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Countering the Spectacle: The Sundarban Tiger beyond Binaries in Soharab Hossen's *Gang Baghini*

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Abstract: This paper interrogates the dominant representational regimes that spectacularise the Sundarban tiger as either a ferocious predator, an endangered icon, or a commodified emblem of conservation. Drawing on Guy Debord's notion of spectacle and Barbara Harlow's theorisation of resistance literature, the study explores how Soharab Hossen's *Gang Baghini* subverts these reductive imaginaries. Through intimate portrayals of human–nonhuman entanglements, especially in the relationships between Adharbabu, Kajla, and the tiger, the narrative resists anthropocentric binaries such as human/animal, wild/domestic, and predator/protector. By reimagining the tiger as a being imbued with memory, myth, and affect, the novel offers a de-spectacularised, ethically attuned vision of ecological coexistence rooted in embodied histories and regional specificity.

Keywords- Binary,human-nonhuman, resistance, spectacle, sundarban,

In contemporary ecological and cultural discourses, the Sundarban tiger has come to embody a set of dominant representational regimes, often reduced to the spectacle of wilderness, a marker of danger, or a commodified symbol of conservation. Whether showcased as the flagship species of eco-tourism campaigns, feared as a ruthless predator, or fetishised as an endangered being requiring human intervention, the tiger's identity is continually shaped by narratives that serve institutional, governmental, and capitalist interests. As Guy Debord, in his *The Society of the Spectacle*, asserts, "...life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly experienced has been replaced with its representation in the form of images"(16). The Sundarban tiger, in this sense, is not merely an ecological being but a constructed figure, an image which is staged, commodified, and consumed in public imaginaries.

Against this backdrop of spectacularisation and reduction, Soharab Hossen's *Gang Baghini* emerges as a narrative of resistance. The novel counters these dominant discourses by restoring agency, ambiguity, and vitality to the figure of the tiger and the interwoven life-worlds of the Sundarbans. In *Gang Baghini*, the tiger is not merely an emblem of danger or ecological fragility; rather, it is a being with affect, desire, memory, and mythic resonance. The novel resists the objectification of the tiger and challenges how human–nonhuman relations are structured by power, violence, and containment. The narrative raises a 'systematic and concerted challenge to the imposed chronology of what Frederic Jameson has called "master narratives" (Harlow 78). Hossen deconstructs the image of the tiger as spectacle and instead crafts it as a symbol of entangled resistance: resistance against the spectacularisation of the tiger.

Through its textured character portrayals, particularly the evolving relationships between Adharbabu, Kajla, and the tiger, the novel reconfigures both human and nonhuman subjectivities. It complicates the rigid binaries of human/animal, predator/protector, and wild/domesticated, offering instead a layered intersection of ecological, psychological, and gendered consciousness. The tiger becomes not only a nonhuman actor but also a mirror for human trauma, desire, and exile, especially in the shadow of partition and personal displacement. Ultimately, *Gang Baghini* asserts that resistance to spectacle is not only

aesthetic or symbolic but also ethical, embodied, and ecological, unfolding through myth, memory, desire, and wounded belonging.

Annu Jalais, in her "Unmasking the Cosmopolitan Tiger", critically examines the representations of tigers in recent history, and draws a crucial distinction between the globalised notion of the "cosmopolitan tiger" and the locally situated "Sundarbans tiger". She argues that the cosmopolitan tiger, often valourised by urban conservationist narratives and global wildlife discourses, becomes emblematic of Western-dominated environmental concerns. In contrast, the lived realities of those who coexist with tigers in places like the Sundarbans are rendered secondary. Through a comparative analysis of colonial and postcolonial representations, Jalais demonstrates how even depictions of wild animals are deeply imbricated in structures of power. Drawing on Philippe Descola's theorisation of the multiplicity of ontologies surrounding "nature," she shows how dominant frameworks of conservation marginalise alternative ways of relating to and understanding nonhuman life. The 'cosmopolitan' view, she contends, perpetuates an unequal and coercive relationship between those who consume mediated images of the tiger and those who must negotiate its physical presence daily. Thus, her work powerfully critiques the epistemic violence embedded in global environmental imaginaries and urges a rethinking of conservation ethics that accounts for plural ontologies and local knowledge systems (31-38).

Animals hold a profound and enduring presence in Bengali literature, as their representations are deeply embedded in the region's cultural and narrative traditions. Though both the mainstream Bengali literature and the literary expressions emerging from the Sundarbans fall under the broader category of Bengali writing, the latter remains largely peripheral and underrepresented. The literature of the Sundarbans is shaped not only by aesthetic trends of mainstream Bengali literature but also by the socio-economic realities and ecological specificities of the region.

The Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest and one of the richest in biodiversity, is home to species such as the Royal Bengal Tiger, Javan Rhino, wild buffalo, barasingha, leopards, saltwater crocodiles, and fishing cats, alongside a wide variety of avian life. Coexisting with them are over four million people whose livelihoods (woodcutting, honey collection, fishing) are deeply entangled with this non-human environment. This intricate entanglement has given rise to a body of literature where animal presence is more frequent and symbolically potent than in the mainstream Bengali literature. From Manoj Basu's *Joljangol* (1941) and *Bon Kete Basat* (1951) to Avijit Sengupta's *Kuhakjatra*, these reflect the daily struggles, resilience, and emotional landscapes of the Sundarbans' inhabitants, while simultaneously capturing their interdependence with the region's flora and fauna.

Within this context, Soharab Hossen's *Gang Baghini* stands out as a compelling narrative that reimagines the human–animal relationship beyond surface-level coexistence. Set against the Sundarbans' harsh and unpredictable terrain, *Gang Baghini* centers the lives of woodcutters, honey collectors, and coast guards, figures marked by vulnerability and resistance. Through the interplay of human desire, ranging from intimate longing to primal instincts, and the persistent presence of non-human beings, Hossen blurs the lines between the real, the mythical, and the psychological. Importantly, *Gang Baghini* can also be read as an act of resistance against dominant representations of the Sundarbans tiger, often framed within global conservation discourse as either a spectacular object of ecotourism, a menacing killer, or an endangered species in need of protection. By reconfiguring the tiger as a figure of shared vulnerability, psychological mirroring, and migratory longing, Hossen resists the flattening effects of such cosmopolitan, external narratives. In doing so, the novel "provides a more developed historical analysis of the circumstances of economic, political, and cultural domination and repression" (Harlow 78). It opens up a space for an

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alternative ethics, one that reclaims the agency of both human and non-human inhabitants of the Sundarbans against imposed imaginaries and structural marginalisations.

Helen Tiffin, in *Reimagining Communities*, explores how "flora and fauna" often become metonymic of the nation-state, functioning as symbolic representations of national identity and belonging. As she observes, "the koala and the kangaroo in Australia, the beaver and the maple leaf in Canada" exemplify this symbolic process (Tiffin 23). A similar dynamic is at work in the Sundarbans, where the Royal Bengal Tiger has come to stand as the dominant metonym of the region, projected as its singular emblem across global conservation, tourism, and ecological narratives. However, this symbolic elevation often comes at the cost of rendering invisible the lived realities of the people who inhabit the Sundarbans, whose entangled lives with the forest are marginalised within this narrow, spectacular framing. The colonial-era prestige associated with hunting and killing tigers has, in contemporary times, been replaced by the prestige of conserving and protecting them. Today, the tiger is expected not only to embody its historical epithet of the "royal beast" but also to fulfill its role as the national animal and a global icon of wildlife conservation, carrying the burden of both national pride and cosmopolitan environmental branding. Moreover, in recent years, the expansion of travel economies, facilitated by government-led promotion of tourism in the Sundarbans, has contributed to the increasing commodification of the region and its non-human inhabitants, particularly tigers. In contrast, *Gang Baghini* offers a markedly different narrative that actively resists the instrumentalisation and spectacularisation of the tiger as a national or ecological symbol. It challenges dominant discourses that reduce animals to symbols of national pride, tourist attractions, or conservation icons. Instead, *Gang Baghini* gestures toward a relational ontology in which species boundaries are porous, and interdependence is not structured by domination or utility but by shared precarity, mutual recognition, and psychic resonance. In doing so, the novel resists both anthropocentric narratives and the commodifying gaze of global conservation, offering a counter-discourse rooted in embodied experience, memory, and vulnerability.

In the beginning of *Gang Baghini*, Coast Guard officer Adhar Roy reflects on the quiet beauty of Kolos Dwip: "Kolos camp is giving a dreamy appearance. It is beautiful too" (Hossen 16).[1] Though stationed there for five years, his initial understanding of the Sundarbans, shaped by geography textbooks, saw it only as a vast, untamed terrain. This reductive view begins to shift as he gradually develops an embodied connection with the land. One evening, he perceives the delta anew: "The waters of rivers, rivulets, tributaries, and estuaries caress the small deltas with affection… marked by swampy regions known as bada… small, forested delta[s]" (Hossen 16). This transformation underscores how dominant representations often exoticise the Sundarbans through the Royal Bengal Tiger or depict it as inhospitable, obscuring its rich ecological and cultural life. Roy's perceptual shift illustrates the value of a situated, affective epistemology rooted in proximity and lived experience. Just like a local once told Annu Jalais, "Wait till you have seen the forest and understood its ways," and so too does Adharbabu come to "grasp the forest's beauty and unique geography through witnessing and understanding its ways" (Jalais 9).

In the opening chapter of *Gang Baghini*, a conversation between Haladhar and Manikhar reveals how human presence in the Sundarbans poses a greater threat than non-human animals. When told of river pirates, allegedly from Thailand, Haladhar asks if they are "jantunamanush" (animal or human), and upon hearing they are human, he asserts that it is the humans in the *bada* (swampy forest) who are truly dangerous (Hossen 14). Unlike animals, they are unpredictable and destructive. Similarly, when fisherwomen Kajla and Shankari, identifying as *Sabare*, are asked by Adhar Babu if they fear fishing in predator-infested rivers like the Thakuran or Matla, they respond that their real fear lies not in tigers or crocodiles but in the exploitative *managers* who buy their fish at half the value. As they say, they are "snatching food from the mouths of tigers and crocodiles," yet it is the human economic predators who inflict the deepest harm (Hossen 21). For the

Sabare, the real "tigers" are not in the forest but within the human economic structure, embodied by the oppressive intermediaries who perpetuate systemic exploitation. These scenes destabilise the binary between the human and the animal, foregrounding a complex interplay of animality and humanity where the moral hierarchy is reversed: it is the humans who exhibit predatory behavior, while the non-human animals become part of a larger, interdependent ecology.

During his stay on Kalas Dwip, Adhar Roy learns from local woodcutters that Kajla has begun to identify herself with *Bonbibi,* enacting the goddess's persona in both ritual and daily life. Kajla's self-impersonation of the goddess invites a feminist reading of resistance and agency. Positioned in a precarious socio-economic landscape and having been objectified by multiple male figures, forest officers, navy personnel, and boatmen, Kajla's embodiment of *Bonbibi* represents a strategic reclamation of spiritual and social authority. In taking on the figure of the divine protector, she transcends her vulnerable position as a widow and *Sabare* woman, asserting both bodily autonomy and moral power within a deeply patriarchal context. Her transformation foregrounds a subaltern feminist politics, wherein divinity becomes a mode of self-empowerment and collective protection in the face of systemic gendered exploitation.

Adhar Babu, who had once attempted to initiate a relationship with Kajla five years prior, seeks to rekindle that connection. However, Kajla firmly resists his advances, asserting that she is no longer "just a woman" -she is something beyond. She declares that she is, at times, *Bonbibi*, the revered forest goddess of the Sundarbans, and at other times, a tigress:

-You are making a mistake again, Kajla whispers, I am not just a woman.

-Then what are you more?

-I am Bonbibi. Also…!

-Also what?

-Now I am a tigress too. (Hossen 34)

…

-You must ease your mind before attempting to take root anywhere, Babu.

-I know…

-Then why are there signs of lust in your eyes? Ease your mind (Hossen 35).

This self-identification is deeply significant, especially within the cultural mythology of the region, where the figure of the tiger is traditionally associated with the demon king Dakshin Rai, the adversary whom *Bonbibi*defeats to protect the forest-dwelling communities.

Kajla's dual identification with both *Bonbibi* and the tigress complicates the conventional binary of divine protector and demonic predator. Her appropriation of both roles signals not merely a personal strategy for survival or resistance against male aggression, but a more profound reconfiguration of local mythologies and gendered power. By embodying both the sacred and the feared, the maternal and the feral, human and non-human, Kajla destabilises the symbolic order that rigidly separates protector from threat,

human from animal, and human from animal. As the narrative unfolds, her figure gestures toward a subversive rewriting of spiritual and ecological agency, one that challenges patriarchal and anthropocentric structures alike.

The metaphor of "taking root" functions as a potent symbol of settlement and intimacy within the narrative, particularly in the interaction between Adhar Babu and Kajla. While Adhar expresses a desire to establish a relationship, both emotional and corporeal, Kajla resists, invoking the cosmology of the *badabon* (swampy forest) region. She reminds him that in the cultural belief system of the Sundarbans, rooting oneself in a human body requires a ritualistic acknowledgment of *Bonbibi*, the forest goddess, followed by the symbolic taming of the tigress. Only through the completion of these acts, she suggests, can one hope to carve a "river terrace", a metaphoric space of emotional anchoring, within the heart of another. (Hossen 36)

Kajla's articulation complicates normative understandings of love and desire by framing them within a mytho-ecological ontology. When he asks what it takes to create such a river terrace in a woman's heart, she offers a striking image: 'the death of a hundred tigers—tigers driven by unfulfilled, frenzied desire. According to her, the landscape of the Sundarbans—the small deltas, the terraces, the shifting riverbeds—emerges from the residue of such failed mating attempts', suggesting that the very geography of the region is shaped by the embodied pain of desire denied (Hossen 35).

This passage invites a profound symbolic reading, where human longing, animal instinct, and the natural world are entwined in a shared ecology of affect. Kajla collapses the boundaries between human and non-human, between cultural mythology and physical geography. The tigress, here, is not merely an animal but an extension of female agency and carnal resistance; the tiger becomes a figure of masculine aggression and frustrated desire. Through this lens, desire is no longer a private, internalised phenomenon; it becomes material, shaping not only relationships but also the landscape itself.

Psychologically, this narrative blurs the division between human consciousness and animal instinct, suggesting that emotions like lust, pain, and longing are trans-species energies that leave traces on both the body and the earth. Ecologically, the story affirms an animistic worldview where the land is not inert but is born of, and continues to bear, the imprint of interspecies interactions. Kajla moves beyond the spectacle of the 'cosmopolitan tiger' which 'becomes a badge of one's own cosmopolitanism, because it is seen as moving beyond the parochialism of one's location, which necessarily rests within the confines of urbanity and one's nation-state' (Jalais 10). Rather, she relates to 'a more local tiger, their tiger' (Jalais 10).

Culturally, Kajla's speech embodies a subaltern feminist cosmology, where women's bodies are not passive sites of male desire but terrains that demand reverence, ritual, and reciprocity before access. In a deeply symbolic moment in the narrative, Kajla informs Adhar Babu that a young tigress has entered her mating season and is releasing the scent of *atap chāl* (sunned rice) to attract a mate, a scent that evokes both fertility and longing in the cultural imagination of the Sundarbans. Adhar Babu, at first unsettled by the fragrance, soon realises that it emanates not from the forest alone, but from Kajla herself. This realisation blurs the boundary between human and non-human, between woman and tigress, positioning Kajla as a liminal figure who embodies both feminine subjectivity and animal desire.

Overcome by desire, Adhar attempts to inhabit the role of the tiger, attempting to assert a dominant, corporeal claim over Kajla. Yet his effort to fully inhabit this hybrid identity fails. His desire, though made explicit, is ultimately thwarted, not by force, but by the ecological counter-presence of a real tiger. Kajla interrupts Adhar's approach by pointing toward an actual tiger swimming across the Raymangal River toward *ChhotoChamot* island—the very space they occupy. The tiger, migrating from the Bangladesh side of

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the Sundarbans, is drawn by the same scent of sunned rice, signaling its search for the tigress it associates with that olfactory trace. This mirroring of Adhar's desire in the tiger's movement produces a profound moment of psychological and ecological doubling.

The tiger's presence on the riverbank becomes a potent trigger for Adhar Babu, catalysing a resurgence of long-suppressed memories linked to his own displacement during the Partition of Bengal. As he watches the tiger cross the Raymangal River, moving fluidly between borders, Adhar's mind is transported back to his origins in Faridpur, Bangladesh:

> The liberation movement of Bangladesh was at its pinnacle at that time. He started his journey from Dhaka's Jagannath Hall to his ancestral house at Faridpur. That uncertain journey ultimately stopped in this side of Bengal. He could not return to his motherland since then. His heart beats a bit louder still when he remembers these events. (Hossen 54)

This recollection situates Adhar's personal history within the broader trauma of partition and statelessness. The tiger, in this moment, is no longer merely a symbol of ecological wilderness or physical threat; it becomes a psychic mirror, reflecting Adhar's own fractured sense of belonging. What follows is a striking exchange between Adhar and Kajla that probes the limits and absurdities of human-imposed borders:

> – Kajla, Is there any partition exists in the case of the tigers?
> – What?...
> – Is there any barbed wire in the river, Kajla?
> – No.
> – Is there any 'that side of Bengal' or 'this side of Bengal' division for the tigers?
> – I don't know.
> – Can the tigers return to their homeland when they come to India? (Hossen 54)

This dialogue exposes the arbitrary and anthropocentric nature of national borders when juxtaposed with non-human movement. The tiger, indifferent to geopolitical demarcations, becomes a figure of ecological continuity, able to traverse what humans divide. Adhar's shift from desiring to be the tiger (as a metaphor of masculine dominance and access to Kajla) to identifying with the tiger (as a fellow exile) signals a profound psychological transformation. No longer projecting upon the animal, he begins to internalise its condition.

This moment establishes a nuanced psychological interconnection between human and non-human. The tiger, moving instinctively across rivers once charged with the violence of partition, evokes in Adhar a deep affective recognition of his own dislocation. The tiger becomes a transgressive figure that collapses the binary between human and animal, native and outsider, self and other. Ecologically, the scene underscores how rivers, fluid, transitory, and borderless, form a habitat that resists the fixity of political cartographies. The Sundarbans, straddling India and Bangladesh, becomes not just a contested geography but also a liminal space where species and subjectivities coexist, migrate, and remember.

This convergence of memory, ecology, and cross-species identification reframes the tiger not merely as a creature of danger or desire, but as a carrier of submerged histories and a catalyst for empathy across species lines. The narrative subtly dislodges anthropocentric assumptions by suggesting that understanding the non-human may require inhabiting their vulnerabilities and disruptions, echoes of one's own.

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In the surveillance tower overlooking *Choto Chamot*, a protected deltaic island prohibited to local woodcutters and fishermen, Adhar Babu becomes acutely aware of the presence, or perhaps the phantom scent of sunned rice (*atap chal*). This olfactory signifier, ambiguous in origin (whether emanating from Kajla or an actual tigress on the island), permeates the air and erodes the human-non-human divide. In granting access to his subordinate Bankim and a select number of locals, Adhar orchestrates a site for cross-species encounter and shared belonging.

During this vigil, Adhar confides to Bankim a confession laden with personal and historical resonance: he details the brutal violence of the Partition era politics, the cruelties enacted under the banners of religion and power, the tyranny of Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Awami League machinations, and the abusive governance of military regimes. He recounts his flight from Faridpur, the wrenching separation from his family, the economic precarity of survival in West Bengal, and his eventual acceptance and establishment within the Coast Guard. Yet, he remains unrooted: a citizen by necessity, but never quite home.

In this moment, the tiger's attempted migration across the Raimongal River becomes an uncanny echo of Adhar's own journey. The animal, unimpeded by barbed wire or national demarcations, traverses a boundary that once violently partitioned Adhar's homeland. Psychologically, the tiger's crossing activates Adhar's sublimated trauma, a deep-seated displacement that resurfaces with the animal's efforts. The tiger emerges as both mirror and agent of memory, destabilising the geo-political limitations that entrap the human subject. Adhar's insistence to share the experience with Bankim underscores a posthumanist solidarity: both human and non-human inhabit an ecological-emotional terrain unbounded by artificial constructions.

This convergence of human and animal movement also foregrounds a non-anthropocentric critique: while Adhar laments his own rootlessness, the tiger exemplifies a form of mobility that resists human-imposed immobility. The shared boundary-crossing becomes a meta-narrative about belonging, agency, and the porousness of categories. Adhar's narrative and the tiger's expedition converge to suggest that ecological systems—rivers, wildlife, human collectives—speak in one symbiotic voice, where both human and non-human histories co-author trauma and belonging.

As the tiger attempts to penetrate the interior of *ChhotoChamot*, it is met with the violent obstruction of barbed wire fencing, an emblem of regulated access, conservationist control, and geopolitical containment. The tiger hurls itself repeatedly against this steel threshold, refusing to yield to the territorial logic imposed by human authorities. The narrative unfolds:

> In that moment, the tiger makes a mighty leap, as if he will soar over the barbed wires. But his second attempt too ends in failure. Still, the male does not give up. He retreats to the river, emerges once more on the shore, and leaps again. Again, the sharp metal tears into his flesh, and he crashes to the ground. Watching the tiger's repeated defeats, Adhar Babu is overcome with sorrow.
>
> 'Is it not possible,' he says, 'to cut a portion of the wire?'
>
> 'Have you lost your mind?' Bankim responds in a trembling voice. (Hossen 100)

This moment is not merely about an animal's thwarted crossing; it reveals a profound psychological and ontological identification between Adhar Babu and the tiger. The tiger's struggle with the wire parallels

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Adhar Babu's own unhealed trauma of partition, dislocation, and rootlessness. Born in Faridpur, present-day Bangladesh, and forcefully displaced during the Liberation War, Adhar Babu carries the psychic scars of national division. In watching the tiger crash against the barbed boundary, he sees an allegory of his own journey across fractured homelands. His impulse ("Is it not possible to cut some parts of the wire?") is more of a subversive yearning to undo the very structures that have shaped his historical exile. Just like Eduardo Kohn's encounter with jaguars and local beliefs taught him that through such an encounter "we do not remain unchanged. We become something new, a new kind of 'we' perhaps, aligned somehow with that predator…" (Kohn 2), Adhar's encounter with the tiger similarly draws him into a shared desperation, to belong, to root himself, aligning his psyche with that wounded, persistent predator. Here, the barbed wire becomes a metaphorical hinge between human and non-human experience, an interface where trauma, desire, and memory leak across species boundaries. The tiger is not just an ecological subject; it becomes a mirror of Adhar Babu's embodied history, turning the animal into a vector of political critique. Through this entangled interspecies identification, the idea of the nation-state is rendered fragile. The tiger's disregard for human-imposed borders, its natural impulse to move fluidly across rivers and deltas, directly challenges the geopolitical logic of division.

Adhar Babu's longing to dismantle the barbed wire thus emerges not only as a critique of conservationist enclosure but as a symbolic rejection of partitioned identities and bordered sovereignties. His emotional identification with the tiger destabilises the fixity of the human/non-human binary and, simultaneously, the political naturalisation of the nation-state. In this moment, the border ceases to be a line of protection and becomes a wound on the tiger's body, and on Adhar Babu's psyche.

As the narrative unfolds, the tiger's repeated, desperate attempts to leap over the barbed wire and enter the protected terrain of *Choto Chamot* begin to take a severe toll on both its body and on Adhar Babu's psyche. With each failed attempt, the tiger becomes increasingly wounded; its body is ravaged by the metal thorns of human-imposed borders, its flesh torn open, its blood staining the soil of contested territory. The tiger's suffering becomes a brutal manifestation of border violence—violence not just geographical, but ontological.

For Adhar Babu, this is not a distant spectacle. As Descola describes the "social objectivation of nature," the tiger, framed as spectacle, becomes a victim of this objectifying gaze (85). In contrast, Adhar Babu resists such reduction—he does not merely observe the tiger; he internalises its struggle, psychically aligning with its wounded persistence. The tiger's bodily wounds evoke deep psychic resonances, reactivating his own historical trauma of crossing the India-East Pakistan border during the Partition. As he watches the tiger's futile efforts, he sees in its struggle the mirror of his own: the desperation of exile, the violent dislocation of belonging, and the profound alienation that comes with trying to root oneself in a foreign land. Adharbabu forges a "substance of kinship"[2] with the tiger through their shared trajectories of displacement, trauma, and spatial belonging, each a subject shaped by the violent legacies of Partition and the liminal geography of the Sundarbans. His reflective gaze upon Partition is thus mediated not through a distanced historical lens, but through an intersubjective entanglement with the non-human other, wherein both human and animal co-inhabit a landscape marked by rupture, exile, and survival. The tiger's bleeding body becomes a site where the human and non-human converge in shared suffering, a communion of loss that transcends species.

This interspecies empathy destabilises Adhar Babu's rational faculties. As his identification with the tiger deepens, so too does his rebellion against the cultural mythologies that have historically structured Sundarban cosmology. In a moment of affective rupture, he abandons reverence for the protector deities like

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Banabibi, Shah Janguli, and even Kapil Muni, and instead invokes the exiled figure of Dakshin Rai, the demon-king often demonised as a ferocious tiger in local lore:

> -Let it be! - Adhar's voice erupts into a roar, uncannily echoing the tiger's cries across the border- It is the time of Dakshin Rai! His wealth has been stolen by Kapil Muni, Banabibi, and Shah Janguli! Now the time has come to return it to him! Do you understand? — No, Babu! Kajla whispers in fear (Hossen 126).

Here, Adhar's psychological disintegration is complete. His identification with the tiger transforms from affective sympathy to symbolic possession; he no longer just sees himself in the tiger, he becomes the tiger. The tiger's failure is his failure. The collapse of the tiger, beaten and bloodied in its final attempt, signals the collapse of Adhar's hope, his masculinity, and his tenuous sense of belonging. And yet, the death of the tiger does not pass without cultural inscription. Kajla, rooted in the oral cosmology of the Sundarbans, interprets the tiger's demise as generative—an ecological sacrifice that, in the beliefs of her people, will give rise to new riverbanks and deltaic formations. In the rhythms of Sundarban life, such deaths are not just endings but beginnings—suffering is a precondition for regeneration. Her belief carries the eco-cultural understanding that land itself is shaped through death, pain, and the slow accretion of organic loss.

For Adhar, the tiger's death is not symbolic; it is personal. It is a reiteration of his own futility, his failed desire to root himself in love, in place, and history. The *sunned rice*, the scent that once symbolised intimacy, fertility, and connection, now becomes a phantom trace of what he can never possess. In a final act of psychic collapse, Adhar enacts violence not upon the state, nor upon the tiger, but upon the woman who stood as the interstitial figure between the human and the animal, the goddess and the survivor: Kajla. He shoots her. Though Kajla survives, wounded but alive, the social fabric ruptures irreparably. The group disbands, each individual carrying their own scar, be it on the body, the memory, or the soul. The narrative closes on this melancholic note: an ecological parable where human longing, animal suffering, and geopolitical trauma dissolve into one another.

Kajla's reading of the tiger's death as generative reflects the local epistemology of the Sundarbans, where struggle and sacrifice form the basis of ecological and spiritual regeneration. This stands in sharp contrast to Adhar's modernist melancholia, highlighting a clash of worldviews. Adrian Franklin argues that the "animal world" is not a uniform or universal category but a socially and historically constructed field, laden with moral significance. This field emerges from the human tendency to project social logic, tensions, and complexities onto animals, and is shaped by variables such as class, region, gender, and religion.[3] In *Gang Baghini*, this dynamic is evident in the contrasting ways Kajla and Adharbabu relate to the tiger. For Kajla, who has grown up in the Sundarbans and internalised its mythologies, the tiger holds deep cultural and spiritual meaning, rooted in local narratives and rituals. In contrast, Adharbabu's relationship with the tiger is shaped by his personal history, trauma, and displacement, through which the animal becomes a psychic mirror of his own struggle for belonging. These differing modes of meaning-making not only highlight the plurality of human–animal relations but also serve to challenge and resist the dominant urban, middle-class perception of the tiger as merely a spectacle to be consumed or protected.

Also, as Jalais writes that for the local people, the tigers, 'by becoming "cosmopolitan" animals, had become high-status animals and had moved onto the other side of the overarching socioeconomic divide'(13). Moreover, the tiger (especially in Sundarban) has become "the spectacle" which is both "the product and producer of the contemporary form of reality. It is not a supplement to, or decoration of reality, but the very heart of pseudo-reality" (Debord 18). The narrative of *Gang Baghini* resists this spectacle and dissolves the distance between the tigers and the people of the Sundarbans, as seen in Adharbabu's

becoming one with the tiger and Kajla's culturally embedded relationship with the Sundarban tigress, culminating in her symbolic merging with the animal as a means of subverting the patriarchal gaze.

Bruno Latour writes that "ecology movements have sought to position themselves on the political chessboard without redrawing the squares, without redefining the rules of the game, without redesigning the pawns." (69) His argument underscores the necessity of rethinking not only our ecological practices but also the epistemological and ontological foundations that structure our understanding of the non-human world. For Latour, addressing ecological crises, whether local or global, requires "adding a new series of new voices to the discussion, voices that have been inaudible up to now." (69). In the spirit of this call, *Gang Baghini* by Soharab Hossen offers a compelling narrative that foregrounds precisely such voices, those of the Sundarbans' human and non-human inhabitants, whose mutual entanglements have long been silenced or misrepresented in dominant ecological and literary discourses.

The inhabitants of the Sundarbans have historically lived close to the non-human world, developing modes of interrelation that challenge anthropocentric binaries. This deeply relational existence, where the boundaries between humans and animals are porous and continuously negotiated, reveals a form of ecological subjectivity grounded in interdependence, affect, and co-becoming. Within this context, *Gang Baghini* emerges as a narrative of resistance, not only against the material violence of displacement and marginalisation but also against the symbolic violence enacted through the spectacularisation of the Royal Bengal Tiger.

Through its refusal to frame the tiger solely as an endangered species, a spectacle for tourism, or a menacing predator, the novel reconfigures its image by embedding it within the psychic, cultural, and material lifeworlds of local people. Adharbabu's psychological identification with the tiger, Kajla's mythological entanglement with the tigress, and the narrative's repeated disruptions of mainstream imaginaries of the forest animal collectively dismantle the sanitised and commodified portrayals that dominate popular and conservationist narratives. In this sense, *Gang Baghini* enacts what Barbara Harlow refers to as the power of resistance narratives:

> Resistance narratives go further still in analysing the relations of power which sustain the system of domination and exploitation. Where symbols and images often fail to elucidate the implicit power structures of a given historical conjuncture, the discourse of narrative is capable of exposing these structures, even, eventually, of realigning them, of redressing the imbalance. (Harlow 85)

In Sundarbans literature, human–animal relations are depicted with remarkable complexity, resisting reductive binaries of predator and prey. In Niranjan Mondal's *Badaboner Padabali* (2019), stories such as *Banabibir Apon Bone* and *Jal Jongol Jibon* show how fishermen and honey collectors, though vulnerable to tiger attacks, continue to revere the animal as 'boromiyan', recognising their own intrusion into its territory. Nikhil Mondal's *AyelarChinri*(2017) reveals how characters identify themselves with prawns, while Amar Mitra's *Dhanapatir Char* (2007) portrays the elderly Dhanapati as embodying an ancient turtle, blurring human–animal distinctions and transforming such identification into a source of communal resilience against state oppression. Similarly, Tapan Bandyopadhyay's *Koti KotiBochorer Pari* (2002) situates human evolution within a broader struggle for survival alongside other species. Across these works, animals are not symbolic ornaments but integral to ecological, cultural, and psychological life. Within this tradition, Sohorab Hossen's *Gang Baghini* stands out for reimagining the tiger not as a ferocious predator or endangered icon, but as a mediator of trauma, desire, and resistance within a shared ecology of human and nonhuman vulnerability.

By invoking a rich, culturally embedded, and ecopsychological understanding of human–animal entanglements, Hossen's *Gang Baghini* resists dominant paradigms of animal studies that universalise experience without attending to regional specificity. Through its blurring of binaries like human/animal, wild/domestic, predator/victim, the novel deconstructs the spectacle of the cosmopolitan tiger and resists its symbolic commodification. In doing so, it invites a more inclusive, situated, and relational framework for animal studies—one that prioritises local epistemologies and challenges the extractive logic of both capitalism and conservationism. Ultimately, the narrative reclaims the Sundarbans tiger as a living presence within a dynamic ecology of shared vulnerability and mutual recognition.

Endnotes

[1]All the translations of Soharab Hossen's *Gang Baghini* are done by the author of this paper unless stated otherwise.

[2]As mentioned in Radhika Govindrajan's book *Animal Intimacies*, according to Carsten, "substance of kinship" is not solely derived from biological ties but is cultivated over time through shared practices and entanglements (such as eating from the same soil, drinking from the same rivers, and worshipping the same gods) which together produce a sense of relationality and belonging.

[3]My interpretation of Annu Jalais' writing on Adrian Franklin as quoted, 'The "animal world" for any society, says Adrian Franklin (1999), is never an indivisible category but a historically constituted and morally loaded field of meanings that derives from the human habit of extending social logic, complexities, and conflicts onto the natural world, and particularly onto animals. The possibilities for differentiations in meaning and practice in human-animal relations, he says, are multiplied everywhere by the social differentiations that stem from class, regional affiliations, gender, and religion. But in this case, whatever their regional affiliations, gender, and religion, the urban middle classes the world over are "united" in a particular perception of tigers and the "protection" of wildlife.'

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