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Manuscript Title: A Handbook for Our Troubling Times: Reviewing Sumana Roy's *How I Became a Tree* (Book Review)

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The idea of human progress, measured by the amount of developmental work accomplished, is a legacy of the European Enlightenment's idea of modernity. By virtue of this very principle, humanity has forgotten its essential nature and divorced its existence from the surrounding environment by choosing to inhabit in an imaginary water-tight box of its own creation, which is perhaps inert to the interactions of its immediate ecosystem. Enlightenment's preoccupation with the instrumentalist view of nature stressed that humanity had the right to treat nature as a potential site of conquest and harness it to fill their unquenchable appetite for development; and regarded earth as a "vast machine made of inert particles in ceaseless motion" (Merchant 226). The colonial project allowed humanity boundless freedom to exploit nature for furthering their selfish designs of progress. Coupled with this, the monstrous machinery of capitalism has

exploited our environment, paralysed our diverse ecosystem and propelled us towards a crippling maldevelopment.

The fading away of the representation of the non-human element from the mainstream literary imagination may suggest tellingly about the age that we inhabit, the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene entails the centrality of the human experience and the shunning of the non-human towards the margins. It operates on the premise that nature exists solely for the gratification and profit of human beings. It is in consonance with this belief that non-human representations are diminishing from the terrain of the so-called serious literary imagination. It is to reclaim this lost territory that literary and critical approaches like Posthumanism, Climate fiction, Environmental literary studies, Plant Humanities, Blue Humanities are making a steady headway. Sumana Roy's *How I Became a Tree* (2017) is one such poignant attempt at reclaiming lost voices, or perhaps lost silences, that thwart the blind march of Capitalism and throttle the hierarchical structures of representing reality through radically rethinking ideas that govern humanity's understanding of its immediate environment, especially its entanglement with the botanical world.

How I Became a Tree is a dialogue with the world humans have forgotten and forsaken, in an increasingly modernised and commodified existence. It is a deep meditative immersion in the need of finding familiar metaphors for living by looking at the world through the perspectives of the plants. It is also a work that reflects and documents meticulous research on the literary, cultural, artistic and spiritual history of the world from the lens of Plant Humanities.

Divided into nine distinctive parts, with an epilogue at the tail end, the text is woven like a patchwork of diverse, but interconnected ruminations which are factual, often personal and therefore political. Thus it is a revealing and thought provoking journey that begins with a tree growing inside the author's head and her meandering across the her need to examine and look into portraits of plants especially the way they have been painted and regarded by Nandalal Bose, the long shadow that they cast, hunting for gossip related to the botanical life in Tagore's Santiniketan, falling in love with trees and inquiring if they are capable of adultery, looking at trees as children and Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose's scientific curiosity and predisposition of regarding plants as progeny, getting lost in the forest, to finding oneself under the shade of a tree like the Buddha under the Bodhi tree immersed in deep meditation, looking at the tree as a corpse and dealing with death, and finally reaching that note where every Bangla folktale comes to an end with: "Aamar kawthati furolo/Notay gachhti Murolo."

However, the text defeats any attempt at strict generic categorisation. It is both a memoir and non-fiction. The narrative style does not follow a teleological order, but flows independently indifferent to the logic or need to cohere and is extremely unassuming despite its expansive scope of intervention. It is an extension and somewhat also a manifestation of Roy's quest to look for "tree-shaped snug fits in that bean bag called literature" (61). Going against the linear conformity afforded by the Western civilization's advocacy of the tree diagram, Roy embraces the rhizomatic structure by getting inspired from the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari as proposed in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980). Roy's style is personal and epigrammatic, punctuated with a series of conjunctions, like a rhizome, always in the middle.

In the first chapter titled "Tree Time", Roy talks about the impossibility of rushing plants and challenges Capitalism's obsession with punctual codes of conduct and its associated ideas of productivity. Roy asserts: "One can't tinker with the timing of a yawn, one cannot play with tree-time" (10). Her need to turn into a tree was thus "a need to return to slow time" (70). Regarding from the intersectional lens of gender, caste, race, religion, nationality, and ethnic categories and using a proliferation of Botanical imagery, Roy studies the various ways in which plants have appeared in the popular imagination. Talking about history's preoccupation with the visible and the mobile, she remarks that because of the lack of eyes, plants have been banished from history, whereas plants have been a very significant factor of determining the course of history, especially through its migration, dispersal and monopoly. Tracing the connection between plants and the feminine, Roy talks about women transforming into plants in mythical tales like Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and its overtones of sexual atrocities, elsewhere in the text, she deals with the various tales where women identify themselves with plants like in Bonophul's "The Tree", O. Henry's "The Last Leaf", and in a later section marriage between a tree and a woman and their violent end in Aparna Sen's *Sati* (1989). Perhaps it is an attempt to highlight how women too have been marginal creatures in a patriarchal society, just like trees.

In the chapter titled "The Silence of Trees", Roy talks about recalibrating the scale of human voices from the perspective of various plants as a result of her need to escape noise. For her it is "the sound of resistance" (34). She also highlights the capacity of plants to strike the perfect balance while dwelling on the idea of restraint in plants. In plant economics, need and want are the same thing. This is the greatest lesson for humans in the Anthropocene which is fuelled by greed. Roy's project is a response with one's disillusionment with such a world and

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her anecdotes which bleed into analytical passages, one chapter flowing into another moving between the personal and the political is an attempt to reach out and form a camaraderie of members who feel the same way, it is also a repository of the ecstasy of having found similar minds in others who harboured the desire of (and often succeeded in) becoming trees.

Dealing with the incorporeal vis-à-vis plants, Roy talks about the long shadows cast by them and the crippling fear mingled with curiosity that aroused in her mind. Their presence would inspire awe and fear and their absence fill her with sadness. She experimented with x-raying plants to know more about their inner life and tried to collect the shadows. Roy writes, "That there is no history of shadows is one of the saddest absences in our archives" (67). Despite the perplexity, she finds consolation in the fact that even an unfamiliar tree's shadow seems familiar for the shadows of trees "obliterate specificity," dissolving its colour, form or bearings, just like the shadow of a man does not reflect "race, class, or religion" (79), an open-minded approach relinquishing every trace of discrimination. Thus, the shadow offered an opportunity of identifying and perhaps becoming a tree for Roy.

At the heart of the text is the chapter of Tagore's garden and his love for plants. Roy notes with fascination Tagore's desire of becoming an "ordinary tree" (99), just like her deep yearning to become grass, moss, weed, without serving any purpose and challenging the concept of Utilitarianism head-on. It is also reminiscent of his dear friend's idea of plants, who too treated them as his children, Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose, who asserted that we sow though we "may not reap the fruit" (128). Tagore's rich corpus of literature is also replete with representation where man is not privileged over plants. In Tagore, there is no need for metamorphosis, and a fluid existence is portrayed, decentring a homocentric universe (104).

The deep sense of filial bond with plants is not strange but quite remarkable and has been a part of the Indian culture where it is mentioned in the Upanishads and Roy notes that one tree was considered to be the equal of ten sons. The inextricable part of loving is losing and while talking about death Roy wonders why has no one ever written any obituary for dead trees. Her text plays out as a canvas which is at times a diary, a treatise, a philosophical document, a deep introspection, a memoir, an assertion and an interrogation. Here, Ovid, Shakespeare, D.H. Lawrence, Dali, Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay, Bonophool, Satyajit Ray, Milosz, Buddha, the Upanishads, the Vinay Pitaka and so many other diverse texts, authors, philosophical doctrines and religious ideas jostle for space. It is a text where one loses oneself, just as in a forest only to find one's true identity and attain the ultimate

realisation as Roy sums up that it is a plant that can teach us the balance of existence. It would not be too far-fetched to claim that it may as well be a handbook for our troubling times.

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