

## Sumana Roy. *How I Became a Tree*

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Sumana Roy's *How I Became a Tree* (2017) is a profoundly introspective meditation on the intersection of human existence and the natural world, wherein the author interweaves poetic sensibilities with a critique of modernity. Through an intricate narrative structure, Roy formulates what may be construed as a didactic project for environmental education, foregrounding an experiential re-engagement with the non-human realm. Her writing does not proffer definitive conclusions but instead fosters an intellectual and affective openness, evoking what Joan Retallack terms a 'self-imposed resistance to closure' (Retallack 2003: 13) thereby engendering a sustained engagement with the philosophical, ethical and phenomenological dimensions of ecological consciousness.

Modernity has engendered an epistemic rupture between human cognition and ecological awareness, severing the sensory and intellectual bonds that once tethered us to the natural world. Roy's book emerges from this very rupture, as she embarks upon an introspective journey to document what she terms her 'spiritual and emotional transformation into a tree' (p. 26), a process through which she interrogates the ontological and ethical stakes of arboreal existence.

This transformation is not to be understood in a literal sense but rather as a metaphorical elevation of human consciousness to the

nuances of the arboreal realm. Her prose is suffused with evocative imagery, culminating in a moment of transcendental attunement: 'Not until a bird came and sat on my shoulder around sunset one day. I did not move. I do not know about the bird but I was certain that in the thinning margins of that forest in Baikunthapur I was, at last, ready to be a tree' (p. 222). By adopting a mode of being that resists anthropocentric temporalities, Roy engages in what she terms 'Tree Time', an alternative temporality unmoored from the inexorable acceleration of human existence: 'So, when I look back at the reasons for my disaffection with being human, and my desire to become a tree, I can see that at root lay the feeling that I was being bulldozed by time' (p. 3).

Roy's engagement with time, language and the self's relationship to nature is profoundly philosophical. She questions whether it is possible to write as a tree might – an aspiration that entails relinquishing conventional grammatical structures, which she perceives as instruments of temporal regulation, losing her sense of grammar which is 'a linguistic baton with which to control time' (p. 62). Her reflections resonate with a mode of existence predicated on attentiveness, slowness and an immersion in the rhythms of nature. She observes the ways in which industrial societies have pathologised aging, treating it as a process of decline rather than an accrual of dignity: 'Our lives in the industrial age, lived bizarrely as an approximation of machines, had made us think of age as ugly – in the way machines rusted, wasted, and gradually became ugly before they fell apart' (p. 6). In contrast, she finds within trees an alternative paradigm of temporality, one that embraces the process of growth as an unfolding rather than a degradation.

Roy also examines the semiotics of abundance and excess in contemporary consumer societies, critiquing their detachment from inner life: 'Ours was an age of excess – more food and clothes and houses and things than we needed, an extravagant show of wealth and emotions without either being connected to the inner life' (p. 11). In juxtaposition, trees emerge as symbols of self-sufficiency, existing beyond the imperatives of accumulation and spectacle. Her meditation on tree care and human grooming practices further elucidates her concerns:

Both the hairdresser and the gardener seemed to believe in the value of snips and cuts for a better future, and in this I began to see the kinship of my undisciplined hair with the wayward branches of trees. I had begun to feel the violence of seasonal pruning and cutting that was inflicted on plants and trees (p. 10).

Her exploration of trees also extends to their modes of resistance, both literal and metaphorical. She examines how trees respond to wind and sound, drawing an analogy between arboreal resilience and human acts of protest:

My experiments with the sound recorder had brought about a new realization—that trees shared a natural sound with people. It is the sound of resistance—like protesters ‘raising their voice,’ trees produced a sound that held in it their fight against wind, water, rain, to tearing, cutting and breaking (p. 25).

This poetic rendering of resistance imbues her narrative with an ecological politics that underscores the urgent need for a reconfiguration of human-nature relations.

Beyond individual meditations, Roy highlights the broader socio-political dimensions of deforestation, aligning with Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s observations about forests and nationalism. In the forests, the categories of nation and identity dissolve: ‘These forest dwellers—and this included all plant life resident inside it—did not know who or where Bharatvarsha was’ (p. 155). Instead, the primary struggle within the forest is against trees themselves, as agriculture encroaches upon the wilderness. Here, Roy positions deforestation as a historical and ethical struggle, where trees are sacrificed to human expansionist agendas, reinforcing the moral charge attached to afforestation and deforestation as acts of sin and redemption.

Roy’s arboreal reflections are not merely contemplative; they also offer a pedagogical model for environmental education that integrates artistic sensibilities with ecological awareness. She reminisces about her childhood encounters with art and literature, invoking O. Henry’s short story ‘The Last Leaf’ as an exemplar of art’s ability to mediate between human and non-human life. The performative act of embodying leaves within theatrical representation becomes, for Roy, a mode of kinaesthetic learning that fosters ecological empathy: ‘The character from O. Henry’s short story *The Last Leaf*—Johnsy—had begun to believe in her life—and death—being a mimicry of the life of leaves on the tree in winter’ (p. 48). This intermedial approach to understanding nature gestures towards a broader environmental pedagogy, one that privileges embodied cognition and aesthetic engagement over mere didactic instruction.

Similarly, Roy's reflections on the painter Nandalal Bose further illuminate the ways in which artistic practice can function as an act of ecological becoming. She perceives the act of drawing leaves as a form of ontological transformation, wherein the human subject enters into a mimetic relationship with the non-human world: 'The tree-becoming human is also on the next page where the illustration of tree bark made me want to scratch a rough patch of skin on my knee, where so many scars of childhood games live' (p. 39). This dissolution of boundaries between self and nature underscores the radical potential of art to recalibrate human perception and affective engagement with the environment.

While modern education prioritises scientific understanding of nature, it does not necessarily foster empathy. What value does knowledge of trees hold if it does not prevent their destruction? Learning about trees should inspire inclusivity and respect for them. Arboreal humanities, emphasising artistic engagement, offer an alternative. Sumana Roy's reflections on trees provide a framework for creative education. Art classes can incorporate drawing, dance, theatre, and writing inspired by 'tree time', reinforcing trees as living beings integral to the ecosystem. Literature courses can move beyond conservation narratives to encourage personal reflection on students' connections with trees. Creating imaginative spaces for interaction can promote conservation and an environment-sensitive pedagogy that fosters 'becoming-other' or creative learning.

## CONCLUSION

Sumana Roy's *How I Became a Tree* presents trees as more than objects of study – they are epistemic interlocutors capable of transforming human consciousness. Her critique of modernity, engagement with alternative temporalities and artistic sensibility advocate for an ecological awareness that transcends instruction. Her work suggests an environmental pedagogy rooted in relational ethics and experiential learning. By integrating arboreal humanities, artistic expression and embodied practice, educators can deepen students' connection with nature, fostering empathy and responsibility. Through literature, art and interactive

activities, an environment-sensitive pedagogy can cultivate awareness and belonging within the ecosystem.

## REFERENCES

Retallack, J. 2003. *The Poethical Wager*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

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