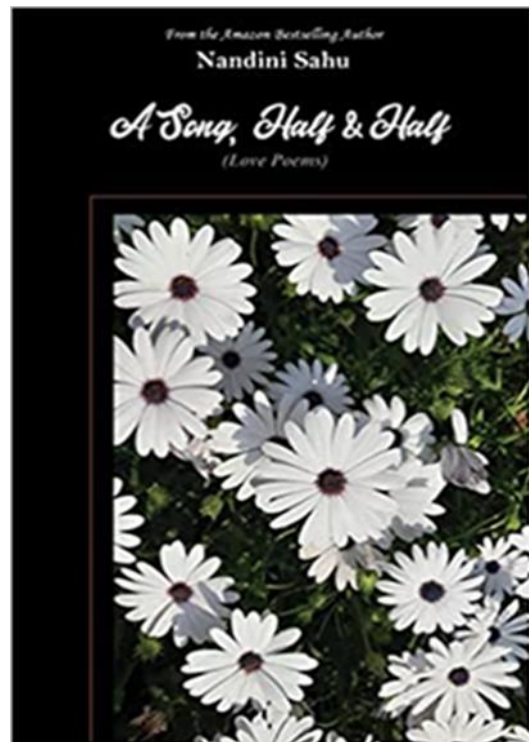


**A Song, Half & Half: (Love Poems), By Nandini Sahu. Black Eagle Books, 2022, ISBN-978-1-64560-256-9.**

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Love is at the centre of this volume of poetry, as the title itself tellingly indicates. The poet, in the “Preface”, comments that “the tone and tenure of these poems can be condensed to one word- love.” This introduction by the poet is perfectly apt to describe the volume. Each poem in the book talks about the different “modes and mores” of love that the poet experiences. The volume introduces the reader to the different faces of love, as encountered by the poet. However, as the poet leads us through this one emotion- which is one and myriad at the same time, what remains unmistakably singular, is the voice in which she writes these poems- that of an independent, intrepid modern woman, whose love will not be fettered by social constructs of what a relationship ought to be.



The poem, “A Parody of Love” is a light-hearted poem where she parodies a prospective suitor who is a caricature of a misogynist. Though the general tone of the poem is nonchalant and light, the poet takes the opportunity to assert her protest against the hegemony of patriarchal concepts and ideals about women. She draws attention to the stereotypical ideals that men have about women, which she presents through the viewpoint of the supposed suitor of the poem: “After all, the ornament of a modest woman is being amiable.”

The poet’s unapologetic assertion of feminine power and strength is further compounded in the poem “Ahalya’s Waiting”. In the poem, she alludes to the Hindu legend of Ahalya, the most beautiful woman created by the god Bhramah. According to the narratives that exist, Ahalya is married to the much older Gautama, but Indra too is enamoured by her beauty. Indra eventually

comes in the guise of her husband, Gautama, and seduces her. When Gautama finds out about this liaison, he curses both Indra and Ahalya, wherein Ahalya turns into a stone. She regains human form after she is brushed by Rama's foot. In the poem, the poet questions the narratives that exist singularly from the male perspective. In these, Ahalya has been portrayed as her father's puppet, the unwilling wife, a victim of a seductive lover, and a cursed woman who requires a cleansing experience that is achieved only when she touches another male figure, Rama's foot. The poet offers the reader an alternate perspective, one that is from the female point of view. After all, it is Ahalya's story.

The poem "Isn't Love Enough?" invites the reader, and the poet's lover, whom she addresses in the poem, to give in and surrender to the powers of love because love is enough. The fear of societal opinions is a burden that cripples love. These quests, she points out, are trivial and meaningless. She reasons, "only birds born in a cage think flying is an illness." The use of metaphor facilitates a deeper understanding of the poet's idea of the freeing spirit of love, that must be embraced wholeheartedly, or not at all.

The language in which the poems are written is simple, almost conversational, yet profound and evocative. The use of metaphors conveys meaning and enables the readers to arrive at a deeper understanding of the poet's thoughts and feelings. Many of the poems in the volume are soliloquies directly addressed to the poet's "love" evoking a Borrowings tone and quality to the poems. All in all, these poems explore the existential and inescapable reality called love that compels the reader into a philosophical and spiritual quest.

The volume is born out of a dark period in the poet's life. The poet explains in the "Preface" that these poems were inspired when she was confined in isolation, after falling ill with Covid-19. During this period, she also lost two of her dearest associates. At this low point in life, she turns to love- and out of this darkness a "terrible beauty" is born. This volume promises to remain relevant to all ages and through time because love is the common currency for the whole of humanity. We must all encounter love, experience love, and embrace love, as individuals, and as a collective race, to derive meaning from this journey called life.

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