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A Voice for the Subaltern : A Review of Nandini Sahu's *Sukama and Other Poems* (2013), The Poetry Society of India, Gurgaon (Hariyana), India. PP – 106, Rs.150/-, ISBN: 978-81-925839-2-1

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Nandini Sahu's new poetry collection *Sukama and Other Poems* (2013) is the latest amazing and successful contribution to Indian literature written in English. Perhaps she wrote this volume with a view to reconsider our established and biased opinion on the poor and marginalized on the one hand and women in general on the other.

Sukama and Other Poems consists of 48 exquisitely crafted poems to suit to the purposes of representing the case of the subaltern. The inspiration for the volume seems to stem from the poet's visit to her native place in 2010 when she heard the sad demise of Sukama, her childhood domestic help. Nandini Sahu, the woman-inclined and thought provoking poet, steeped in feminist criticism is seen to represent the case of women, especially the marginalized and down trodden.

The title poem "Sukama" delves deep into Sahu's past to reconstruct the social milieu prevalent during her childhood in the true spirit of a woman concerned with a hierarchical system that had taken woman for granted. The tribal *Kandh* woman has been treated as a surrogate or "foster mother" who has been presented with a kind of supportive solidarity that only poet of Nandini Sahu's stature can explore. That she was a pretty and attractive woman during her youth, and her tattooed face (her mother's protective steps in order to make her less attractive and less desirable) speaks volumes about the plight of a marginalized, tribal woman. The idyllic atmosphere has been replaced by the city bred hybridity and with it the promise and innocence of Sukama also disappear. The poet urges her readers to support the cause of this "slum-dog tale" of the poor and helpless woman.

The next poem, "Bridge-in-Making" explores Sahu's search for roots to retain her original flavor in a globalised context where she tries to strike out a middle course between the "privileged" and "marginalized". She rivets her attention on the indigenous flavor by willing to write "poetry as delicious as watered -rice, *brinjal fry* and *dry fish*". She clings to her roots firmly for her very survival in the poetic world. She also candidly admits her allegiance to English without refurbishing or tarnishing image of her ancestry. She writes :

Odia is to think, feel, dream and
be my funeral pyre. English, to me,
is my garland and my sword, my sole refuge. (5)

She has also shed the fear of colour complex and is not afraid of writing about her "wheatish brown skin". Subaltern studies which had been out-rightly rejected as "lock, stock, barrel" has lost its hegemonic implications in recent days where women have seized

opportunities to occupy significant positions. Colour complex is no more treated as potential force. Nelson Mandela's funeral ceremony being attended by over ninety heads of the countries points to this triumph of colour complex.

Elsewhere she has established herself (as all poets!) as the "unacknowledged legislator of the world". Sahu is not scared to wage a lone battle against the loneliness, boredom and "nothingness of life" which haunt her soul routinely. She dares "the endless agony of a nude lifetime".

To change the serious mood of struggle for survival, Sahu refreshes our mind by drawing our attention to the true love where all divergent elements vie for a symbiotic harmony. She urges her lover to forget the earthly worries and misunderstandings, and indulge in true love. She says:

I am the sea, and you the vessel .
Is life
only a game of the
victor and the vanquished ? (The Lamb-Wool Sky ,13)

She showcases "the trajectory to living" through the rich store house of images and metaphors that sing the praise of making life beautiful and worth living. But living in a metro where relationships break in seconds, Sahu is appalled with the spurious developments where she has lost her "punch word" to describe her agony. She possesses a strong wish to become "an autonomous woman / sometimes / I am my own mother". (Chasing The Mirage ,19). She is caught "between myself and myself", her real self and a make-shift one that she has adapted for her self, and the ambivalence comes to the fore in many a poems .

That she is bred and brought up as an Odia does not undermine her poetic credentials and her worldwide acclaim as poet is without doubt. "Odishan Landscape "becomes her forte. She showers praise for her native land : "Odisha , the melting pot of cultures / the melting point of the East and West "(31). Sahu profusely alludes to the historical roots where *Chandasoka* metamorphosed into *Dharmasoka* and the Places like Puri ,Konark, Gopalpur-on-sea may remind the poet of her childhood; but her cosmopolitan placement in Delhi washes away the tag of local colour to replace it with universal acceptance .Sahu tries hard and succeeds to preserve her multicultural identity .

Whether in "Sukama" or in "The Song of The Kandha Woman" or in the "Odishan Landscapes", she seems to represent the cause of the "New Subaltern" that would make Gayatri Spivak Chakravarty proud . Spivak's "Can The Subaltern Speak" finds its vindication in Sahu's poems and the glimpses of this vindication can be traced in Odia *Laxmi Purana* in which the subaltern Shreya (the low caste Shreya Chandaluni) has been properly represented by none other than Goddess Laxmi. She has been deserted by Jagannatha at the behest of his elder brother Balabhadra to prohibit her entrance to the Great Temple (BadaDeula). Things so happened that both the brothers went foodless for days together finally to yield to the wishes of the defiled Goddess of wealth. They accepted food from her hand and made amends for the injustice meted out to her by allowing food from Anand Bazar open to all people irrespective of their caste.

There is a lovely poem, “*Shoes*” which talks of patriarchy and androgyny. While talking of the various men in the personae’s life—grandfather, father, husband and son— “shoes” are used as a metaphor for male-dominance. The memory of the shoes haunts her even when she has left those in a remote past:

“Now I keep myself busy
sipping cinnamon and herbal tea
eating almonds, listening to music
reading novels and
writing things of my interest.
I have heard
the edge of the shoes had
vanished decades ago
when I first began writing poems in
English
flawless.

(But) Does memory spare you?
... Do androgyny and patriarchy
give you the space
to think otherwise ?”
(*Shoes*, 55)

Another poem, “*Growing Up Amid the Ruins and the Rains*”, is a nostalgic recollection of her childhood in Udayagiri, a rural village in Odisha, where the past and the present are merged in a most artistic way, revealing the pain in her present state:

“Growing up among the ruins, patiently,
I have become mature in the art of frolicking
with my shadow till sundown. Each

dark night, it creeps under my door,
that feel of love and the sense of loss borrowed
from Udayagiri. ...

In darkness I touch and feel the ruins.
Ruined pillars, archways, moth-destroyed wedding albums.
Sultry, sticky cream-powder-comb boxes. Detached parents and sisters.”

(*Growing Up Amid the Ruins and the Rains*, 88)

Sahu writes wonderful Haiku poems:

Devil

He is nowhere here or anywhere.

Very much there in
the spirit sans love.

Sleep

My sleep and sleeplessness
play hide-and-seek.
Is someone awake in me?

We readers are extremely thankful to the poet for presenting a panoramic canvas where the subaltern's case is being adequately represented. Beautifully bound, with an enigmatic photograph on the cover page, the collection deserves a refreshing outlook.