

Interview

Re-Thinking Teaching-Learning-Writing, in the Classroom and Outside

Saloni Sharma in Conversation with Sumana Roy

Sumana Roy is the author of two works of non-fiction, *How I Became a Tree* and *Provincials; Plant Thinkers of Twentieth-Century Bengal*, a work of literary criticism; *Missing: A Novel*; *My Mother's Lover and Other Stories*; and two collections of poems, *Out of Syllabus* and *VIP: Very Important Plant*. She has translated Jagadish Chandra Bose's essays in *The Man Who Made Plants Write*. Her poems, essays and stories have been published in *The Paris Review*, *Orion*, *Lit Hub*, *The Point*, *Granta*, *Guernica*, *Prairie Schooner*, *LARB*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Emergence Magazine*, *The Common*, *The White Review*, *Berfrois*, *The Journal of South Asian Studies*, *American Book Review*, among other places. She is Professor of Creative Writing at Ashoka University, India.

Saloni Sharma (SS): Welcome to Fortell, Sumana. Let us begin with a question readers have often asked. As an academic who is also a much loved and appreciated writer of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, you seem to occupy many different spaces at once. Are these actual boundaries that exist between a multitude of creative identities? How seamless (or not) is the transition between what academia clearly defines as different genres of writing?

Sumana Roy (SR): When I wake up in the morning, I have no conscious awareness of who I am—I have forgotten that I am a daughter, an aunt, a wife, a friend, an employee, a woman, and so on. And so with writing in the various forms that I have explored. Anything can set it off, this allergy—an image, a line that's arrived from eavesdropping, a banner or billboard, the shape of my mother's shadow, a laugh, the anaemic sun. It then compels an exploration—how that exploration happens decides the

genre. I'm not conscious of any difference between prose and verse as being different kinds of homes of the argument, of thought and feeling. I have explored the political through the poem, the elemental world through prose, and also the obverse. Fiction allows a kind of time-play and tone that I might not find in the essay. And sometimes the poem, with its condensed language, will not allow the directness that a subject might need. All of this is to say that I do not believe in the divisions and hierarchies that exist between genres. Genres hang out in what used to be called the 'common room'; I don't know whether that phrase still exists in college campuses anymore.

SS: Your work on Plant Humanities is fascinating. As a discipline it is something many of us are unfamiliar with and have not had the opportunity to critically engage with. Could you please give our readers an introduction to how you read this dynamic subject and its historicity?

SR: Saloni, having been raised by parents who were, by their constant assertion, very 'disciplined', I grew to feel scared of the word. That it would become an everyday word in the professional life that would choose me was something that I could not have imagined. Also, perhaps because of the very old-fashioned and conventional kind of education I had in a provincial college and university, my professors never used the word 'discipline' in the sense we use it today. The word that was used for the things we studied was 'subject'—so I would say that the subjects I studied in college were English Literature, Economics and Political Science. 'Subject' and 'subjects'—both these words are (or at least used to be) extremely accommodative.

I became aware of the 'Plant Humanities' when on a residence at Dumbarton Oaks, Harvard University. Six of us had been selected for this residency. I was attending online—it was during the time of the Covid lockdown and I didn't want to take the risk of flying to Boston. It would be midnight in India, and I would listen to the other writers and researchers speaking from Australia and South America and the US, —there was an ease with which they spoke about plant archives in their cultures. I felt deprived of such an archive. When I had begun working on what would become *How I Became a Tree*, I would turn to people all the time—historians, botanists, artists, friends ... For more than fifteen years—or more—I have been reading and collecting material on plant philosophy, literature and art. It would be a shame for me to be selfish

and not share it with others. It is from this that my idea of creating an archive for the Indian Plant Humanities came up. The website should go live soon, and I would be happy if your students and colleagues and readers contribute to the archive. How has the Indian subcontinent been looking at plant life? Not from a scientific perspective alone, but as metaphor and analogy, lived experience, art, cinema, literature—that is what constitutes this archive.

SS: When I read *How I Became A Tree* in 2017, I found it transforming my understanding of the Anthropocene and the centrality we accord to human actors in our socio-cultural spaces. Is there any particular significance/nuance you wish the reader would not miss?

SR: For me, *How I Became A Tree*, is not a book about the environment—I wouldn't ever be able to write such a serious book. It's a book I wrote to save myself, not the planet. It's a book of exploration about a relationship between two species, human and plant—one with a mind; the other, more intelligent, without one. That it's an exploration about becoming—and it's not a coincidence that so many humans, at this moment in history, more particularly women, feel the desire to become a tree.

SS: Recently, we have been witnessing interesting convergences in South Asian literature, privileging life and communication outside human existence and this seems finally to be making its way to university syllabi. *How I Became A Tree* seems like an excellent intertextual site to explore this idea further. Do you see this as a pattern that might possibly be changing the texts we study in the classroom?

SR: It's a moment in history, as I said—it's important for teachers to remind students about the impress of the world on such a seemingly innocuous desire. Why are so many women writing about the relationship between human and plant in the twenty-first century? I'm not asking them to look for a moral—the violence on both, woman and weed, woman and plant, woman and grass, woman and tree ... I feel uneasy about using words like the 'Anthropocene', for instance. Everything is anthropocentric—including the urge to dismantle anthropocentrism and, say, my unease with it. The popularity of gardening videos on YouTube and Instagram tells us about the desire to experience something outside the cabined life of the city. Literature is, like all art forms, a point of entry into thought and experience. Debadrita Saha, a PhD student at Ashoka University, is trying to develop a pedagogical model where an

intimacy with the plant, animal and elemental world can be incorporated in literary studies. This will be different from subjecting a literary text to the regime of an ecocritical analysis.

Yes, it would be nice to have a new kind of reading experience in the classroom. Our students must read for pleasure, otherwise nothing will change—in the classroom or outside it.

SS: In *Plant Thinkers of Twentieth-Century Bengal*, you write of ‘plant blindness’ and erasures of practices of critical reading. What kind of pedagogical interventions can help in taking us back, as lay readers or as scholars, into writing that should already have been accessible to us?

SR: Living and writing are not separate things, as anyone who’s tried to write is aware. As is pedagogy. Let me give you an example. *Prakriti Paath* was designed by Rabindranath and the teachers of Patha Bhavan, the school that he founded, to record the changing seasons and how they manifested themselves in the lives of flora and fauna in Santiniketan. The young students, therefore, were turning a notebook into a book—turning into historians of the region while being students themselves. We forget this often—that our students are our contemporaries, that they are responding to the pressure of history as much as they are creating that pressure themselves. Like plant blindness, we too, in spite of all the correctness in our behaviour and intention, suffer from a kind of blindness about those we teach or raise. I find that literature and creative writing professors can often be prescriptive—we want our students to write in a certain manner and style, we want to indoctrinate them into what we believe is right. We are unwilling to be changed by them. I think the pedagogical impulse must be omnidirectional—we must improvise like, say musicians, do, and, to extend the metaphor, we must jam with them. During the teaching semesters, when I’m asked what I’ve been reading, I tell them the truth: ‘student writing’. They might misunderstand this to be a chore, with some element of drudgery. I am very fortunate—my students are among my favourite contemporary writers. I try to incorporate their responses in the courses I teach. I mention former students who have taken the same course and mention their writing and responses in the classroom. It’s a manner of citation that comes to me naturally, from the way I live and talk. I know very little and I am often wrong—my students belong to a generation where they are petrified of saying or doing anything wrong. My only

ambition as a teacher is to give them some kind of freedom—to be and do as they wish or want to. The Humanities likes to talk about freedom as a kind of abstraction. It would be good to allow our students to taste it, without our mediation. What one does with one's limited freedom determines the personality of our imagination, after all.

SS: To me, that is the exact sort of pedagogical innovation we would all benefit from.

I recently read your essay 'The Problem with the Postcolonial Syllabus' and it felt like a validation of every postcolonial reader's desire to read for the pleasure of reading, of being immersed in a world, possibly far removed from one's own, without the impending threat of a 'moral education'. You write there, "Literature in the postcolonial syllabus should surprise the student, not just confirm and illustrate 'theories'." How do you propose we shift the burden for the reader in the postcolony?

SR: Why else would one read if not for pleasure? Do we listen to music to be educated? Does *sa re ga ma pa* make us better human beings? Why should we have this expectation of literature? Is a line a moral thing? And drawing an arc—is it a moral act? Is the plant or animal or elemental world a moral habitat? I call it 'meaningitis', the expectation that everything has meaning. What is the meaning of a day? Or the night? The allegory, the parable—our indoctrination in this way of looking at the world, something forced on us from the first books we are given, generates this expectation. Where are the books that indulge a child's senses when he reads about another child climbing a mango tree and savouring the sweetness of its mangoes? Rabindranath rejects a moralising pedagogy when he creates a language to hold the joy of the everyday in *Sahaj Paath*, the primer he writes for children entering written Bangla for the first time. Do you find the same burden of guilt driving the syllabus in Hindi or Urdu or Bangla or Tamil literature departments in India? Why don't we realise that this is a form of colonialism itself, to expect postcolonial literature as either serving the Area Studies function or to make us better citizens? Has that happened—have we succeeded in using guilt to make a better world? What else is the postcolonial literature syllabus except a manifestation of saviour complex? To read literature without the lens of representation; to see specificity, not types; to value the intelligence of word, phrase, syntax, form, to not be told what it's *about*; to not read for information alone ...

SS: On a somewhat related note, how do you read ‘world literature’? In *Provincials*, you make an analogy, as sharp as it is disruptive, with ‘world vegetables’. What is it about these categories that seems reductive or problematic to you?

SR: I find the word ‘world’ in such a phrase or category tautological. Literature is of the world—it is produced by it and it belongs to the world. To think of literature as the United Nations with representation from every single passport is a ludicrous idea. It comes with good intention—it’s meant to be egalitarian, reverse the hierarchy, and so on. I am uncomfortable with the idea that reading a novel from every single country in the world will make me a better and more politically aware citizen. Literature is not Area Studies; it’s not general knowledge. And even if it were, how will information about various literatures make us better readers, better moral beings?

SS: You also teach a course on *Rasa*, which is often taught, at least in traditional syllabi, as literary theory. What, to you, is the role of ‘theory’ in the classroom?

SR: ‘Theory’ is a word and category imported from the Anglo-American Humanities, and became an important component of English literature syllabi. Theory turned everything into ‘text’; we’ve forgotten that there was a world before that and that there can be and must be a word and world after ‘text’. Text became a subject on a surgery table, specialists looked for what they wanted. Like the cardiologist looks for the heart or the nephrologist for the kidney, experts from different areas of specialisation began looking for symptoms in the text. Reading the word like this will lead us to create a more equitable world—this is the god-like logic that decides our syllabus.

I chose to teach the theory of *rasa* because it is the most democratic among all theories I know. It is available to everyone, experienced by everyone, and not restricted to those who have the vocabulary given to them by a university education. Theory must be accessible to everyone; it’s become terribly elitist.

SS: The idea of identity comes up frequently in your writing. Do you think the worlds of literature and literary criticism are poised to analyse existing narratives so as to reimagine human identity and belonging? Your writing seems to accomplish this effortlessly, but how do you think

language that questions certainties of identity offers new sociological/cultural/ecological ethics?

SR: I won't be able to answer this question satisfactorily. I'm not conscious of writing from the constituencies of my identity, my identities. I also don't—can't—write with a specific constituency in mind. Believe me, I feel nervous when I hear phrases like 'identity and belonging' now. Like all children today, I immediately blame my parents—there must be some genetic defect in me that does not allow me to see anything as an abstraction. What exactly is 'human identity'? From the phrase I understand that it must be something important. But I don't understand it completely. I wonder whether those I feel close to—the plant and elemental world, for instance—have a sense of identity in the way we do. I've seen the ravages of communal identity on the material and psychic world around me. Through my own writing and reading, I have been looking at language, both literary and of the street. Why has the English language become so violent, for instance? Why do people *grab* a coffee, why is someone a *bomb*, why does a song (or the mic) have to *drop*? Literary criticism is not a byproduct of literature—it is literature itself. I write from that belief, that criticism is a sense-making project, and it is available to everyone, not those with a university education alone.

SS: There is so much to unpack in this thought. It does, however, take me to my next question. Do you think creative writing can serve as a form of resistance, offering alternative narratives to exploitative capitalistic relationships with 'nature'?

SR: I don't understand—and therefore don't feel close to—the category 'nature'. 'Nature', whatever it was supposed to mean, has perhaps always been an anachronistic word. It is more aspiration than the reality of the moment. Rabindranath recognises this when he writes about Kalidasa—that the natural world that the Sanskrit poet is writing about in *Meghdutam* isn't reportage, it's not in front of him; he has to imagine it because it doesn't really exist. Our experience of 'nature' is always a belated one—we have arrived late to it, to its ruins. When my students write about plant and animal lives, they often begin writing from a sense of guilt—emotionally educated, they acknowledge the human's irresponsibility. But soon enough they realise that guilt is not a productive emotion. Then they migrate to intimacy—how might it feel to be a certain species, for instance? Snigdha Dhameja, for instance,

wrote her Creative Writing dissertation on various kinds of animals, from their points of view, animals and insects that are as much family as her parents and brother. It is said that fiction teaches empathy. I think any kind of creative practice compels us to notice, to pay attention, to come out of our selves. Being forced to think about form in their writing also leads them to question the obvious truth of the centrality of the human gaze that has been the drug of publishing. And academia—which is, let's accept it, the most anthropocentric site of all.

SS: Yes, academia does still exist as an anthropocentric, often determinedly self-righteous site. We do, hope, however, to hold ground for further conversations, interventions, and moments of unlearning like this one, to reassess our social spaces, re-navigate our classrooms, and find new methods of thinking and teaching that can address some of the concerns you have brought to our collective attention. Again, thank you for your time and your valuable insights.

Saloni Sharma is an Associate Professor in English at Kirori Mal College, University of Delhi, where she teaches papers on feminism, popular culture and science fiction. She reads and reviews an inordinate amount of Indian writing in English.

salonisharma@mnc.du.ac.in