

Sumana Roy, *Plant Thinkers of Twentieth-Century Bengal* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 224 pp.; ISBN 9780198929284 (hbk).

Plant Thinkers of Twentieth Century Bengal by Sumana Roy is a compelling exploration of the cultural history of plants in Bengal through the lives of six major authors and a Bangladeshi refugee woman whom she calls “Maya Mashi,” offering readers an insightful journey into the world of plants. Roy starts with a poetic introduction, which she names “PHLOEM,” and gives an overview of how plants are in the background, and through this book, it would be a beginning endeavour to know the history of plants and create a “plant poetics that has changed the way people would imagine and live with plants” (p. 2). In this anthropocentric world, we are conditioned to not notice the plant life in our surroundings, which she terms as “plant blindness” (p. 4): unless we have any need, we never think of plant lives. The book is divided into seven parts: the first six are explorations into the lives and endeavours of authors to make the invisible life of plants visible, and the last part is dedicated to a woman who is close to the author—her knowledge of the plant world is shown through the proverbs she used within her communication.

In the first part, the relation between human and plant lives is explored through the experiments of Jagadish Chandra Bose, a scientist and author. He is known to have designed a variety of instruments such as ‘Electro-optic analogue,’ ‘Plant Photograph,’ ‘Lens Antenna,’ ‘Resonant Recorder,’ ‘Plant Sygmograph,’ and ‘Crescograph’ (p. 15) to acknowledge the invisible life of plants, although he was ridiculed and mocked for his attempt but later recognized by scientists for new research on the language and script of plant communication. His experiments and study have shown the similarities between the human and plant nervous systems and how plants perceive their circumstances and respond to environmental inputs, which he terms as “plant neurobiology” (p. 21). Through his two important works, *Abyakto* and *Torulipi*, he has shown the hidden history of plant life and the record of plant responses to different kinds of stimuli. Next is Rabindranath Tagore, whose main argument is the existence of trees before humans and how the culture and history of trees come first. He has dedicated his whole life to the plant world through his works and the legacy of his family in creating a plant consciousness through a variety of plant existences in his garden, ‘Santiniketan,’ which was for him like a joint family, not only for humans but also for trees. He has talked about the opposite of plant blindness, how people remember places through trees that grew near them. “Phool Phutano” (p. 53) (blooming of flowers) is a term he has used to describe how humans can’t make flowers bloom, which shows the limitation of human agency against plant consciousness. Moreover, through his *The Two Sisters*, *The Arbour*, *The Broken Nest*, and *Bawlai*, and their protagonists, he has shown the indifference of modern people to the plant world in human-plant interaction. This section concludes with a note of knowing the world not only through books but also through lived experiences, and suggests, in order to know plants, we must not generalize them but see their peculiarities.

The life and works of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay are next talked about. He has challenged the mainstream idea of history that excludes all other species except humans. According to him, we as Indians have become indifferent to the living experiences of Indian plant lives because our education system has been disrupted by colonial rule. He further highlights that poverty, hierarchy, caste, or any distinction belongs to humans but not in plant

life, and notes that now this distinction can be seen in certain varieties of the plant life, which have become boundary walls: some plants are restricted outside the house, and some are inside our houses. Notwithstanding this, throughout his works, we can see humans feeling themselves to be some kind of plant or natural being which makes protagonists of his works—Opu, Durga, Nistarini as “Plant-humans” (p. 82). Bibhutibhushan’s plant theory can be concluded in this line: “To be able to love [plants]s, we must know them” (p. 96). Jibanananda Das is the next whose love for nature is discussed through his poetry. He has been called a “Prakrito Kobi (poet of nature)” (p. 99) as he has woven within the world of plants through his poetry. He has explored the secrets of plant life as “magic, mystery, and mist” (p. 106). His poetry can be read as a botanical history of Bengal as he has imagined Bengal through plant world, not by boundaries, but through experiences. He has prioritized the plant world over the human world, underscoring that humans try to control everything, but plants are always there for comfort and solace. Association of deathlessness can be seen in his writings as light is to the plants and darkness is to Jibanananda, because he believes trees don’t sleep (p. 120). Through this analogy, we can see how he resonates himself more with the plant life than the human life.

In the next part, Shakti Chattopadhyay resonates his life more to the plant world. Throughout his life he has a double consciousness of being a human and a plant. He was affectionate towards the marginalized and talked about equitable space for both humans and non-humans. He has talked about two castes of plants: upper caste (rose, lily, jasmine) and lower caste (grass, weeds, wild plants), emphasizing how human tendencies have created these discriminations among the plant world by preferring flowers over leaves, trees over weeds, light over darkness, and edible fruits over rotten ones. All these differences are due to human needs; if anything in plant world is not useful for humans, they think that it does not have the right to live, grow, or reproduce. He suggests that the only escape from this human-centric world is the metamorphosis of humans into trees: there would be no bloodshed if the world turned into a garden. “The only natural violence would be the fall of flowers and the nodding acknowledgement of the wind by leaves” (p. 146). This shows that, if humans learn to live in harmony like trees then there would be no violence and the only violence would be natural death which is like falling of leaves and flowers in the trees.

Next is Satyajit Ray, a film director, author, and screenwriter. From “Thakurmar Jhuli” (Grandmother’s tale) to the modern day, Ray’s vision of plant life is beyond scientific explorations and spiritual realisations. It is more instinctive, a blend of botanical and fantastic, anthropomorphizing plants to challenge the idea of human exceptionalism. He portrays fantastical elements in trees, flowers, and leaves in his stories, which helps humans to get rid of dangers. He shows how from folktales to the real world, plants are the main companions to humans. He is telling us of the times we are now living in, “[t]his reversal, not of the plant killing the human, but human malice, killing plant life, an entire universe, a microcosm, as symbolized by the greenhouse, seems like prescience” (p. 173). Ray has envisioned a dystopian future, wiping out plant life. Critiquing a human-centric worldview, Ray highlights that human interference in nature is ultimately causing self-destruction. In his view, instead of humans dominating nature, they should become more like trees—rooted, patient, and interconnected. The last section of the book is dedicated to “Maya Mashi,” a Bangladeshi refugee woman who is Roy’s house help. Maya Mashi, quite often, answers in proverbs based on plant lives. She wishes to be a tree in her next life and considers this life to be a training for it. She doesn’t have

a surname which resonates with plants because surnames have differences, but plants don't have any. The last line of this book emphasizes the importance of every being in this world as “Bherendao brikkho”—“a weed is also a plant” (p. 195).

The whole book is an exploration of plant consciousness developed by variety of thinkers, most of them belonging to the Brahmo Samaj, and it notes much similarities among their views. Most common of them all is how plant history has not been discussed throughout and how the differences and issues of humans have contaminated the plant world, culminating in making differences among plants. Most of these thinkers are willing to be transformed into trees because of the resilient living of plants without causing any harm or violence. The book reimagines cultural history through the lens of plants, urging readers to reconsider their relationship with the natural world. By merging together science, literature, and philosophy, the book offers an alternative ecological consciousness—one that embraces slowness, rootedness, and coexistence. Roy's exploration is deeply entangled with Bengali literary and scientific traditions. Each thinker she examines, Jagadish Chandra Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, Jibanananda Das, Shakti Chattopadhyay, and Satyajit Ray, contributes uniquely to the discourse on human-plant entangled relationships, challenging human/plant binaries of speciesism. The book serves as an essential text in plant humanities, paving the way for further research into forgotten ecological histories and plant agency. Future studies could extend Roy's approach beyond Bengal, exploring plant narratives across diverse cultures and landscapes.

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