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Symbiotic Narratives for a De-Colonial Turn
Exploring the Arboreal Identity in Sumana Roy's *Out of Syllabus*

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Abstract This study delves into the nuanced relationship between humans and trees, focusing on Sumana Roy's *Out of Syllabus* (2019). Using a multidisciplinary approach drawing from anthropology and philosophy, it aims to uncover the dynamic role of trees in the human experience in India. Positioned within a postcolonial perspective aligned with the decolonial turn, the analysis emphasises trees' active agency, challenging their traditional portrayal as passive elements. Informed by scholars like Jones and Oppermann, it delves into the nuanced interplay between human and arboreal existence, enhancing our understanding of their symbiotic relationship.

Keywords Arboreal symbiosis. Postcolonial narratives. Human-tree dynamics. Decolonial arboreal identities. Roy's botanical discourse.

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1 Introduction: Trees as Custodians of Cultural Narratives

This study delves into the complex relationship between humans and trees through a detailed analysis of Sumana Roy's poetry collection, *Out of Syllabus* (2019). In exploring the nuanced role of trees in the human experience, the research adopts a multidisciplinary approach, drawing insights from anthropology and philosophy. Rooted in a theoretical framework that perceives trees as dynamic, non-passive entities, scholars such as Owain Jones, Paul Cloke, Tim Ingold, Serpil Oppermann, and others contribute nuanced perspectives woven into this discourse. The analysis is meticulously directed towards understanding the nuanced identity of trees within the geographical expanse of the former British colony, India. This analytical framework, aligned with the decolonial turn, aims to shed light on the developmental paths of "local distinctiveness" and "place-identity" (Cloke, Jones 2002, 9). Through a postcolonial lens, it contends that anthropocentrism should not dominate the cosmic centre, emphasising the importance of balancing human and non-human elements in understanding identity and place. Instead, it necessitates fair consideration alongside non-human elements (Huggan, Tiffin 2017, 17). Within this contextual framework, the study explores the intricate entanglement between human and arboreal existence, portraying trees not solely as silent observers but as active participants in the dual roles of storytellers and ancestral entities. The thematic focus on the arboreal identity within the Indian landscape unfolds as an exploration of the cultural, ecological, and symbolic dimensions of trees, demonstrating how they transcend their conventional portrayal as passive elements of the landscape to become dynamic agents intricately interwoven into the cultural and ecological tapestry of the Indian subcontinent. Through this literary expedition, the paper aspires to contribute to a profound understanding of the symbiotic relationship between humans and trees.

In Indian mythology and epics, plants hold profound significance in human life, a principle highlighted by Krishna and Amirthalingam in their scholarly work (2014), *Sacred Plants of India*. They argue that trees maintain their sacred essence even amidst adversity, drawing on passages from Valmiki's epic poem, *Ramayana*, to illustrate this enduring spiritual continuity. Sita's devotion to a towering banyan tree (*Ficus benghalensis*) along the Kalindi riverbank, where she prayed for Rama's success in his vows, epitomises the enduring reverence accorded to these botanical guardians. The Dandaka forest, dwelling place of Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita, alongside the Ashoka grove where Sita was held captive in Lanka, stand as revered sanctuaries. The *Ramayana* also extols the sanctity of botanical species such as tulsi (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*), pipal (*Ficus religiosa*), banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*), and amla (*Phyllanthus emblica*), which play a

crucial role in religious rituals. Specific narratives further underscore this reverence: in their search for Sita, Rama and Lakshmana sought counsel from a badari tree (*Ziziphus mauritiana*), and in gratitude, Rama bestowed eternal life upon it after it revealed Sita's location. Even Ravana, despite his infamous reputation, adhered to cultural norms by abstaining from cutting fig trees (*Ficus religiosa*) during the month of Vaisakha (Krishna, Amirthalingam 2014, 29-30). These passages from the *Ramayana* illuminate the enduring connection between plants and human life, deeply interwoven in Hindu mythology and cultural traditions, portraying them as sacred entities woven into the spiritual and ethical fabric of society.

> Plants such as the basil [*Ocimum tenuiflorum*], pipal [*Ficus religiosa*], banyan [*Ficus religiosa*], and Indian gooseberry [*Phyllanthus emblica*] were worshipped by the common people. […], the epic says the human heart makes man regard plants and trees with sanctity and as worthy of worship. (Krishna, Amirthalingam 2014, 30)

Contemplating the longevity of these trees as 'majestic sentinels', named so because of their enduring presence and unchanged reverence throughout history, inspires profound reflections on their interconnected narrative with humanity. These sacred trees, deeply rooted in cultural and spiritual traditions, have witnessed countless generations, each leaving a legacy of care and communion beneath their expansive canopies. Their resilience and natural grandeur symbolise continuity and inspire awe, while their role as protectors of cultural heritage and biodiversity emphasises their significance as true guardians of time and tradition. Therefore, it can be stated that

> There is an inextricable link between people and trees, especially old trees. From all the thousands of uses we have put them to, and all the fears and desires we have projected onto them, human cultures around the world have emerged from the trees. […] trees also carry significant cultural baggage. Deep currents of meaning swirl around our culture(s) and brush through the branches of any tree or tree-place which is being encountered, experienced, narrated or imagined at any given time. […] we should immediately recognize arbori-culture as a global phenomenon, with different societies and places offering often distinctive discursive narratives of tree meanings. (Cloke, Jones 2002, 19-20)

This contemplation brings to mind an intriguing and culturally resonant ritual in Punjab, India – known as "Jatheras" (Rose 1883, 374), which invokes ancestral connections. This ritual, deeply rooted in the cultural tapestry of Punjab, unfolds as a poignant expression of the interconnectedness between the living and the ancestral spirits. A

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unique facet of this tradition involves the newly-wed couple partaking in a ritualistic circumambulation around the Pipal tree – a sacred fig tree (*Ficus religiosa*). During this ceremony, the bride and groom intricately tie a red thread around the Pipal (*Ficus religiosa*), symbolising the eternal bond of marriage. As they embark on this symbolic journey, the ritual takes on a profound significance – the newly weds are not merely binding their destinies, but also engaging with their ancestral lineage, acknowledging the continuum of life and the enduring connection with those who came before. The culmination of the ritual involves the pouring of *kachi lassi* – a mixture of milk and water – around the base of the Pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*). This libation serves as a symbolic gesture, a gesture of gratitude and celebration shared not only with each other but also with the ancestral spirits believed to reside within the sacred tree. It is a poignant acknowledgment of the shared journey of life, connecting the present with the past in a sacred and timeless dance. This ritual, regrettably, occupies a marginalised position within academic discourse. A singular exception to this scholarly lacuna is discerned in H.A. Rose's work, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province*, dating back to 1883. Within the pages of this comprehensive glossary, Rose provides a rare elucidation of the term 'Jatheras': "Jatheras are also commonly worshipped in the central districts, but the rites vary" (374).[1]

In the folklore of Bangladesh and West Bengal, oral histories weave narratives of a spectral presence known as "gechho bhoot, ghosts of Bengali trees" (Roy 2019, 264). This phenomenon encapsulates the belief in spirits or ghosts inhabiting trees, as expounded by Sarkar and Debsarma in their book chapter (2021, 71), "Ghosts in Bengali Folktales: Looking for Subaltern Cultural Identities". This intriguing cultural facet prompts contemplation on the divergent metaphysical roles assigned to trees in different cultural contexts. The term *gechho bhoot* assumes significance, denoting souls tethered to the mortal realm due to occupational hazards or fatal accidents (73). Sarkar and Debsarma illuminate this concept in their text, highlighting the nuanced semantic range of the Bengali word *bhoot*:

> Bhoot means both 'past' and 'ghost' in Bengali and *Pret* means 'spirit' in the literal sense of the terms. They are believed to be the souls of an unsatisfied human who has died in unnatural and abnormal circumstances. Other animals and creatures other than humans can also be turned into a ghost. (70-1)

1 This ritualistic practice manifests variances across villages within the Punjab region, and the aforementioned ceremonial depiction specifically pertains to the traditions observed in Jandiala, Nawanshahr.

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This intricate interplay of cultural narratives unveils a diverse spectrum of metaphysical beliefs, emphasising the multifaceted connections between the natural and supernatural realms. The juxtaposition of ancestral spirits in the Punjab and the spectral inhabitants of trees in Bangladesh and West Bengal reflects the profound cultural diversity embedded within the broader cultural environment of the Indian subcontinent, where trees not only serve as silent witnesses, but as repositories of narratives transcending the boundaries between life and afterlife.

The ritual of the Jatheras and the folkloric legend of the *gechho bhoot* emerge as integral components of "subaltern cultural identities" (71), manifesting within the expansive realm of folk imagination. In delving into these cultural narratives, ostensibly tethered to seemingly passive entities such as trees, a paradigm shift occurs, revealing the inherent agency embedded within these arboreal entities within both mindscapes and landscapes. Far from being inert elements of the physical environment, trees, as elucidated through these socio-cultural narratives, become active agents in shaping the cultural and metaphysical contours of specific communities. The Jatheras ritual, with its nuanced observances and significance in Punjab, and the *gechho bhoot* folklore, weaving spectral narratives within the folk traditions of Bangladesh and West Bengal, collectively underscore the dynamic role trees play in the cultural heritage of diverse populations.

Recognizing trees as repositories of cultural narratives unveils their agency as carriers of collective memory, embodying not just physical presence but also serving as conduits for the transmission of cultural and metaphysical beliefs. In this light, trees emerge as custodians of subaltern cultural identities, silently narrating stories that resonate through generations. Consequently, the entanglement of trees within socio-cultural narratives reaffirms their pivotal role as dynamic agents, perpetuating the rich tapestry of subaltern cultural identities across diverse landscapes.

2 Decentralising Anthropocentrism Through *Dwelling Perspective* for *a Decolonial Turn*

This exploration prompts a deeper consideration of the essence of place identity, particularly through the lens of trees, integral components of local culture, as illuminated in the discourse by Sarkar and Debsarma (2021). The resonance a place holds in the hearts of individuals extends beyond its physical attributes; it becomes a canvas painted by nature, evoking contemplation and emotion. Reflecting on Vittorio Lingiardi's insights, the significance of a tree-lined place transcends mere visual aesthetics. Instead, it unfurls its

meaning through the intricate interplay between the observer and the observed. This dynamic interaction sparks emotional and psychic responses, fostering the genesis of a uniquely personal and intimate relationship between individuals and their surroundings (Lingiardi 2017, 19). The emphasised landscape connection surpasses mere physical presence. It encompasses an environment, horizon, panorama, space, soil, and territory. It becomes an existential anchor, so intertwined with the being that recognizing the landscape becomes synonymous with recognizing the place in the world. This deep connection with the landscape adds existential value, seamlessly integrating into identities and weaving into the rich tapestry of collective experiences.

In landscapes marked by the shadows of colonial history, like the Indian context, the intricate bond between individuals and trees gains profound significance. In numerous cultures, including those that have not undergone colonisation, trees represent much more than mere natural beauty. Conversely, within colonised cultures, trees serve as testament to the intricate interplay between colonial legacies and indigenous cultural narratives. The narratives woven into their branches resist the erasures of history, becoming resilient testaments to shared existence and identity reclamation. Trees emerge as living witnesses, bearing both the scars of the past and the ongoing stories of resilience within landscapes shaped by colonial echoes.

The colonial cultures, rooted in rationality and epitomised by the West, systematically positioned the stronger Western human as the central focus of human pursuits. This trend, notably prevalent during the Age of Enlightenment and accentuated with Darwinism in the pursuit of development, originated in the West. This anthropocentric perspective, later imposed on the colonies, falsely equated anthropocentrism with Eurocentrism. As a result, humans assumed a dominant role in nature, shaping the treatment of the natural environment in the colonies without regard for the intrinsic principles of native cultures (Huggan, Tiffin 2015, 30). In this discourse, it is pertinent to highlight the Western rational and capitalist perspective instilled in one of the characters in Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Hungry Tide* (2005), namely S'Daniel by his teachers:

> In school his teachers taught him that life's most important lesson is 'labor conquers everything', even rocks and stones if need be – even mud. As with many of his countrymen, a time came when Daniel Hamilton had to leave his native land to seek his fortune, and what better place to do that than India? (49)

The colonisers, from a Eurocentric perspective, perceived the Indian environment not as a deserving entity to be respected, as the indigenous population did, but rather as a resource to be exploited

without restraint. This exploitative approach formed the foundation of the colonial economic system. An illustration of this attitude can be found in the exploitation of Sandalwood (Santalum album), a tree highly esteemed in Indian culture and tradition. Designated as royal trees by the Vijayanagara empire and Wodeyar dynasty, and utilised in sacred sites such as Hindu temples, sandalwood in the Western Ghats region was extensively harvested by the British for export to Europe. In the period between 1799 and 1809, a staggering quantity of over 62 million maunds (with one maund equating to 37.32 kilograms) of sandalwood was extracted solely from the Coimbatore district, yielding substantial revenue for the British government through leases and rents (Mathew 2019, 593-4). This systematic exploitation extended beyond the indigenous human population to encompass the very landscape, thereby fostering an unsustainable and exploitative relationship with the environment (Castellino 2020, 583-5). Their perspective can be characterised as exploitative, given that, in their view, the landscape around was perceived as lacking any socio-cultural significance and identity.

In contradistinction to the prevailing colonist viewpoint, the conceptual framework of the “dwelling perspective”, expounded by Tim Ingold in seminal works such as “The Temporality of Landscape” (1993) and “Building, Dwelling, Living: How People and Animals Make Themselves at Home in the World” (2000), assumes paramount significance. This theoretical construct subsequently finds elaboration in the collaborative endeavours of Paul Cloke and Owain Jones, notably in *Tree Cultures: The Place of Trees and Trees in Their Place* (2002). Approaching this discourse through a postcolonial lens posits that, in former colonies, such as India, the *anthropos* – the human being – has not been ascribed a central position in the cosmic narrative, thereby challenging Western colonial ideologies that traditionally accord human centrality by excluding non-human entities. This postcolonial perspective serves as an analytical framework for elucidating the evolutionary trajectories of “local distinctiveness” and “place-identity” (Cloke, Jones 2002, 9), asserting that anthropocentrism should not monopolise the cosmic centre. Instead, it necessitates equitable consideration alongside non-human elements (Huggan, Tiffin 2017, 17). Within this context, trees emerge as integral components of the local population’s identity, intricately interwoven with their collective psyche. This profound relationship transcends mere physical presence, signifying the embodiment of memory within trees and reciprocally weaving memories into the very fabric of arboreal existence. Instances such as *Jatheras* and *Gechho Bhoot*, as delineated earlier, underscore the parity in significance accorded to non-human elements. These foundational concepts find particular relevance within the “Botany” section of Sumana Roy’s poetry collection, *Out of Syllabus*.

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It is crucial to acknowledge the profound connection between human beings and nature that shapes the identity of a place, especially considering non-human entities such as trees. In Heideggerian terms, one can articulate that "the being-in-the-world" (Cloke, Jones 2002, 81) defines the essence of the "dwelling place" (80) – the landscape where one resides, intertwined with other inhabitants, both human and non-human. Cloke and Jones emphasise that

> Dwelling is about the rich intimate ongoing togetherness of beings and things which make up landscapes and places, and which bind together nature and culture over time. It thus offers conceptual characteristics which blur the nature–culture divide, emphasize the temporal nature of landscape, and highlight performativity and non-representation, and as such it is attractive to those trying to (re)theorize the nature of nature, and the nature of landscape and place. In particular, the understanding of dwelling provides a route for those who seek to move away from dichotomous realist and idealist approaches to place, environment and landscape. (81)

Contrary to Cartesian notions that accentuate the separation of body and mind (81), Lingiardi, Jones and Cloke's perspectives illustrate the profound connection individuals share with a specific place, both mentally and physically, facilitated by non-human entities. This relationship can be understood as a shift from a "building perspective", where ideal human mental constructs are imposed on the world, to a "dwelling perspective", wherein any act of building, living, or thinking is shaped within the context of an already existing world, thereby influencing the very process of shaping. Consequently, emotions, affection and memory become integral aspects of this dynamic interaction. Dwelling, in this interpretation, is closely tied to notions of home, the local, and a genuine concern or fondness for nature and the environment. To dwell, within this framework, signifies establishing roots through the act of accommodation in a specific place (81). From a postcolonial point of view, in alignment with Edward Said's perspective (1978), it becomes apparent that colonisers lacked a genuine connection with the lands they colonised. Instead, they viewed these territories as wild, jungles awaiting civilization for the sole purpose of colonisation, despite the land occupying some space in their minds fueled by fantasies, as evidenced in certain paintings (1978, 119). In accordance with their principles, both human and non-human entities were deemed deserving of respect only if they conformed to being "a product of number, of form, of proportion, of situation" (119). This rational perspective, prevalent in European philosophy, is evident in the works of Kant, Diderot, and Johnson, all of whom emphasised the notion of "reducing vast numbers of objects to a smaller number of orderable and describable types" (119).

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Consequently, the concept of dwelling emerges in stark contrast to the notion of 'rational' dwelling advocated by colonisers for the exploitation of the lands they occupied. The essence of dwelling, inherently, "incorporates both a spatial and a temporal dimension" (Cloke, Jones 2002, 82). "Dwelling emphasizes the temporal dimension, and envisions ensembles of characters (people, things, and animals) producing places and landscapes over time" (83). This signifies that the past, unmarked by colonizers, and places deemed sacred in the indigenous perspective cannot be eradicated. Thus, the conception and sacredness of non-human entities reject being regarded solely as objects for unmitigated exploitation. The concept of 'being-in-the-world' necessitates an understanding of the landscape, wherein

> the past and future are co-present with the present-through processes of memory and imagination. Past, present, and future are continuously reprocessed while the materiality of the landscape is worked by, and marks, this process. (82-3)

This perspective aligns with significant assertions, emphasising that "non-humans [are] active players in the 'performance of place'" (83). Hence, a place develops its distinct identity, referred to as "place-identity", and possesses "local distinctiveness" (22), aspects that are beyond dispute.

3 *Out of Syllabus* ("Botany"): The Narrative of Trees and Memory

3.1 Metamorphosis: *Trees-body-of themselves*

A limited number of authors engage in the discourse of trees, a complex subject demanding an exploration of one's ontological presence in the world. The act of writing 'about' and 'with' trees necessitates a nuanced interaction between being and non-being, a communication that transcends conventional expression. Here, it becomes the writer's responsibility to unravel the intricate language and memory embedded in the realm of non-being, presenting an authentic and formidable challenge. Among the individuals who have confronted and navigated this complex terrain is the writer Sumana Roy, a faculty member at Ashoka University (Haryana, India). She introduced her literary career with her nonfiction debut, *How I Became A Tree*, published by Aleph in 2017. She transitioned to fiction with her first novel, *Missing* (2018), followed by *Out of Syllabus: Poems* and *My Mother's Lover and Other Stories* in 2019. Her contributions extend to renowned publications like Granta and The LA Review of Books.

Residing in Siliguri, India, she remains a noteworthy figure in contemporary literature.[2] This section will focus on Sumana Roy's poetry collection, *Out of Syllabus*.

As Sumit Ray writes,

> *Out of Syllabus* is a collection of thirty-five delectable poems. [...] the collection is a feast for the senses. [...] the book 'combines rational ordering with the 'unreason' of striking figures of speech'. This 'rational ordering' comes from the sectioning of the poems under subjects that one would usually study at the high school level. Starting with Mathematics, she goes through History, Chemistry, Biology, Physics, Geography, General Knowledge, etc. right up to Art. Interestingly, there's no First Language, but only Second Language. (Ray 2019)

Within the designated section of the collection, "Botany", Roy assumes the role of a 'humanist' scientist, delving into assumptions that surpass conventional scientific explanations. In the course of this thematic exploration, a recurring motif surfaces: that of the anthropomorphization of nature and pure metamorphosis, notably emphasised by the story of "the seven Champa brothers" (Roy 2019, 262). This theme gains further emphasis through two additional factors: the first, previously discussed (see § 1), involves the *gechho bhoot*, while the second revolves around the semantic field employed to depict trees as if they were human beings (evidenced by phrases such as "plants must have a mother tongue?" p. 262, the soil turning red due to the blood of trees pp. 265-6, trees working thanks to the Earth's haemoglobin, "flower corpses in the earth's mass coffin" p. 266, "Does the garden know every plant in it?", "decapitated shrubs" p. 267). Sumana Roy's exploration of metamorphosis finds parallels in classical literature, such as Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Edmund Spencer's *The Faerie Queene*. Her approach uniquely ascribes human-like qualities to trees, endowing them with emotions and memories. She portrays trees as active participants in their environment, challenging anthropocentric views and emphasising the interconnectedness of humans and nature. This perspective aligns with Iovino and Oppermann's insights in "Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency and Models of Narrativity":

> The agency of matter, the interplay between the human and the non-human in a field of distributed effectuality and of inbuilt material-discursive dynamics, are concepts that influence deeply the ideas of narrativity and text. If matter is agentic, and capable of

2 New Writing. "Sumana Roy". https://www.newwriting.net/writer/sumana-roy/.

> producing its own meanings, every material configuration, from bodies to their contexts of living, is 'telling', and therefore can be the object of a critical analysis aimed at discovering its stories, its material and discursive interplays, its place in a 'choreography of becoming'. (2012, 79)

This assertion directs our attention to another pivotal proposition, namely,

> All matter, in other words, is a 'storied matter'. It is a material 'mesh' of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces. (Iovino, Oppermann 2014, 1-2)

This implies that plants, in contrast to the anthropocentric perspective that deemed non-human entities as "passive, inert, unable to convey any independent expression of meaning" (2014, 2), are also 'storied'. In Sumana Roy's poetry, trees can be seen as 'trees-body-of-themselves', serving as repositories of memory that encapsulate past, present, and future life.

3.2 Close Reading of the "Botany" Section

The subtitle of the section "Botany", a section divided into three parts, signalled by Roman numbers, "The Afterlife of Trees and Their Lovers", underscores the focus on the continued existence of trees rather than their demise. The emphasis lies in how plants endure, carrying with them memories and symbolism. The narrator introduces the notion of a plant language, questioning, "plants must have a mother tongue?" (Roy 2019, 262), which they perceive as "a foreign language" (262). The subsequent exploration adopts a dwelling perspective, highlighting the cultural nuances in the meaning of the word plant. For instance, it is noted, "To the aborigines, the words for tree and house were the same" (262). This perspective aligns with the *Jathera* ritual, where trees are regarded as guardians of ancestors. This challenges Western rational epistemological perspectives. It establishes a parallel between the concept of Jagadish Chandra Bose's house, the abode of the Indian physicist and botanist, and the indigenous outlook: "And so this mountain house of Jagadish Chandra Bose" (262). This reference is already present at the outset of the poem: "Jagadish Chandra Bose's house, Mayapuri, Darjeeling" (262). The intended meaning behind this comparison becomes evident later on: "It is difficult to imagine a history of trees without man in it. Man as tree, tree as tale" (263). This idea prompts the narrator to delve into a folk tale, particularly that of the seven Champa brothers. This

assumption is rooted in their query: "It is easy to turn this into a folk tale, to see the scientist reincarnated as a tree. Like the seven brothers Champa?" (262). Understanding this aspect necessitates familiarity with the story of the seven Champa brothers which is set in a kingdom where a king, desperate for an heir, receives magical mangoes from a forest priest. The king follows the priest's instructions to feed the fruits to his wives. While the elder queens, consumed by disbelief, do not conceive, the younger queen gives birth to octuplets during the king's absence. Jealous, the elder queens bury the babies, who transform into flowers. The youngest, Parul, is born later, hidden from the elders. Raised in the forest, Parul learns her origin and revives her flower-born brothers into princes (Choudhury 1999, 285-7). In contrast to the narrative of the seven Champa brothers, the narrator underscores: "But they were tortured; not Bose" (Roy 2019, 263).

As plants endure through human catastrophes, the narrator seeks "immigrants, plants who travelled well" (262). These are plants that have functioned as "Bose's muses" (263). Indeed, "Plants are living things" (263). Consequently, as the narrator ascends, "the sacrifice of grass, the silence of soil" (263) occurs beneath their feet. Moreover, with a scientist's gaze, a crucial phenomenon is observed: "Sometimes a different time zone – flowers are late risers" (263). Just as there are various time zones globally, there are also distinct time zones for flowers, emphasising their active nature. This aspect underscores the sense of belonging to a place, akin to questions of identity within a nation-state context. The narrator concludes by posing the question: "Do these conifers remember Bose?" (264), raising inquiries about the presence of memory in plants. Hence, plants exhibit affective agency. Ultimately, a definition of botany is provided: "Botany is only a history of the personality of plants" (265).

The second part takes place at "Shakti Chattopadhyay's house, Baharu South, 24 Parganas" (Roy 2019, 265), the residence of a Bengali poet notable in the field of eco-poetry. This part commences with a thought-provoking question. The narrator speculates whether the poet Chattopadhyay would ever pose this question: "Are you General or Scheduled Caste?" (265). The categorization into general, unmentioned, and scheduled castes is delineated in the Indian Constitution under Article 341. This classification was instituted to uplift disadvantaged classes in response to the pervasive caste system. This query pertains to the betel nut tree (*Areca catechu*) (265): the poet Chattopadhyay was a proponent of green poetry and harboured a profound love for trees (Sengupta 2005, 5). The narrator raises the question of whether the Brahmin poet from another caste could openly express inter-caste love by inscribing it on a tree trunk like a government census roll (Roy 2019, 265). The exploration of caste in this context highlights a significant nuance. Typically, when considering castes, the association is made with individuals. However, in

this instance, Roy associates caste with a non-human entity, namely trees. Through this approach, she places trees at the narrative forefront, attributing to them an active materiality and relational agency.

Each morning, the earth transforms into a "mass coffin" where "flower corpses" are interred by the "sweeper" (266). The narrator refers to Chattopadhyay's poem title, "Does the garden know every plant in it?" (267), using it as an intertextual reference to inquire if the garden is aware of each individual tree. In this poem, the narrator highlights Chattopadhyay's deep love for plants in the metaphorical "enormous garden" (Sinha 2018, 4). However, ambiguity arises as to whether this garden is tangible or exists only in the poet's imagination, given later verses expressing concern about a mind seeking pleasure, suggesting a metaphorical realm (4).

In the concluding remarks of this section, the assertion that "Every tree is a folk tale" (Roy 2019, 267) prompts readers to ponder the complex interplay between humans and nature, emphasising the possible discord or unease arising from the existence of trees in specific surroundings. The tone and significance of verses convey a feeling of contemplation, irony, and comprehension regarding the dynamics between the natural realm and human conduct. This reflection is heightened by the closing line: "Only some shed their morals like leaves" (267). This implies that trees, in addition to their physical presence, also serve as moral instructors for human existence.

The third section delves into the Buddha Tree (*Ficus religiosa*) and the site of Buddha's enlightenment, the "Bodhi Tree, Bodh Gaya" (267). This tree is surrounded by various myths, akin to "ambulance sirens" (268), attracting numerous "patients, pilgrims, and tourists" (268). The narrator reflects on the significance of sitting under a tree, emphasising the amalgamation of shade and shadow as a healing experience: "There must be something about sitting under a tree, in the bandaged conflation between shade and shadow" (268). A notable observation contrasts the Hindu mythological tradition of forest exile with Buddha's deliberate choice to sit beneath a solitary tree:

> Other men chose exile in the forest, vanwas—
> Rama, the five Pandava brothers, their wives.
> Only Siddhartha came to a solitary tree, to escape desire. (268)

The rationale for this choice is further elucidated a few verses later, highlighting the forest as a place of concealment and rivalry. In contrast, the solitary tree symbolises a lesson learned by Buddha – the futility of eyes, legs, combs, and words (268). Conversely, trees embody Buddha-like qualities, especially in perilous situations where they withstand bombing without fleeing (269).

The poem concludes with a potent metonymy: "Only I know that the tree is Buddha. And that the Buddha was a tree" (270). In this

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instance, the Bodhi tree itself serves as a representation of Buddha, emphasising the intertwined identity of man and tree, where Buddha, in the past, was the tree.

4 Conclusion

Sumana Roy's *Out of Syllabus* delves deeply into the intricate relationships between humanity and trees, intertwining cultural, historical, and ecological narratives. The collection challenges conventional Western perspectives, emphasising the active agency, storied nature, and affective presence of non-human entities, particularly trees. The "Botany" section sheds light on different trees and their cultural significance, emphasising their role in shaping individual and collective identity. The dwelling perspective, rooted in indigenous practices and postcolonial critiques, underscores the interconnectedness between humans and trees in shaping local identity. The collection posits that trees transcend mere objects of exploitation, embodying active participation in the narrative of a place. Sumana Roy amplifies the indigenous understanding of trees as living entities with memories, fostering a nuanced ecological consciousness. The integration of perspectives from poets like Shakti Chattopadhyay accentuates the multifaceted connections between nature, spirituality, and human existence.

The exploration extends to sacred trees, exemplified by the Bodhi Tree (*Ficus religiosa*), highlighting the profound interplay between nature and religious or spiritual experiences. In this context, trees are not passive entities; instead, they constitute essential elements actively influencing mental landscapes, or more precisely, mindscapes, as per Lingiardi's terminology, and shaping human engagement. The conclusion emphasises that, in this intricate interplay, places and landscapes should be perceived as complex temporal-spatial-material processes, interwoven with social, cultural, and symbolic meanings. Individuals navigate these landscapes, feeling the affective resonance of what they see and experience. The Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*), sacred and inseparable from the existence of the Buddha, serves as a poignant example of the integral role trees play in shaping both personal and collective identities within the intricate tapestry of human-environment interactions. *Out of Syllabus* thus stands as a compelling invitation to reconsider our relationship with the natural world, fostering a more profound understanding of the agency, memory, and affective presence of trees in the intricate fabric of our existence.

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