



**Anthropomorphized Trees and Chremamorphized Humans
in Sumana Roy's *How I became a Tree***

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Abstract

Aim: *The main aims of the researcher are—one is to critically analyze the anthropogenic nature of trees as feminine as well as masculine; Second is to promote the idea of “Equality and Equity” with all living things on the Earth. In Clear words, it has explored the reciprocal comparison of humans with trees, to demonstrate the magnificent lives and traits of trees, which homosapiens do not have.*

Methodology and Approach: *The study is based on the non-fiction of Roy's How I Became a Tree as the primary text. It has included the ideas of other fiction, poems, research articles, and films as secondary sources to analyze the text*

Outcome: *The book is a memoir of Roy's nostalgic childhood happenings. hilariously, she stabilizes her desire to become a tree with the supporting literary experiences of Tagore, D. H. Lawrence, Jagadish Chandra Bose, etc, with plants and flowers. Rathindran Prasad' Bhoomika, a 2021 South Indian Horror movie is added to emphasize the reprised attitude of trees, if they speak for themselves, to stop the materialistic exploitation of humans on the Earth.*

Conclusion and Suggestion: *The paper winds up with the notion of, like humans, plants are one of the off-springs of the Great Mother. They have all the emancipation and territory to live like humans. They resemble anthropocentric images to expose their unique habits which are more or less similar to human personalities and to show the endangered life of them which echoes the apocalypse of humans.*

Keywords: Nature writing, Eco-criticism, Eco-feminism, Plant Studies, Prosopopoeia, South Indian Movie, and Natural Evolution

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Nature is the onliest inspiration for writers and artists to sketch their wonderful imaginations, through their magical words. It heals the pain of mankind. It kindles the positive spirit of every individual. As a genre, Nature writing comes into the literary path at the beginning of the twentieth century. Though it hides its

origin in the hind of “Ecocriticism”, many American pioneers such as Melville, Thoreau, Cather, and Steinback, bring this school to the light of academics. After all the talk of socio-consciousness in varied branches of subjects, to respect, protect and accept the plants, animals, and climates, divergent regional writers like MacFarlane, Kingnorth, Hime, Aller, Millosz, take their pens as their swords.

On the rise of the Feminism Movement, countless women writers create their columns in this domain too, named “Eco-Feminism”. Unlike male writers, they highlight nature as their companion with day-to-day existence; some prominent matron writers are Gene Stratton Porter, Sally Carrigar, Gretel Ehrlich, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Rebecca Solnit. In Indian literature, Sumana Roy is an upcoming naturalist, novelist, and poet. She spent her early days in the foothills of the Himalayas, maybe, which urges her to publish her first non-fiction *How I became a tree* in 2017.

The first part of the article focuses on, Roy's wishes to become a kind of ordinary tree— “wanted to become, grass, moss, weed, something that would not draw attention to itself, something that was of no use to humans, something almost nameless except as some footnote in a sincere botanist’s dull diary” (Roy,2017, p.82). She lists that social violence, discrimination, and material mindsets are the reasons, for her desire of embellishing a tree. Despite highlighting the anthropologic nature of trees, she shows how humans adapt their lives with trees in various relationships by quoting Tagore, Bose, and real-life celebrities.

Humans tend to give priority to names that are their identity which they give the individual at the stage of Infancy itself. Tagore is an admirer of plants and trees. He treats them as his “Children”. Because of his fondness for them, he gives them attractive names according to their nature and living places. At one instance, Tagore comes to know about Bideshi, a foreign tree through his late

friend Pearson. As a lover of trees, Tagore is not satisfied with the odd name of Bideshi. He waits for the outcome of the alienated tree. Thus, the tree reveals its identity with the blooming of vibrant blue flowers. “I have always found a deep happiness in the color blue, and every day, when I passed it, the flowers made me stand still in silence. I also wanted to speak to it as a poet, but I did not have a name with which to address it” (Roy, 2017, p.81). He baptizes Bideshi as ‘Neelmonilata’ for its beautiful color to show the singularity of the plant.

In his *Banobani*, Tagore remarks that every plant became an aborigine by giving a “deshi name” (Roy, 2017, p.81) to them. He writes a letter to his distant granddaughter Hemantabala Debi and sends a flower *OchnaSquarrosa* along with it. He personifies the bruises of Ramadhan Chapa, the locals called, with the sufferings of a new bride in her in-law's house: “...when it reaches you after being crushed by the postal department, it will look like a new bride that has had to endure a lot of pain from her cruel mother-in-law, and has therefore been denied its self-expression” (Roy,2017, p.81-2).

Like Wordsworth, Tagore sees nature everywhere and in everything. He decides to implant love for nature in the minds of learners, not as an “Ecology” (Roy, 2017, p.84), one of the subjects that they have to study for their examination. He established a school called ‘PathaBhavan’ in 1901, with the main goal of celebrating nature, and he emphasized the intention in his letter to his close associate Keshitimohan Sen in 1909, “we should strive to make the students familiar with the birds, animals and plant life in the ashram” (Roy,2017, p.85).

Eco-criticism is the study of literature and the environment. A literary theoretical concept was introduced at the beginning of the millennium. However, the base idea was initiated in Tagore’s days. His school of nature study with a guide of ‘PrakritiPaath’, edited by Anil Kumar De, has a distinctive study of plant life. First, students of Santiniketan study the trees with their five senses; they

observe and differentiate the leaves and flowers with their fluctuating colors, smells, and weight. In the upper classes, they diagnose the different kinds of soils which are suitable for diversified trees, and also, they study what comprises resources and food supply for all living things. Many critics consider that Tagore gives much more importance to trees than men analyzing the curriculum. However, Tagore wishes to treat trees as a co-participant of daily life with mankind. He urges that “trees be studied as individuals, the way medical doctors and psychiatrists might study men” (Roy, 2017, p.86).

Tagore is an outstanding person who writes about trees and plants in the Bangla language. There are two famous poems on palm and banyan trees in which he portrays them as family members by giving them human authority. His verses are rewording “the life of flowers, fruits, and trees, turn their activities into human parables, the flowers of the season become metaphors of love and waiting, the leaves move to the rhythm of his mood, the roots and veins become visible in marking relationships and history...” (Roy, 2017, p.87) Such a devotee of trees, often wishing to be a tree, Tagore depicts that the palm tree longs to be a bird as a human desire for another person. The tree does yearn to touch the sky as birds and wants to fly with the spirit of the wind as Shelly beautifully says in “Ode to the West Wind” (1820): “If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee; / A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share / The impulse of strength/ Only less free / Than thou, O Uncontrollable.”

Tagore perceives the tree as chained to the earth as human commits to social responsibilities. To break the similar bondage, he compares the tree with a child who is free and uncontrolled. At the same time, in his poem on the banyan tree, he describes the old banyan as “an old patriarch” (Roy, 2017, p.87). He is “exhausted with his books and studies, asking for a break from his mother, or taking his mind on a holiday” (Roy, 2017, p.87), in his poems he fancies himself

as a tree child playing with the branches of “shaggy headed banyan tree” (Roy, 2017, p.87), “as a grandchild does in a grandmother’s lap” (Roy, 2017, p.87).

Plantain tree is celebrated for its evergreen resources. Indians use them in all felicitous ceremonies, especially for marriage and pre-marriage functions, which stand for prosperity and fertility. Roy cites a poem by Nitoo Das on a girl’s image of getting engaged to a plantain tree at her puberty age. It is more common in Assamese rituals, and also in the South Indian ritual of mangal dosha. After all, Roy implies here that people consider trees as human partners or companions to an individual by organizing such rituals in the name of superstition beliefs. To validate it, she exhibits the character of Uma from AparnaSen’s movie *Sati*. Forced by Aunt, Uma agrees to the ritual of marrying a banyan tree that would save her from “the curse of widowhood” (Roy, 2017, p.93). But she “finds companionship in the unspoken love of the Banyan tree” (Roy, 2017, p.93). She becomes pregnant by a school teacher, yet she names the father of the child as a banyan tree to logically attack the credulous villagers. The story ends with the death of a husband-banyan tree, attacked by furious lightning along with the death of Uma with blood on her forehead.

Plants too celebrate and enjoy ceremonies like humans. Roy remarks by citing the lines of Kahlil Gibran from *On Marriage*: “For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts/ And Stand together yet not too near together/ For the pillars of the temple stand apart, / And the Oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other’s shadow”. Plants marry each other which is a natural mechanism called “Inosculation” (Roy, 2017, p.99). The writer connects this concept with the Hindu rituals in which two trees are tied with red clothes amid the magnanimous celebration. It is often seen in Hindu temples during festivals. While witnessing these scenarios, as an outsider, Roy imagines that the two trees are man and

woman; they are united by tying together the red cloth to be a wedded pair as humans do this ritual as one of the processes in marriage.

Roy wishes to become a tree and to some extent, she is fond of having a tree boyfriend with forest-like qualities by quoting from the prelude of SharanyaManivannan's "Boyfriend like a Banyan tree": "A man who's a forest unto himself, with conspiracies of birds, and secret blossoms, and shaded places; a matrix generous enough for the world" (Roy, 2017, p.92). Citing the above, it is not logically possible; Roy imagines future encounters like visiting a party with "a potted plant" (Roy,2017,p.102) or changing the bride's surname to the groom's that usually married people do, would be inclined to hilarious segments.

After all, tree-huggers love nature unconditionally. They associate "trees have no memory, not of pain, neither of pleasure. It is this that makes them tabula rasas--- they are lovers like no other. The history here was unchangeably one-sided--- the lover remembers the tree, the tree doesn't remember her at all" (Roy, 2017, p.99), still they expect anything in return. The writer recognizes the real couple of tree-human, who married in November 2013. To create social awareness of environmental problems, the Peruvian Star Richard Torres wedded a tree in Buenos Aires. But he has chosen the tree as his long-wedded wife for her mesmerizing aspects.

Nowadays, most couples go for adoption because of their infertility. Interestingly, they opt for trees and plants as their children. Roy mentions those children as "green children" (Roy, 2017, p.104). She is in a dilemma about whether it is possible not to eat them because humans cannot eat their children. It is "an act of Cannibalism" (Roy, 2017, p.105). Yet it is impractical in the condition of plants. In the chapter Science of *The Language of Plants* (2017), Christian Nansen points out the difficulties of overlooking plants as a co-existing creation, still human populations see them as "production". They are the core food

products of vegetarians. Once, Roy is reported by the doctor that her hemoglobin count was low; which may lead to anemia, and suggested looking after her health.

As a mother of plants, she questions the love of plants for her, as she shows for them like a son giving liters of blood to his mother in need. As expected, she has got clarification from her home gardener. He gives her the leaves of the thorny plant *Kuleykhara*. By consuming its gloppy glucose, one gets cured of anemia. Like a child of a human parent, a plant takes care of its loved ones, when they need it. She realizes that “every green sip is a blood transfusion from a bottle into my veins” (Roy, 2017, p.106). Human and plant lives are intertwined. Each needs one other for their survival. However, Roy believes that plants are “in need of daily attention and care” (Roy, 2017, p.128).

Jagadish Bose, a friend of Tagore, is a Botanist. He is honored to be called a “plant psychologist” (Roy, 2017, p.111) rather than a plant physiologist. He admits plants are living things as other creations on the Earth such as an excellent poem that prevails as immortal writing till it gets ruined. He adores the individuality of plants, like the personal lives of Humans with other humans. He guards them like his children. Roy brings out Bose’s 1917 lecture in which he demonstrates the humanness of plant lives using numerous gadgets such as Phytograph, Automatic photograph, Buler instrument, etc; With his continuous observation, he confirms that every plant has proper growth and development within themselves, physically and mentally like humans.

Adding that, Roy questions further to reassure the emotions of trees and plants, and how far they communicate their feelings and react with other species: “didn’t the tree feel exhausted on a hot day in May, didn’t the tree feel sad to see leaves fall at its root, didn’t it feel jealous when its neighbor was given more water than it, and so on. But most of all, the secret I wanted to know was how young plants felt when their parents died. Did they feel like orphans?” (Roy,

2017, p.112) To clarify with the readers, Roy picks an essay by Bose entitled “Automatism in Plant and Animal”, in which Bose highlights, like mankind, plants are exposed to “the harshness of the environment” (Roy,2017,p.113) such as, to, weather, disasters, and climate changes.

As Herbert Spencer suggests in *The Principles of Biology*, “The survival of the fittest”, the plant-people fight with Mother Earth, along with other species, to bring back their identity into progression. It reminds me of the trials of Irrawaddy Dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*) in adapting to the new environment in Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* (2019): “As sea levels rose, and the flow of freshwater diminished, salt water had begun to intrude deeper upstream, ... too saline for the dolphins...began to venture further and further upriver, into populated, heavily fished areas” (Ghosh,2019,p.92). In every attempt, there are two possibilities for living. One is that non-human creatures accept the changing surroundings and another is they reflect their reprisal in reverse.

Like Humans, plants are one of the off-springs of the Great Mother. They have all the emancipation and territory to live like humans. In *Radical Botany* (2020), Meeker and Szabari emphasize that Speculative Plant Narratives devote a spatial role to plant life, especially in the field of Cinemas. The makers create an anthropocentric image of plants to expose their unique habits which are more or else similar to human personalities and to show their endangered life of them which echoes the apocalypse of humans.

Even with the support of Roy’s non-fiction, *How I became a tree*, the researcher emphasizes that the tree has more qualities than humans. To strengthen the discussion, Rathindran Prasad’s Eco-thriller *Bhoomika* is added for the supplementary. It premiered on 22 August 2021 on NetFlix via Vijay TV Network. In a literary sense, it is a template ghost movie, in which, Samyuktha and Gautam, along with two friends come to Ooty for a real estate project of

transforming an alienated school campus into a renovated modern building. Yet figuratively, as the movie goes, the director gives the social message of revealing the real face of Mother Goddess through the “wide angle shot of a singletree thrice” (Filmi Craft, 2021).

The second part of the article focuses on the other side of the coin--- it circles the qualities of the tree that is predominated within the human figure. The character of Bhoomika from the movie is under the main interpretation. She is a person with three traits. A nature artist always handles the brush with the “doodle images” (Cinema Vikatan, 2021) of trees. Roberto Zazzara, the cinematographer, paints the character of Bhoomika full-fledged. She is everlastingly a tree. In one instance, her father Ganesan is trying to teach her school syllabus, and her body language--- eyes, hands, and legs, is thinking and admiring something else. She always focuses on painting trees and leaves.

On one side, her librarian father Ganesan struggles a lot to get her admitted into the school. But, on the other side, she is like a leaf, flying according to the nature of the wind. Though she is a human, she thinks and lives like a tree. Gautam’s friend Gayathri, after escaping from the haunted place, finds out the actuality of the isolated place; there the audience witnesses the tree nature of Bhoomika. Unlike others, she lives in ‘tree-time’ as Roy mentions. She does not like any artificiality and she wishes to live with the act of clumsiness of nature.

While discussing the personified trees, Roy speaks of Bawali from Tagore’s short story collection; Roy presents the importance of trees and the survivability of plants by personifying them with human aspects to give the parallelism to the non-humans. Yet she identifies a gripping short story “Bawlai” from Tagore’s marvelous collection to reciprocate the plant attributes to humans. In the story, Bawlai is “as old as the earth’s forests” (Roy, 2017, p. 89) and transports “their spirit in him” (Roy, 2017, p.89). He stays with his uncle and

aunt. His interest in the trees conceives him to resemble a tree. “As a child, he would stand and stare silently, like trees do, showing no curiosity ...when it rained, he behaved like a happy tree in July, when it grew very hot, he moved about bare-chested, embracing the heat like trees do...in the month of magh, he behaved like the mango tree beginning to bloom; in phalgun, he became a flowering sal tree” (Roy, 2017, p.89). He eagerly learns the history of every tree and sapling. He hurts when anyone even tweaks a leaf from trees. He believes he is a reflection of trees and cognizes “the secret life of seeds that had fallen from trees overhead and had now struck a tiny root in the ground” (Roy, 2017, p.89).

Bhoomika, like Bawali, believes that she is the reflection of trees. In the movie, she always spends her time with a single huge tree. The sound of the drilling machine irritates her, which she believes is a synecdoche for destruction. The Cinematographer sketches the appearance of Bhoomika with the glowing light of insects and birds with green touch in her. The audience sees her along with the other characters elegantly, at the first entry in the film. Prasad conveys the Gaia theory in the movie that Mother Earth is an organism and its creations are only viruses, including trees. The creatures may get resources from Earth for living, yet they should not grab their full power. They do not have that much capacity within them. Prasad declares clearly that humans, animals, plants, and insects are all part and parcel of nature. Humans with their cognitive capability have created imaginary hierarchies to lead a better hegemonic world for themselves. But it is only their assumptions.

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