



“And Academics Make Very Good Trolls.”

Akshaya Kumar in Conversation with Sumana Roy

(This is an edited version of a conversation that took place between Sumana Roy and Prof. Akshaya Kumar at Mulk Raj Anand Auditorium, Panjab University, Chandigarh on 16 February, 2024 in the Chandigarh Language Congress.)

Akshaya Kumar: It is very difficult to introduce a writer, more so when a writer is very un-authorly. An author normally operates within certain culturally-shared horizons to strike a ready resonance with his potential audience, but here is a writer who rebels against conventional authorly protocols. For Sumana Roy even the exclusive categorisation of literature as ‘literature’ is not-so-comfortable. She is not very happy with the division of literature into genres, she goes to extent to describing the division of literature into genres as some kind of “literary racism.” It is always a challenge to write *ab initio* without being conditioned by the given forms of literature. The very idea of the scripting ideas into a genre-free form amounts to challenging the entrenched templates of culture. One has to postpone, perhaps create an alternative kind of world to write, intransitively. One has to create a very different kind of world because as long as one is in this world, one is instinctively driven by the classificatory complexes of this world. Sumana does create a different world of plants and trees. Therein, she finds the whole idea of genre-wise division simply preposterous. Let me quote from her well-received book *How I Became a Tree*. She writes, “When I eventually decided to write about my experiences of metamorphosis, my spiritual and emotional transformation into a tree, I wasn’t sure whether I could use the word ‘literature’ at all. It seemed so artificial, not just the scaffolding of voice and structure, but this whole things about genre” (26). She goes on to assert that there is no natural division of genres, and that there is no way one can assign a particular genre to a plant or tree. There is no way that one can call “grass as poem and banyan as epic, ginger as philosophical tract and rose as young adult fiction” (26). So, let us start the conversation on this note. How can we postpone or even abandon the very idea of genre while writing

literature? Would we then not relapse into some kind of literary primitivism?

Sumana Roy: I must clarify that I am not against the idea of literary as I am against the classification of genres. (Just as I am against the category of the 'bio-note.' It is a category I dislike.) Let me try and explain this through something that I teach – the *rasa* theory. At this moment the people I can see on my screen, myself included, we are experiencing a range of emotions at any given point of time, and these emotions are fluid and in a state of flux. To classify a person and limit them to one definitive category is therefore to do them injustice, because we move across a range of emotions and are not the same person at all times. I think this manner of classification goes against the idea of our experience of literature itself. If I buy a book for you and say it is a thriller, then you already know that when you will read it your palms and armpits will sweat. So, you have been preconditioned by the classification of this genre to think and expect something of the genre. One of my favorite thinkers, Michelle Serres said – and I'll paraphrase – that at any given point of time, for instance you can hear me, you can smell me, see me, feel the temperature of the day on your skin. . . . At any given point of time all your five senses are active, but when you mention a genre, the effect of one sense is heightened and the rest suppressed. I would like to meet the literary text directly, without being introduced to it through its generic name. I dislike any kind of classification. It also has to do with my resistance against linear classification.

AK: I have seen in your writings that there is a constant struggle to break free from the grid of genres. For instance, look at your anthology of animal stories *Animalia Indica*, you include not just stories alone, you go on to include a couple of poems – one by Rudyard Kipling and another by Vikram Seth, extracts from novels of Perumal Murugan, Nalanjana Roy and Motilal Kemmu, also non-fictional prose of George Orwell. In your novel *Missing*, you quote quite a lot from newspapers, bringing together two registers simultaneously in a relationship of juxtaposition – one of jejune journalism, and other of reflective and layered fiction. Should that mean that now we have to look at the genre of story or fiction in a much more enlarged and expansive way?

SR: I think I should not take credit or discredit for *Animalia Indica* alone. Many of the suggestions also came from my editor who had done a bit of research himself and pointed me towards certain texts. But if I were to be left to do an anthology such as this one, you are absolutely right to suspect that I would include a variety of genres. To have poetry, fiction, non-fiction, essay, graphic narratives, art, some stills from cinema, that comes naturally to me. I know it is frustrating for a publisher because publishing today survives on categories. Akshaya, when a subject comes to me, it also comes in a certain form – for instance, I discovered this news item about Barack Obama coming to India and planting this tree in Delhi, and the death of the sapling a few days later. And I thought there was something there, in that news item. I wanted to write an essay. But I just couldn't fit it into the form of an essay. An essay would require a kind of elaboration that I felt would not be appropriate for what I had in mind. My proclivity after reading that news item was to take the text from the news story and smuggle it into a poem, and that is how the poem "VIP: Very Important Plant" was born. Maybe if you asked me now, I would respond to it differently, in a different genre. All artistic choices are contingent, as you know.

AK: As I see today that already people are expressing some amount of no-confidence in the future of fiction. Even the practitioners of fiction are saying that for the kind of complexities we are up against, we need a mixing of the genres. So, the emerging style is not loaded in favour of one genre or the other. When I look at you, this book *How I Became a Tree*, I found that there are entries which have a short story like structure, there are entries which look like autobiographical snippets, there are entries which look poetical, and there are entries which look almost like diary notes. Even in your collection of short stories *My Mother's Lover and Other Stories*, there is a mixture of genre. In the title story, for instance, the lover of the mother happens to be a poet, and that allows you to use a lot of poetry within the scope of narrative prose. So how do you look at the future of literature in terms of its tryst with literary taxonomies?

SR: I think it was H.D. who, after the first world war, said that we will never be able to write an epic again. The first world war changed Europe's relationship with forms such as the epic, and a consequent gravitation towards shorter forms that felt more alive and urgent, both

spatially and temporally. So, James Joyce's ambition was different from Homer's – not the entire life of Odysseus, but a day in a person's life. The fragmentary and the lyrical were privileged over the epic or the epical. Similarly with *Mrs. Dalloway* and so on. What do we think of fiction now? I think that was your question? Social media, Internet, after what is happening in Gaza, after Syria and Serbia, after the everyday violence ... what has happened to fiction, to the novel, for instance? I think writers, particularly women and non-binary writers, are moving outside the tight compartments of genres. Publishers have been forced to invent a new category of classification, one that is disobedient to conventional genres. It is possible that the rise of autofiction owes to this phenomenon too – that the hand-me-down form of the novel wasn't sufficient enough to include the sideward glance. This, however, is not new. I am thinking of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's novel *Aranyak*, born out of a diary that he kept during his time of employment in the forests in Bihar. His job was to clear the forests for plantation, and he kept a diary in the 1920s. This would eventually come to us as the autofictional novel *Aranyak*, the title deriving from the Upanishads.

To return to your question about the idea of 'research' and its role in creative practice – as one of my colleagues said, "you are not an academic. Why are you putting so much research into the book?" It had never occurred to me that the person who would read the book might be unintelligent. I don't think any reader is unintelligent, we are always dumbing down the reader. That is the publisher's job, particularly the sales team. So, I trusted my reader. Everything, whether I am researching, living, walking through a forest, all of these come together at different points of my existence in my life and consequently into everything I write. At some point of time, I would like to think that the poems too would enter my non-fiction. They have in fact in the next book that comes out next month. It is called *Provincials* – how our literatures, cultures, cuisines, the way we live have contributed to metropolitan culture but it has never been acknowledged, how we continue to be bullied by metropolitan culture and how this idea that we are calling 'World Literature' is actually something that has been created by our ancestors from places like where you and I are. It's not about practicing what I preach, it's something that comes to me naturally. It has nothing to do with the

fact that I believe in this and I must do it. It is not premeditated at all. If it was premeditated, I could have become a content creator on Instagram.

AK: Tree remains your mainstay, so if trees and forest by that analogy constitute the primary unit of our survival, should we then not dismiss the categories of culture, namely nationality and nationhood? It is not a question of just dispensing away with the idea of literary forms or genres, then it comes to demolishing all kinds of political denominations and identity-formations. Would it then not be a kind of lapse into the Hobbesian state of nature?

SR: Civilisation and what constitutes the idea of the primitive has always been in flux. But I will come to that later. Do I want to do away with all categories? It is a utopia. The fact that we have our passports, we need visas to move between places, the reason we envy birds for instance. These categories are bureaucratic. For instance, take the word 'forest'. The word we were taught in our languages was 'jungle'. But there are no jungles left in the world anymore. A few forests remain, where the human hand has still allowed it to survive. We say 'afforestation' or 'deforestation', not 'a-junglification' or 'de-junglification'. It is a utopian ideal. The doing away of categories interests me because categories are, by their very nature, hierarchical. In academia, where we teach Foucault, we continue to be happy about the hierarchies of professor, associate or assistant professor; it supplies us with reasons to feel proud. We want to use these prefixes when we write our bios. So much of what we say and preach to our students, we do not end up practicing. The difference between a tree and a plant also has to do with a different kind of hierarchy. Trees will survive longer. Seasonal plants have shorter lives. And then in a very Deleuzian way you think of grass and the rhizomatic, and how that is a challenge to the platonic idea of the tree. All these categories have the backing of history. And when we say history, whom do we mean? We know by now that history is always of the winner.

AK: You do talk about the materiality of tree, but there is this propensity to slip into the metaphysical as well. In your poem "Bodhi Tree, Bodh Gaya," for instance, in lines such as these – "One comes to trees to escape the pornography of waiting. / There must be something about sitting under a tree." (*Out of Syllabus* 121), a tree

acquires equanimity of divine proportions. In another poem, you assign a metaphysical anonymity to trees: "You look at the trees, their indifference to recognition, / and you begin to see the path of evolution – / the mammal's backbone needs fame. The tree trunk none." ("Are Trees Anonymous?", *V.I.P.*, 12) The metaphysical is a kind of a zone where all boundaries of space and time collapse. Unless we materialize trees, the tree consciousness would become just a matter of utopian fantasy. What do you say?

SR: I encounter variations of this question and also feel slightly hesitant when people ask me – what is this tree or what is this species? I have to remind them and myself about my lack, that I am not a botanist, and I am not coming to plant life through the botanical. My groping towards plant life might have begun from a place of flight, because I was going through a very difficult time and had tired of the human social world. I was looking for other forms of life. I did not want to die; I was sure about that. I considered the possibility of living like a dog, but then realised that a dog does not live outside emotional economy. I was looking for a form of life that was outside the emotional economy that humans are raised in. I had jaundice and lay on my bed for what seemed like months. I remember the summer afternoon – I saw the shadows of papaya leaves, shaped like the human hand, only more beautiful. Something shifted in me, I felt the will to live. I thought to myself – I did not plant the papaya plant, some bird or insect must have, and yet it has given me something, so it is outside the conventions of reciprocity, perhaps outside an emotional economy. It was a moment of epiphany. I wanted to live like a tree. A few years passed and I thought that surely, I am not the only abnormal person in the world who has wanted to live like a tree. I then began looking for people who had exhibited a similar desire. Then discovering Jagdish Chandra Bose who had proved to the world that plants were living beings was like me, childless, did not have biological children of his own. Why did Gautama have to travel all the way from Nepal to Bodhgaya and why did he have to sit under the tree? What did the tree give him that the human company did not? So, looking at these people, both well-known and those like myself, led to this idea. I did not own a laptop at that time, so I was making notes on my phone and notebook. Gradually a form began to emerge and I thought that this probably has the shape of a book.

I think our ancestors had a far more spiritual understanding of beauty. Look at our government buildings and those built 500 or 600 years ago. I think beauty is necessary in our lives. Something that the government and terror regimes make us want to forget. That is the reason we find something when we go to forest, go to the sea, or when we work with our hands. These are things we have been forced to forget by the very head-heavy nature of our education system. I think we need to have a metaphysical revolution in the Indian subcontinent today. So many of our poetic traditions owe to the various forms of the metaphysical. There has been a complete disappearance of the phenomenological tradition which created so many of our poetic philosophies. So, if in some way we could work towards rehabilitating that kind of consciousness, I am up for it.

AK: Academics, and the contemporary pedagogy is at a receiving-end all through your writings. Even the title of your collection is *Out of Syllabus*. You are clearly unhappy with the syllabus-driven academics.

SR: Because people like myself, which I presume is the majority, will never find a space in the syllabus. There is a kind of writing – and art – that is meant to live outside the syllabus, that, because of the hierarchies in which the academic corporation operates, never manage to find illustrative duties of the courses that are taught in the humanities today.

AK: You are absolutely dismissive of the kind of pedagogy that we do in our classrooms. In your short stories – particularly “New Provincials”, and “Close Reading”, and in your columns in newspapers also, you often complain about the ways in which literary theory has usurped literature and its enjoyment from the classroom. It would be wrong to assume that literary theory is used in the classrooms in unfiltered and uncalibrated ways. May be, in some elite universities – and Ashoka is one such, it is pedaled too much, and therefore the disenchantment?

SR: I came to Asoka only four-and-a-half years ago when I had already been formed by the circumstances of my life. My parents are very unremarkable people, fortunately, like I am. So, there was no pressure to be an academic. The critical theorists you mentioned are very important, not just to you and me, but also to the world. But the

way it is taught and the way it has colonized the English major syllabus, it has fortunately not managed to colonize the Punjabi, Bangla, or Spanish literature syllabus, for instance. But “we” have this burden. It has been very important for me that I should not be Robinson Crusoe who writes about Friday in a language that Friday does not understand. Maybe a hundred years ago people had access to philosophical culture through music, literature, spiritual practice, or religion. It came in different forms; it came through daily living. I am not exoticizing the past, but there were points of access. I get to know of so many idioms through the person who cooks for us in Siliguri, for instance. That kind of life has been ignored by academia. A complete dismissal of lived experience and living knowledge systems outside the autoethnographic. How that does not form the body of Anglo-American critical theory. Even before you have read any text you must read *The Hungry Tide* as an environmental humanities text. The category – the lens – has been decided for you. It has marginalized a large portion of modern Indian literatures that formed people like you and me. Humor is not sexy or political enough, though we know that we love to laugh, though we know that the nation state right from the time of Plato to the Indian government right now, whatever their political dispensation might be, loves to keep its comedians and writers in prison. If I were to ask how many humorous novels are there in the syllabus, the answer would be none. Because we do not take humor seriously. The hierarchy, whether it operates between people, between knowledge systems, between locations, makes me deeply uncomfortable.

AK: When you use tree as your way of life, it has its implication on the very art of writing that you do. For instance, *Missing: A Novel*, is a narrative of just seven days and you pack so much in this rather short span of time. And there is a small essay in the book *How I Became a Tree* where you foreground the role of “slow time” in the growth of a tree. How has slow time become your default way of writing? In your writings, the melodrama is put on hold, and emotions are expressed in a very relaxed slow-paced way.

SR: A few other people have told me the same. I think it is not a tree that I wanted to become but grass. And the fact that grass is so used to being trampled upon but it continues to survive like so many of us. The woman in the novel *Missing* is called Kabita; kobita is poetry,

she has gone missing. The woman goes missing just like poetry has gone missing from our lives. I was copying portions of the newspaper, *The Telegraph*, and how time moves in them, in these excerpts. It is hyper condensed, time in the newsroom and newspaper, and I wanted us to become aware of how much more poetic life is, compared to the heightened politics of the newspaper report. And I thought how wonderful it would be to be able to take leisure, pain, and experience the nine *rasas* in everyday living that the newsroom does not allow us to.

AK: You show almost a pathological dislike for Instagram, Facebook. One can understand dislike for Spivaks and Bhabhas for all the linguistic obscurity they weave in their theoretical works but what about these modern means of instant-connect? These internet social media platforms are the lifeblood of modern generation.

SR: Absolutely. I agree with so much of what Spivak says in her work in the last fifteen years, but my problem is with the language. Similarly, my problem is not so much with social media as in the language in which it comes to us. The language of Instagram is meant to be unmemorable. Your body is not liking the post, your finger is. So, it is the language of faking, it is the language of lies. Everyone is either marvelous and amazing or we are trolling each other. And academics make very good trolls. Whether it is the language of praise or of trolling, both are languages of cliches. We are living in the age of the blurb. That kind of thing on social media has its uses. It has helped us create political movements. It's just the jaded generation that it is producing that I am against. Students have become consumers instead of creators. Also, it begins to get tiresome. You like the same kind of post every day. We have all become clones of each other and this has been indulged and embedded by social media and its vocabulary. That is my only grudge against it.

AK: Coming back to the novel *Missing*, one thing I notice that throughout you evince a remarkable flair of playing with words. In the novel, you play with the word "miss" in multiple ways. When Bimal-da asks for 'Miss form', it triggers off number of speculations. Eventually it turns out to be a form for 'Monthly Instalment Scheme' at the post office. In your opening story of the collection *My Mother's Lover and Other Stories*, "Blind Water", you twist the serious climax

involving suicide of a lady into “a dry lake” into a parodic ending. The profound “Water Martyr Point” is turned into a comical “matar paneer”. You do refer to the role of humour. Is ‘humour’ specific to contemporary writing? Is humour or parody the only strategy left to puncture the tyrannies of the grand narratives of past?

SR: The serious men of the state and academia are all scary. I like the comic. But I think my natural gradient is towards the tragi-comic. I know about the Monthly Instalment Scheme because my father gets a very small pension and has had to rely on the monthly instalments from post offices. That’s how I got to know of the MIS. I find that I have gravitated towards the tragic-comic very naturally. The examples you give are of the Found aesthetic, and it’s one I’m very fond of – in *Missing*, as in some of my poems, I have relied on it to hold a history that I might not have been able to capture otherwise.

AK: We in academia are very fond of fashion and trends. These days people are talking about climate change, and the age of Anthropocene. And also, this whole idea that human beings should abdicate their sovereign positions and distribute the agency to animals, and non-human beings. When someone makes a pitch for these things, how to make out whether one is theory-driven, or is intrinsically attached to these concerns or things?

SR: You remember the epigraph of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*? “The East is a Career.” The environment is the new subaltern.

I was at a residency in Harvard where I first discovered the phrase “plant humanities”. This was three or four years after *How I Became a Tree* had been published in India. It was the first time I learned that what I had been doing for so long was actually plant humanities. It might feel like I had gained a career, but I actually lost something. To have such a boring name such as the “Anthropocene” for something I care for so much is, of course, a pity. We should have a word that shows a real relationship. We should not have umbrella terms. Many of my essays are critique of this professionalization of environmental humanities. My reason for creating this Indian plant humanities reader is not necessarily to generate academic writing, but to go back to two thousand years of our literature. I think love is a radical act, and, if we are able to think and write of those we love, it will have memorability and impact.

AK: How does your obsession with trees and your disenchantment with marriage as an institution go together? You do not dismiss marriage, but you repeatedly refer how marriage augments the sense of loneliness. I am reading some lines from your poem “Singular-Plural” to illustrate my point. The entire poem de-romanticizes marriage, of course without any rancour. The poem begins with some degree of weariness, marriage-fatigue: “Every wedding anniversary, we behave like mountaineers, /and pretend to have conquered distance”. Then you add few more lines on the ritual of anniversaries: “Anniversaries are wall paint, a smoothening of pores. / They bring colour to the skin of a marriage, / and hide cracks where parasites evade mores”. The poem, towards the end, points towards the sense of strangeness that continues in the melee of marital-marathon: “The marriage becomes a metropolis—/ you and I its anonymous citizens.” (*Out of Syllabus*, 6). In your novel *Missing*, Kabir wondering at mother’s loneliness in her marriage asks a question: “Did ‘being married’ – like ‘doing a PhD’? (84) You seem to celebrate the lonely resilience of tree, its capacities to stand tall against all kinds of adversities. Forest is not what you prefer, a tree is your sanctuary.

SR: I like relationships that are like grass, unexpected, non-linear, alive to weather, not custom. I am uncomfortable with the way marriage seems to have become the most important social unit in our times. The idea of the family makes me as uncomfortable as the idea of the nation state – their omnipresence and the power that accrues from living in these institutions, from any institution. We live as employees of institutions – of the state, of our marriages, of our families, of other collectives. We live without freedom. I like the forest, its natural accommodativeness – it offers an alternative way of thinking about institutions which are, by their very nature, closed. I like my aloneness – I have known no other way of being.

AK: There is no end to these questions and I have tried to cover as many aspects as possible. So, thank you for indulging in this conversation with me.