

Shalini Sengupta reviews Sumana Roy's *VIP* – Very Important Plant

VIP: Very Important Plant

Sumana Roy

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We are led into Roy's fictional worlds as if by hand, down a path of woods. Much like her first book, *VIP* – Roy's latest collection – appears as an ode to all that is neglected, one that captures the unparalleled significance of plants to poetry as well as legacies of (colonial) violence and displacement that can be studied through unique focus on plants. In her quietly subversive lyrics, expectations – of people, poems, and ecologies – are undone. Words, like the mind, are allowed to roam where the body is perhaps not. The language is descriptive and located, astutely copped at times to disrupt socially constructed narratives of viewing plant life. Taken together, the various poems in the collection continue Roy's trailblazing new work on plant humanities, one that is prompted by the desire to reposition eco-critical literature from below and render it more open to the experiences of the marginalised other.

The poems in Roy's collection exhibit a concern with and *for* alterity, especially insofar as alterity brings us to the limits of our own self-certainty and certainty about the world. *VIP* opens with a nod to Jagadish Chandra Bose, a quintessential polymath, physicist, biologist, and botanist who is credited with the invention of the extraordinarily delicate High Magnification Crescograph machine that allowed him to produce what he later termed as 'plant autographs'. Bose's work on plant physiology feeds Roy's research and thinking. She takes her epigraph to Bose's *Plant-Autographs and their Revelations* (1927), a text that conveyed in graphic form the reaction of plants to external stimuli and redressed the notion that plants are insensate and inanimate beings whose experiences of the world are pitifully limited. Much like Bose, Roy writes back against such solipsistic anthropocentrism: the tendency of humans to mistake our world for *the* world. Difference, in Roy's text, is neither lack nor privation, a recognition that renders much of Western philosophy – and its insistence that nonhuman animals and plants' experiences

of the world are somehow 'poor-in-world' – meaningless in its wake. Difference, in Roy's hands, is life itself, the origin of meaning and language; the condition for evolution. As the first poem in the collection concludes: "you look at the trees, their indifference to recognition, / and you begin to see the path of evolution".

A series of poems, punctuated by Nikhil Das' exquisite illustrations, follows. The sense of specular alterity is strong in these poems, as each experience of seeing is explicitly mirrored, watching is to be watched; to realise is to be realised; to look is to be looked at. Another world of eyes is also, manifestly, another world of I's. In the presence of trees – in the distance and proximity of their alterity – *VIP*'s narrator is made to reckon with living difference and the realisation that humans are not the only subjectivities in the world. "When the tree sap flows," Roy writes in the next poem, "your ignorance about the foreign grows nests". But the specularity of relation goes beyond the fact of recognising another subjectivity that recognises you. Indeed, the infinite distance between humans and plants is also an infinite relation, a realisation that forms the basis of Darwin's 'vast retelling' of a story that had formed the basis of so many of the assumptions upon which his society was grounded. To look at plants – the narrator intimates – is to be reminded of "abandonment, of your asthma". "You think of grass as human," the narrative voice continues, "why else their secretive lovemaking?"

Throughout this poem, and in the entire collection, Roy grapples with the inadequacy of available language while talking about plant-human interactions. Her language discloses desire and yields the production of a composite, evolving botanical subjectivity: "I want to be a tree/I know this desire lives outside the curriculum". Similar moments of

attention towards an entangled, exchanging subjectivity were achieved in her earlier collection, *How I Became a Tree* (2017) in which the narrator speaks of the desire to embody 'tree-time'. Roy writes: "I began envying the tree, its disobedience to human time [...] I was tired of speed. I wanted to live in tree time" (3–4). The poems in *VIP* similarly augment and impoverish human identity. They mime the undoing of human centrality that any understanding of evolution must affect. We are there, but undifferentiated, everywhere and nowhere, afforded no special place within Roy's narrative. As the poems progress, attention shifts from trees – canonised figures in the homo gardener's consciousness – to moss and ultimately weed. Poems like *Parthenium*, for instance, allude extensively to weed (*Invaders/Famine weed*) to foreground feelings of marginality and otherness, outsidership and neglect. Roy's earlier essay titled *Dalit Plants* comes to mind, which explicitly describes weeding as a political act. Weed – introduced as "*chhotolok gachh*" in Bangla or "Dalit Plants" – is likened with lower-class and -caste bodies who are deemed non-normative and violently expelled from the body politic. The poem *Moss* speaks of similar structures of exclusion: "a garden is like law, its sling pulled for results. And so the constant banishment of moss".

In many ways, the structure of the collection is parabolic. Points of reference are plotted along a curve that eventually returns to the same site of origin before continuing onward. Later sections of the collection – titled *The Afterlife of Trees and Their Lovers* – thus return dutifully to Bose's life and works, and build a portrait of the "scientist reincarnated as tree". Roy's greatest achievement in this regard lies in the archive she painstakingly creates throughout the entire collection, one that brings together artists, writers, and thinkers – ranging from Bose to Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian artist Nandalal

Bose, and the Indian poet Shakti Chattopadhyay – who have generated an indispensable vocabulary for imagining plant-human relationships in the ‘Global South’. In her search for those who had felt the plant-human relationship emotionally, intellectually, or perhaps intuitively, Roy’s thoughts wander to Bolai – Tagore’s eponymous protagonist in the short story “Bolai” – and his love for trees. Myth permeates into memory in **VIP**. The subtle references to Bangla folk tales and fairy lores bestow Roy’s narrative with a certain lightness of grace and warm ebullience, effects that are precariously stabilised across the densely textured composition. The collection brings a granular ethics of attention to this motley of voices – across texts, genres, histories – and holds them in perilous suspension in the contemporary moment.

There is grief and resistance in this collection; threat and desire; impossible longing and devastating intimacy. The collection takes a massive stride on the important journey of reimagining our collective space beside plant and vegetal life. At turns poignant and deeply personal, Roy’s work will long serve to be a vital touchpoint of contemporary poetry.

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