Exploring Human-Tree Interconnectedness in Sumana Roy's *How I Became a Tree*: An Ecocritical Analysis

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Abstract: The intricate connection between humans and nature is a fundamental aspect of existence, shaping cultures, beliefs, and lifestyles. This relationship, characterized by interdependence and symbiosis, is crucial for the psychological, emotional, and physical well-being of individuals. This connection reveals how natural environments foster a sense of peace, enhance creativity, and promote well-being. Conversely, humans impact the natural world through their activities, necessitating a balance to ensure sustainability. In the new age literary theory, ecocriticism has found a prominent place in literature, examining and exploring the link between nature and man. Ecocriticism pleads for a better understanding of nature, and it both interprets and represents the natural world. One such natural entity is a tree. Trees have been significant motifs in literature. They have been symbols of fertility and growth, strength and endurance and renewal and regeneration. Many literary texts show an intimate connection between a human being and a tree. The present paper explores one such human-tree interconnectedness through the lens of ecocriticism in a non-fictional text, *How I became a Tree* by Sumana Roy. This analysis delves into Roy's narrative, where she metaphorically and literally aspires to embody the qualities of a tree, seeking solace from the frenetic pace of modern life. Through literary and philosophical reflections, Roy elucidates her symbolic metamorphosis into a tree, thus highlighting the highest form of interconnectedness where one form merges into the other.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Interconnectedness, Metamorphosis, Sustainability, Trees

There has been a connection between human beings and natural world since time immemorial. This connection characterized by interdependence, mutual influence and symbiosis, is crucial for the psychological, emotional, and physical well-being of individuals. This connection reveals how

natural environments foster a sense of peace, enhance creativity, and promote good health. Conversely, humans impact the natural world through their activities, necessitating a balance to ensure sustainability. In the new age literary theory, ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature and the environment. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and the importance of understanding and preserving the natural world. According to Greg Garrard, the eminent professor of environmental humanities, "The widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human'" (5). It was in the year 1978 that William Rueckert used the term ecocriticism in the essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." However, the definition of ecocriticism is credited to the book, *The Ecocritical Reader* written by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. According to Glotfelty, ecocriticism in terms of literature is defined as follows:

> Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (xviii)

The eco-centric reading focuses on the outside, the house and its environs, rather than the inside. It uses the ideas of energy that is entropy, which is a kind of negative energy within systems which tends towards breakdown and disorganization and that of symbiosis, a living together, co-existing, and mutually sustaining systems.

Ecocriticism has deep roots and within its ambit lays everything related to natural resources like the earth, sky, water, mountains and trees. In the words of William Howarth, "Ecocriticism observes in nature and culture the ubiquity of signs, indicators of value that shape form and meaning. Ecology leads us to recognize that life speaks, communing through encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose, if we learn to translate the messages with fidelity" (76-77). Unlike

most other theories, ecocriticism rejects the view that everything is socially or linguistically constructed. In this connection, Peter Barry's observation is significant:

> For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, and not needing to be ironised as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it. Nature, then, isn't reducible to a concept which we conceive as part of our cultural practice …. Theory in general tends to see our external world as socially and linguistically constructed, as 'always already textualized into 'discourse', but ecocriticism calls this longstanding theoretical orthodoxy into question …. (243)

Antony Giddens advocates more caring attitude towards the environment which can make a human being the steward of nature. This attitude has led to the concept of deep ecology as formulated by Arne Naess. Deep ecology believes in the fundamental interconnectedness of all life forms and natural features. Naess suggests shifting the anthropological view to the ecological view.

Talking specifically about trees, they have been significant motifs in literature. They have been symbols of fertility and growth, strength and endurance and renewal as well as regeneration. There is a kind of organic kinship that exists between humans and trees, communicating with and sustaining each other. As stated by Solvejg Nitzke in his research article:

> Trees and humans are part of a long and complicated relationship. On the one hand, humans not only value trees for their wood, which literally shelters, fuels and furnishes human lives, they also admire and worship arboreal beings for their height, connected-ness, and longevity …. Yet, the relationship between trees and humans exceeds the dimension of the practical: Forests and trees capture human imagination, whether as a thought or a symbol, an actual tree, or a metaphor …. The tradition of humans fashioning themselves after trees and vice versa reaches back millennia. Despite this long tradition, trees have been marginalised in literary and cultural studies as 'just' motifs or symbols, that is, as something, which stands for human interests and stories, not for themselves. (Nitzke 341)

Sumana Roy's *How I became a Tree* is a path-breaking non-fictional work wherein the author literally as well as metaphorically aspires to embody the qualities of a tree, seeking solace from the frenetic pace of modern life. Through literary and philosophical reflections, Roy elucidates her symbolic metamorphosis into a tree. Roy wishes to become a tree or treelike. Her desire to metamorphose into plant life symbolizes a return to a more harmonious and sustainable way of living. In the words of Mathew Hall in his book, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*, "The notions of plant personhood and human-plant kinship are expressed in stories, poems, and myths. Common expressions of personhood and kinship are metamorphoses from human form to plant form" (11-12). As observed by Alberto Baracco, "In regard to the human-tree relation, since ancient times, the tree has long been a symbol of life and the perennial cyclicity of nature. As a connecting element between earth and sky, bringing together materiality and spirituality, the tree has been the fulcrum of myths and narratives and also a recurring element in philosophical reflection. The tree, in fact, has been considered an element for understanding nature and the human being" (255-56). By blending personal narrative, literary reflection, and botanical insight, Sumana Roy creates a rich mosaic that highlights the deep connections between humans and the natural world. As articulated by Anirban Bhattacharjee in his book review, Roy's work:

> … a mélange of memoir, music, spiritual philosophies, phyto-literature, and botanical studies, is a risky body-writing that opens the self toward the other to measure out the author's (own) capacity to respond to the call of the other, as she, as if, or in a keen sense, literally and textually, breast-feeds the non-human non-animal plants/trees, an intimate and unsettling *saṁjoga* (contact) that blurs the borders between the bodies. (78-79)

The paper is an attempt to offer a profound exploration of human-tree interconnectedness where one form merges into the other. Roy is not the first one to talk about such human-tree inter-connectedness. In ancient Greek philosophy there has been a relation between human beings and trees, often on the basis of a supposed analogy of their biological processes. In this regard, the concept of the 'arbor inversa' propounded by Plato in the *Timaeus* is important. Plato argued that the human being is a

celestial plant, an upside-down tree whose roots extend into the sky and whose branches descend into the earth. According to the Hindu philosophy, the world is like an inverted *peepal* tree. With regard to contemporary philosophy of Martin Buber, the tree is human being's direct interlocutor. According to Buber's dialogical philosophy, the tree is a 'Thou' in relation to which it is possible to say the 'I, ' through a dialogue that allows human beings to rediscover their genuine nature. From a similar perspective, Hermann Hesse observes, "Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth" (52).

Several works of fiction have tried to explore this quintessential relationship between a human and a tree. The 2019 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by the American novelist Richard Powers, *The Overstory*, is one such eco-fiction. The novel is divided into four sections, titled "roots," "trunk," "crown," and "seeds" reflecting the structure of a tree. The human characters in this novel begin to hear the utterances of trees, often as eloquent statements addressed directly to them. One of the central characters in the novel, Patricia Westerford, a tree scientist, articulates:

> We scientists are taught never to look for ourselves in other species. So, we make sure nothing looks like us! Until a short while ago, we didn't even let chimpanzees have consciousness, let alone dogs or dolphins…. But believe me: trees want something from us, just as we've always wanted things from them. This isn't mystical. The "environment" is alive—a fluid, changing web of purposeful lives dependent on each other. (Powers 453–54).

The novel undoubtedly talks about the human-tree symbiotic relationship, "The novel offers a fictional reflection on new modes of cross-species understanding by placing its human characters at the margins and in milieux where other species share the same medium and invite them to consort with their symbiotic neighbors" (Clarke 128).

Sumana Roy elucidates the human-tree interconnectedness by viewing trees as parent (mother), children, lover and even a spouse and validates her thoughts by quoting from a number of literati, botanists, film makers and many more. Talking about tree as mother, Roy narrates a Bengali story "The Giving Tree" written by Narayan Sanyal. In the story, a little boy grew up in the loving

canopy of a mango tree, "A little boy loves the mango tree and grows up playing with it- making crown of fallen mango leaves … swinging on its branches, climbing up its trunk, feeding on its mangoes…" (Roy 218). The tree was like a mother to him- caring and giving. However, when the boy became a little older, he left the place in search of greener pastures. He was missed by the "Tree Mother" (218) and then one fine day he returned and demanded money from the mango tree. The tree mother asked him to collect all her mangoes and sell in the market. The young man got the money he desired and went away again only to return years later in search of more money. The tree mother asked him to chop off her branches and to sell the timber. His needs were again satisfied and again many years passed. The man, aged now, returned again and demanded more money. The tree mother asked him to cut off her trunk and sell it off. The man did the same without any sense of guilt or shame. Through this story, Roy highlights the giving nature of a tree just as a mother who sacrifices her life so that the children might live. She also hints towards barbaric human nature that mercilessly kills trees for selfish gains, committing "one of the most abominable crimes" (219) of killing one's own mother, thus disturbing the ecological balance. Personally, Roy regards a papaya tree growing outside her bedroom as a mother, "It is like a mother to me- I take it for granted like I do my mother" (220), and pays due respect and homage to it.

Conversely, Sumana Roy talks about trees as children. Personally, she views all plants as her children, "… the parenting I had chosen was in no way inferior to the production of human children …" (121). She is repulsed with the idea of vegetarianism- to consume the very plants she had watered and cared for like a mother, "But my plants? My tiny kitchen garden with its enthusiastic sprouting of herbs was specifically meant for indulging the tongue" (122). When Roy suffers from a low haemoglobin count and goes to see a doctor, she comes across a son donating blood to his ailing mother. She wonders if this kind of thing is possible with her plant children, "Was such reciprocity ever possible in the monologous relationship I shared with my plants? I had given them care, attention, affection, water, everything except sunlight …. Could they not give me blood when I needed it most?" (122). Interestingly, a plant comes to her rescue that is to be boiled and consumed as a concoction, a

spoonful every day to cure her of her anemia, "Green to red, chlorophyll to blood" (123). The plants prove to be her true children. In the text, she also alludes to the great botanist from India, Sir Jagdish Chandra Bose who also viewed plants as children. She is joyful on this revelation and thus reflects:

> One can only estimate my joy in becoming aware of these comparisons, not just his thinking of plants as his human children but also the easy fluidity withy which he saw the workings of two seemingly very different species, the plant and the human …. There is no more difficulty in understanding this process …. We may thus regard the channels of the ascent of sap in the plant as a sort of diffuse heart. He [Bose] notes the similarities between the human response to light and compares it immediately with the plant- light is food for both … (132)

Roy asserts that "To read Bose, to live like him, is to become aware of a liberating sense of life where one can be plant and human at the same time" (132). Taking the human-tree interconnectedness to yet another level, Roy talks about tree as lover/ beloved or a spouse. She mentions a poem, "Boyfriend like a Banyan Tree" where a woman tired of human lovers desires a banyan tree as her lover. Roy also mentions noted filmmaker Aparna Sen's movie, "*Sati*" where banyan tree is first a lover to a lonely woman and then a husband, "Uma, lonely and unloved, finds companionship in the unspoken love of the banyan tree to which she is eventually married off" (108). Roy mentions another interesting story, "The Tree" written by Adrienne Lang, "Lang's story that had first got me interested in her held in it some of my natural insecurities as a lover. A woman comes home to find that her boyfriend has turned into a tree … into a fig tree" (109). Taking cue from the real-life incidents, Roy narrates the story of Emma McCabe from United Kingdom. McCabe fell in love with a tree she called Tim and even wanted to marry him. Roy also quotes Peruvian actor, Richard Torres who married a tree in the year 2013. However, such companionship is criticized and considered queer by the society at large. Roy remarks, "The imagined reactions of families to such a relationship bothered me …. No matter how moral and utilitarian the nature of the tree-human relationship, a romance between the two would be considered outrageous" (117).

Roy becomes acutely aware of the similarities between a tree and a human being. Both age with time but while humans believe in hiding their age, trees age with grace:

> Age, I was certain, was important to trees. The wrinkles on our face and neck, the accumulation of folds around hips and thighs had, civilizationally, become embarrassing to humans. The age of trees was to be found in similar lines, in circles denoting lived years, in the girth of time that gave aged trees a kind of sober dignity. (5-6)

Roy is acutely aware of the advantages trees have over humans in terms of freedom from sham and patriarchy, "I loved the way in which trees coped with dark and lonely places …. I liked too how trees thrived on things that were still freely available" (Roy 3). She is also aware of the human shortcoming of being pressed with a tight time schedule. She desires to be a tree to have a "Tree Time" (4) and be liberated in mind and spirit, "… when I look back at the reasons for my disaffection with being a human, and my desire to become a tree, I can see that at root lay the feeling that I was being bulldozed by time …. I was tired of speed. I wanted to live to tree time" (3-4).

Finding trees much better than humans, Roy dreams of metamorphosing into a tree, thus taking the human-tree interconnectedness to the highest level. In fact, metamorphosis is an illustrative literary convention that crosses the entire history of human thought. Examples of this form of representation can be found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with Daphne, who transforms into a laurel tree, or Philemon and Baucis, who are transformed into an oak and a linden. Roy wants to do the same and transform into an *Ashoka* tree, "I'd chose to be an Ashoka, the a-shoka, the sorrowless tree, I decide" (221), and thus, articulates:

> I liked what I thought was the restraint in plants …. There was no gluttony, no anorexia … and so they suffered neither from obesity nor malnutrition. In plant economics, need and want are one and the same thing, unlike in the human world where wants had the character of a capitalist bulldozer whose actions could be justified through the prettified word 'desire'. And so, there was no envy, the by-product of this gap between I-want and She-has-it …. I wanted that

> confidence of a tree, the complete rejection of all that made humans feel inferior or superior. (11-12)

Roy is also tired of the exhibition of 'relationship status' by the humans. She finds trees free from this tendency to show-off and thus wants to be like them, "Trees wore no relationship uniform, one could not look at a tree and declare whether it was happily married or that it had got recently divorced, whether it was a widow or single. I longed to become this, liberated of identity tags" (12). And then she felt she had started becoming a tree or had already become one:

> Nothing about my human structure seemed precious to me …. In my head, my two hands, two feet, two shoulders, all of these pairs were broken to create- fit into- a trunk from which smaller branches emanated. The smallest of twigs I conjured out of an assemblage of my little fingers. It was not difficult to imagine skin as bark. (220-221)

The same thought is propounded in the novel, *The Vegetarian* by the nobel laureate Korean writer, Han Kang. The novel presents a female protagonist, Yeong-hye who sees herself as a tree or wishes to become a tree that would require only air, water and sunlight to survive. The novel narrates the story of her becoming a vegetarian due to the trauma she experienced in her childhood and her dreams about the atrocities committed by humans against animals. Her vegetarianism goads her to be one with the flora and thus she decides to become a tree. Her idea to transform into a tree is also supported by her dream, "In the dream, she saw herself converted into a tree. Leaves and roots grow from her body. She also wants to have flowers to bloom from her genitals. The dream further solidifies the idea to withdraw herself from reality and reshape herself into a tree" (Ningtyas 171). Eventually, she declares that she is no longer a human, "I don't need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight" (Kang 159). Sumana Roy in *How I Became a Tree* also declares to have become a tree, "… a bird came and sat on my shoulder around sunset one day. I did not move … but I was certain that … I was, at last, ready to be tree" (Roy 222). Her metamorphosis becomes complete, "In more recent times, the term metamorphosis has often been supplanted in philosophy and academic literature by the ubiquitous term 'becoming'" (Perkins 4).

A 2013 Italian movie called *Alberi* by Michelangelo Frammartino also draws upon the similar concept. The movie is based on the ancient Lucanian tradition where Romito, a man who transforms into a tree, rejects the idea of migration and plants his roots in his own land:

> As a representation of human-tree metamorphosis, the Lucanian romito is linked to other ancient rites and traditions, such as the medieval homo selvaticus and the Celtic green man, and reminds us of other artistic representations, including the walking forest of the Shakespearean *Macbeth* or the Treebeard and the other Ents of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings.* (Baracco 255)

The film transforms it into a collective rite and the single romito is replaced by hundred such tree-men who, after their transformations, go in procession toward the center of the village which symbolically becomes a human forest. According to the filmmaker himself the metamorphoses is "an attempt to eliminate boundaries, break the distance between human beings and landscape so that they merge into one another (256) and further that, "The centrality of the human must be dismantled … it is this human arrogance that must be rejected, not to lose the human being, but to relocate it as a presence among other presences" (260).

How I Became a Tree undoubtedly serves as a call for greater ecological awareness and responsibility. By highlighting the interconnectedness of humans and trees and the metamorphosis from human to trees, Roy underscores the need for exiting anthropocene and embracing symbiocene. In the words of Rini Barman:

> *How I Became a Tree* brings opposites together—and does a fantastic job of striking a common chord among disciplines and among all plant life. This is a unique bouquet of suppressed or overlooked narratives about plants. It subsequently branches out and becomes an ode to *all* that is unnoticed, ill, neglected and yet resilient. As I turned the last leaf of this book, it almost felt like I too was planting a small healing tree within me.

The book seems to profess that the more we would be treelike, the more we would make this world a place worth living. As stated by Jon M. Sweeney, "The takeaway from *How I Became a Tree* might

simply be: We would all do well by ourselves and for the world if we lived more like plants." It would lead to sustainable living practices and hence, environmental conservation.

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