The Subaltern's Speech: Reframing Narratives of Subaltern Representation and Voice Through Tales of The Sundarbans in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Bachelor of Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

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Abstract

The subaltern in literary discourse has long been regarded as a greatly complex subject, with their identification, representation and narratives considered challenging to depict. Both Western and non-Western discourses theorise the state of the subaltern through critical inquiry, and this paper examines the methods and manner of such treatment. It focuses particularly on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's assertion that the subaltern "cannot speak", highlighting the perceived need to represent subaltern groups. By engaging critically with the existing frameworks that shape how marginalised groups are showcased and theorised, this study seeks to uncover the limitations of such engagement. Through close readings of Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children,* this research centres on showcasing the lived realities of the Sundarbans' inhabitants and the legends they share, such as that of Bon Bibi, to highlight the diverse narratives of indigenous people that challenge the notion of subaltern voicelessness. These stories, expressed in multiple forms, often go unheard or unacknowledged due to external impositions of knowledge. This thesis primarily argues for a paradigm shift from representation to participation, emphasising the necessity of listening as a means to engage authentically with subaltern narratives, where their voices inform and reshape contemporary discourse, offering a path forward that recognises the autonomy and agency of these communities.

Keywords: Subaltern studies, marginalised voices, Sundarbans

Acknowledgements

There were, in fact, many beginnings to my thesis which were as quickly discarded as they were written. It is not that I struggled to write my thesis, but rather that no sentence resonated with my last undergraduate work to commemorate the immense emotion I have felt in the last few years. My writing seemed as blasé as what I was feeling then, and my thesis felt like a depressive chore, the result of which would eventually find its place on dusty library shelves.

Yet now that I have written my thesis, I realise that my beginning does not need to be of just mine but a beginning to my country's story, too. The sentiment that I hold now is no different from the sentiment Saleem Sinai from Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* had held in his primal moments of birth: that the era of a new country has been ushered in by its very children. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is akin to Bangladesh's children, the ones who, in the month of July 2024, had rallied to overthrow a tyrant government. Saleem's midnight chord was Bangladesh's 3 PM, preceded by a deathly march and with the clock-hour strike, the children of Bangladesh found new governance in its state and soul. Watching Bangladesh's 'midnight' birth meant that the whole of history, which in part also includes my thesis and any other literature to be written from here onward, holds a different sentiment than before. Therefore, I begin my thesis by talking about the beginning of my new nation, the embattled fields on which all of us, its children, fought and reigned triumphant.

I pay homage to those who departed untimely and without reason during the months of July and August 2024. I pay homage to the countless stories of my country's people, both known and unknown, during this tiresome time. I pay homage to my friends and associates alongside everyone who stood guard against police attacks, even on my university's campus and continued fighting. I pay homage to the minority communities who were attacked and continue to fight relentlessly for protection and power.

When change comes, let it come for all of us.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The concept of the subaltern has been central to discussions of marginalised voices in literary, social, political, and class struggles. Traditionally defined, the subaltern represents those existing on the periphery of society — almost a 'lesser than' entity — who are often excluded from global narratives and power structures. While numerous philosophical and critical inquiries have attempted to define and describe the subaltern, many scholars theorising about this group tend to restrict the voices of the subalterns in a particular philosophical framework that is neither relevant nor related to their experiences.

It was Antonio Gramsci who designed the preliminary identity of the subaltern, through which the classification has gone through almost a game of tug-and-pull as both Western and Eastern critics took hold of the 'subaltern' terminology to claim their hand in subaltern historiography. Gramsci's definition prefaced in his *Prison Notebooks,* written at the time of his incarceration and the Italian fascist regime between 1926 and 1937, was that of the subaltern as the groups excluded from the structures of political and societal power. In Gramsci's view, the subaltern was not just those economically disadvantaged but also lacking the means to articulate their narratives and shape their destinies. Since then, this term has been reinterpreted, particularly within the realm of postcolonial studies, where it has now come to denote the marginalised and oppressed populations of formerly colonised nations.

The subaltern was a heterogeneous collective comprising peasants, workers, and other marginalised groups whose interests were often at odds with those of the ruling classes. However, Gramsci also recognised the potential of the subaltern to become a revolutionary force capable of challenging the status quo and establishing a new social order. [1]As he wrote in his *Prison Notebooks,* "The history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and

[1] It is important to note that Gramsci identifies the subaltern's ability to become a revolutionary force as more tied to class struggle and historical agency. Other scholars such as Spivak focus on more broader intersections of this, such as race and gender which is not noted in Gramsci.

episodic ... But this does not mean that they are not capable of historical initiative or that they are condemned to perpetual subordination" (54-55).

The concept of the subaltern gained renewed prominence in the 1980s with the rise of postcolonial studies. Scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Ranajit Guha began to apply Gramsci's insights to the context of previously colonised nations, where colonialism had left such a scathing mark to make it nearly impossible to wash away its residue. Within this context, the subaltern has begun to refer to the marginalised and oppressed populations of what is classified as the 'Third World' now. This particularly points to those whose voices and stories had been 'silenced' or distorted within the narratives propagated by Western imperialism.

One of the most influential figures in this reimagining of the subaltern is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak interrogates the possibility of subaltern representation, arguing that the subaltern's voice is inevitably silenced or distorted within dominant discourse. She contends that the subaltern is chained within two states of impossibilities: they either lack the means of complete self-expression or when they can speak, their words are often filtered through the lens of the colonisers' language and ideology. Spivak firmly declares, "the subaltern cannot speak" (285). This is not in the sense that they are literally mute, but that their voices are not heard or recognised in a way that would challenge power structures. Instead, their attempts to speak are often co-opted or misunderstood within the impositions of colonial and postcolonial subjects.

The subaltern, therefore, has had numerous categorical definitions and constraints. Spivak's essay marked an overture to how the concept of the subaltern, both as entities and cultures, would play out — that their voices are harder to represent, and most of it is wiped in the narratives of national history and literature. J. Maggio states that "Spivak wants to expose the complicit nature of literature and the intellectual elite, which often appears innocent in the

political realm of oppression" (420). Here, the treatment of the subaltern in literature, as well as other disciplines, is almost paradoxical because while the academic lingo attempts to provide a space for the subaltern to speak, it simultaneously mutes their voices through the difficult discourse and theorisation that surrounds it. Spivak herself writes, "I think it is important to acknowledge our complicity in the muting, in order precisely to be more effective in the long run" (309). This admittance to complicity is almost an intellectual quandary that Spivak both raises and falls into. Her statement marks a need for intellectuals to be more aware of the manner in which the subject of the subaltern is studied and discussed, particularly because their discussions often reinforce the existing structures that continue to silence subaltern voices. Maggio beautifully pronounces this dilemma by stating that "Theory, though powerful, cannot act as an elixir to the issues of the subaltern" (420).

It is on this basis that this paper will explore how academics view and conceptualise the subaltern, specifically by critically examining Spivak's arguments while also engaging with the perspectives of the South Asian Subaltern Studies Collective. This study will analyse how theory is continually presented to understand and represent subaltern experiences and narratives, uncovering the limitations that are inherent in current approaches to subaltern representation. By focusing on the Sundarbans, a tidal land that lies on the fringes of Bangladesh and India, and exploring the stories that encompass the land and its people through the literary worlds of Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* and Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*, this paper will conduct close readings to showcase how the subaltern can speak and share their experiences. This study, therefore, intends to reframe the existing critical approaches to subaltern stories and the concept of representation, focusing on the ways in which subaltern narratives can be heard and acknowledged into present discourse.

Chapter 2: The Subaltern in Discourse

2.1. Representing the Subaltern: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Spivak's exploration of the subaltern is deeply rooted in her critique of representation, which she draws from a Marxist understanding. On speaking of the proletariat, Karl Marx remarked that "The small peasant proprietors cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (239). In Marx's framework, the idea stands that the working class lacks the means and awareness to represent their own interest, thus necessitating a representation with proxies – typically the intellectuals or the bourgeoisie, the classes that have the means and ability to articulate their demands. The proletariat class ultimately lacks the political organisation and consciousness which the bourgeoisie class can fill in for.

Spivak critiques this Marxist notion by arguing that such forms of representation inherently silence the subaltern. She distinguishes between two German terms used by Marx: *Vertreten* (to stand in for) and *Darstellen* (to re-present or portray). According to Spivak, when the subaltern is represented by others—be it through political advocacy (*vertreten*) or intellectual discourse (*darstellen*)—their actual voice is eclipsed, as their representation is mediated through the place of those in power. In addition to this, Marxism takes on a very linear progression of class consciousness and revolution, wherein the intellectual or the revolutionary vanguard represents the proletariat's interests. In Spivak's argument, this approach is limiting to its core because it overlooks all the specificities of subaltern experiences, particularly those of women and colonised subjects, whose identities and struggles do not fit neatly into the Marxist framework. In her essay "Subaltern Studies: Deconstruction Historiography", Spivak explicates this point, "Marx is interested in the degree to which ideology obscures relations of production. His example of the subaltern who cannot represent themselves and must be represented repeats the problematic of representation and the class essentialism of his own critical project" (343).

Moreover, Spivak suggests that the act of representing the subaltern is fraught with "epistemic violence", a term she uses to describe the ways in which dominant discourses impose their frameworks and categories onto subaltern subjects, thereby manipulating the subaltern's original realities into more mainstream concepts of violence or other forms of experience. Spivak states that "The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other" (280). Here, Spivak's example encompasses the whole of the "Othered" in postcolonial studies where both colonial and postcolonial intellectuals, despite their efforts to speak for the subaltern, often end up perpetuating the very silencing they seek to overcome. J. Maggio explains that according to Spivak, the use of the term "other" is used by European intellectuals as a form of "essentialisation…(which) is always the reinforcement of the menace of empire" (420). Constantly reinforcing this term in discourse presents a perpetual method of stagnating the subaltern into their subjective positions and giving little room for them to be anything else. Spivak identifies this as, "There is no more dangerous pastime than transposing proper names into common nouns, translating, and using them as sociological evidence" (306). Through this, every iota of theorisation that happens in relation to the subaltern always positions itself at the heart of an imperial nature, and therefore, little progress is ever made in representing the subaltern, much less empowering them. This critique extends to both colonial and postcolonial intellectuals who, despite their efforts to speak for the subaltern, often end up perpetuating the very silencing they seek to overcome.

To move away from this traditional format of thinking about and for the subaltern classes, Spivak looks into Derrida (a theorist who takes precedence in her overall work) to deconstruct the meaning of the subaltern. Derrida appears as an ultimate saving grace in regard to the problem of intellectual representation because, according to Spivak, a Derridean methodology allows for the possibility of "measuring the silences" of the subaltern (286). The

ability to “measure” the subject of the subaltern is also possible because of the great self-reflexivity of Derridean philosophy, wherein Maggio notes that he is “self-aware of the relative positions of parties to communications…Derrida, therefore, is the prototypical self-aware philosopher, always questioning the boundaries” (424). Here, by utilising the deconstructionist method of analysing the subaltern, it is possible to constantly question the pre-existing notions of the subaltern subject, thereby revealing implicit biases and unexamined presuppositions that intellectuals may perpetuate (whether knowingly or unknowingly) in their analysis of subaltern subjects. Edward Said, for instance, shares how there is a challenge in reading cultural pieces of literature with not just “pleasure and profit but also with the imperial process of which they were manifestly and unconcealedly a part” (xv). Using the Derridean method is particularly useful in texts that propagate the idea of the subaltern subject as universal. For instance, in Said’s book *Culture and Imperialism*, he calls on how Charles Dickens places Magwitch and Australia as a penal colony against which Britain stands as the “metropolitan history… (that is) more inclusive and more dynamic” (xv). Magwitch’s stature as being different from imperialist Britain is presented through his extradition to Australia, where Australia is the essential “Other” to England’s “Self”: “The prohibition placed on Magwitch’s return is not only penal but imperial: subjects can be taken to places like Australia, but they cannot be allowed a ‘return’ to metropolitan space, which, as all Dicken’s fiction testifies, is meticulously charted, spoken for, inhabited by a hierarchy of metropolitan personages” (xvii). Said's analysis of Dickens' work demonstrates the universalising of the subaltern subject by revealing how the novel reduces Magwitch and Australia to simplified representations of all colonial subjects and spaces. By deconstructing these elements, Said exposes how literary texts can propagate and normalise essentialist conceptions of subaltern subjects, reinforcing imperial ideology by presenting these colonial relationships as natural and inevitable rather than as complex historical processes. This manner in which Dickens writes on Magwitch and is read identifies

how the subaltern subject constantly falls under the “epistemic violence” which proliferates Western intellectual discourse.

Deconstructionism aids in the process of identifying and also removing the manners in which Western intellectuals situate the subaltern through the language they use. The Derridean approach does this through close reading whereby it identifies binary oppositions, challenges their hierarchy (such as the binary of “civilised/primitive”) and scrutinises language to uncover internal contradictions or assumptions (i.e., why is one term favoured over the other or what happens if we consider the “primitive” as superior or equal to “civilised”). Spivak illustrates this point through the reference to *Sati,* or female immolation, stating, “What did *Sati* say? Can the subaltern be understood? Or is it always a ‘speaking for?’” (334). She explains that *Sati* was always viewed through a Eurocentric lens, understood either as the slaughter of innocent women or through the point-of-view of Hindu males who would speak for the females. The actual *Satis* retain no voice, no platform, no method of speaking because they are eclipsed by all those who intend to represent them. They are misrepresented in a discourse that does not centre on their lived experiences. The focus shifts away from the women undergoing the ritual to the intellectual and political debates that surround it, particularly those dominated by Western scholars.

This dynamic is especially visible in the vast array of British literature that frames *Sati* as either the conflict between “noble Hindus” versus the “bad Hindus” or as the “civilised British versus the primitive dark-skins” (425). Even within India, figures like Rammohun Roy, a prominent Brahmo reformer, contributed to the essentialisation of *Sati*. In his 1820 essay, "A Second Conference Between an Advocate for, and an Opponent of, the Practice of Burning Widows Alive," Roy addresses both the defenders and opponents of *Sati*. On the one hand, he argues that the Hindu scriptures do not require *Sati* as obligatory, where he attempts to counter those who defended the practice as a religious necessity, stating that "the burning of widows

alive is not positively enjoined by the Hindu religion as an indispensable duty" (9). On the other hand, he refers to those who advocate for *Sati* as being driven by "a mistaken zeal for the preservation of ancient customs" (13). In doing so, Roy frames the practice as an outdated and misinterpreted tradition, echoing British sentiments that viewed *Sati* as barbaric. By characterising the defenders of *Sati* as misinformed, Roy largely gives in to the binary representation of the practice—either a religious misinterpretation or a moral abomination—thus reinforcing the essentialisation of *Sati*.

Spivak engages with Roy's text to highlight how, even in his attempt to abolish the practice, Roy's arguments still operate within a framework that silences the voices of the women involved. She notes that by debating the religious and moral legitimacy of *Sati*, Roy, like his British counterparts, speaks *for* the subaltern woman, leaving her voiceless and without agency (98). This reinforces the colonialist discourse that either romanticised or demonised *Sati*, while sidelining the actual experiences of the women who underwent the ritual.

Spivak critiques this intellectual tendency in both the Western and Indian contexts. She writes:

> Obviously I am not advocating the killing of widows. I am suggesting that, within the two contending versions of freedom, the constitution of the female subject *in life* is the place of the *différend*. In the case of widow self-immolation, ritual is not being redefined as superstition but as crime. The gravity of sati was that it was ideologically cathected as 'reward,' just as the gravity of imperialism was that it was ideologically cathected as 'social mission'. (97)

When Spivak mentions the *différend*, she borrows the term from post-structuralist philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard. Here, she refers to the two types of discourses that exist on *Sati* —one of providing freedom for Hindu women as defined by the British colonisers, and another by the Hindu reformers. Yet, within this binary, the female subject remains absent, as

neither discourse centres on the lived experiences or agency of the women themselves. The women become objects of intellectual debate rather than active participants. Maggio states, "The nationalist Indians accepted the British reading of *Sati*, and made it a point to reclaim the practice" (425). This reinforcement of subject treatment ensures the practice of essentialising sustains and it bleeds into all forms of narratives, creating a very difficult process of navigating how the subaltern can be represented by themselves and then also understood globally.

Didur and Heffernan offer their analysis of Spivak's argument by explaining why she thinks the subaltern cannot speak: "Caught in the relay between 'benevolent' colonial interventions and national liberation struggles that both construct her will for her, the subaltern cannot speak" (3). Their voices are always in the margins, pushed away from all angles of discourse, and nearly erased in even its nascent production. Even prominent Indian figures like Rammohun Roy and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, despite their nationalistic critiques of colonial rule, engaged with *Sati* in a manner that mirrored the West's essentialising discourse, leaving the voices of subaltern women erased from the historical record.

The subaltern's speech is also more or less nullified because of their exclusion as a subject, especially reinforced in the Kantian criticism of universalism. For Kant, to construct someone as a subject, one must have the capacity for aesthetic judgement: "The development of moral ideas and culture prepares man to be capable of feeling the sublime. Without culture, the sublime would merely present itself as terrible to the raw man" (105). Spivak heavily contests this idea in her text *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* wherein she calls out Kant for his idea of the "raw man" which Spivak translates as "uneducated" – signalling to a particular group that is incapable of developing aesthetic judgement and thus remains nullified in the Western concept of a subject (the sublime being). Spivak states: "In Kant, the 'uneducated' are specifically the child and the poor, the 'naturally uneducatable' is woman" (12-14). In Spivak's analysis, Kant reinforces that the "subject" that is made out of the ability to make aesthetic

judgments allows one to participate in human culture. By extending Spivak's critique of Kant, we could state that since the subaltern cannot speak or even be heard, their participation in the universalised human culture is made negligible, and thus, they are removed from the identifier of a "subject being" and this puts them as something of either "not-yet-subjects" or an entirely "non-subject". This essentially models the "Subject" and the "Other": the two polarising pillars of human culture that has been central to Western philosophical thought since the Renaissance.

Spivak's use of Kantian philosophy allows her to draw a threshold on what Western discourse encompasses in the binary definitions of identity/alterity. By defining what the 'Subject' is in Kant, he also inadvertently constructs the alter to the subject, one which is excluded from subjectivity. The silencing of the subalterns, therefore, is not just a refusal to listen but also a result of the epistemological framework of Western thought, built inherently on Western figures like Kant, who constructs the subaltern as incapable of participating in philosophical, aesthetic and ethical discourse. [2]

2.2. The Subaltern as the Eastern Subject: The Subaltern Studies Collective

Spivak's outright criticism of the Western purview of the subaltern would also suggest that there remains a more interesting non-Western model of the subaltern that has not been largely engaged with. With postcolonial studies now expanding further into the re-examination of Western histories and uncovering the stories that were often shuffled underneath dominant narratives, Subaltern Studies have emerged as a widely mainstream component of Eastern studies. Within this, the Subaltern Studies Collective has had a cardinal role. Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee populate the place of South Asian intellectuals who

[2] Spivak uses Kant as a lever to contextualise Western thought on subject and alterity, but her attribution of certain ideas to Kant can also be seen as somewhat restrictive. Her interpretation of Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment raises an interesting paradox: if the ability to make aesthetic judgments defines the subject, then the process of identifying those without this ability (the 'alter' or 'subaltern') implicitly involves hearing or considering them, even if only to classify them as non-subjects. This suggests that the subaltern must, in some way, be acknowledged or 'heard' within the discourse, if only to be excluded from it. In this regard, the subaltern must be heard to determine their stature or the lack thereof in discourse.

have taken up the ground to address the historical silence surrounding the experiences of these subaltern groups, ranging from peasants, tribal communities, migrant communities, and more. The subaltern in the non-Western discipline, while maintaining similarities with the originally Western outlook takes a different interpretation, one where their subject position is brought under the microscope against the plate of nationalist historiographies.

The Subaltern Studies Collective worked largely to re-construct the narratives propagated by Western and Eurocentric hubs of thought with subaltern subjects. Gyan Prakash notes that “Criticism formed as an aftermath acknowledges that it inhabits the structures of Western domination that it seeks to undo” (1476). This indicates that regardless of the attempts to carve out subaltern studies from the flesh of Western thought that it has embedded itself into, there will remain a lot of the “interstices of disciplines of power/knowledge that it critiques” (1476). Homi Bhabha characterises this complex position as an "in-between, hybrid position of practice and negotiation" (20). This concept suggests that subaltern studies operate in a liminal space, simultaneously critiquing Western discourse while unavoidably utilising some of its structures. This hybridity allows for a unique form of resistance and reinterpretation of colonial narratives. Spivak explicates this idea by describing it as “catachresis” – "reversing, displacing, and seizing the apparatus of value-coding" (228). With Spivak’s definition, she identifies how there is a deliberate misuse or reappropriation of concepts from the dominant discourse. She presents that by taking and repurposing these concepts and methods of Western intellectual tradition, we can subvert these structures to amplify marginalised perspectives and create space for subaltern voices and experiences.

The main aim, therefore, was recovery for the voices of the subaltern, which, according to the Collective, has been “silenced” under both colonial rule and nationalist movements. In the preface of the Subaltern Studies Collective, Ranajit Guha signalled a work that would “rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work” in South Asian

studies (vii). Essentially, in parts of reclaiming history, the Collective maintained that the dominant narratives that clouded subaltern voices did not impose a hegemonic rule, which Gramsci believed. Instead, the subaltern had acted in history "on their own, that is independently of the elite… (and their politics had) an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite politics not did its existence depend on the latter" (3-4). What this indicates is that the subaltern does have a voice, they can speak and they have the ability to represent themselves. However, the primacy of Western discourse or nationalist narratives has often blurred their voices from standard textbooks.

Guha explicates what the Subaltern Studies Collective wanted to do and with about eight volumes of essay collections in *The Subaltern Collective,* succeeding his initial focus, the Collective has expanded "from agrarian history to the analysis of the relationship between peasants and nationalists". In mapping out the subaltern experiences, the Subaltern Collective's work focuses both on colonial domination from the West and the postcolonial nationalist movements outside the West– both joining forces as a mammoth against subaltern voices. The Collective's work stood in highlighting the obscured agency of the subaltern, lost within the shadows of elephantine figures such as Mahatma Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru, thus putting the elite over the "un-elite" (the Eastern rendition of the Subject and Alterity). As Guha notes, "the historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism" (7).

Out of the vaults of colonialism and nationalism, subaltern groups are often great agents of active resistance. Central to the work of the Collective is to uncover the "hidden transcripts" of peasant uprisings and other forms of struggles which, in due course, had been fragmented or systematically excluded from official archives. For instance, Bengal witnessed numerous uprisings such as the Santhal Rebellion by the Santhal tribal community against British colonialists, the Indigo Revolt by Bengali peasants against oppressive indigo planters, the

Tebhaga Movement of sharecroppers demanding fair crop shares - all of which are overlooked in mainstream historiography. Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that the subaltern consciousness often exists in a "subterranean" space, outside the reach of dominant ideologies (29). Yet, the Collective's work was steeped in its Eurocentric analysis, using Marx, Derrida, Gramsci, Foucault and so much of these ideologies to create a constant comparativist analysis with how subaltern experiences are presented. This approach, although insightful, also creates a cycle where Western theories are still continually applied to and tested against subaltern experiences. This inadvertently perpetuates the very Eurocentricism that the Collective sought to critique, making the whole purpose of repurposing the subaltern image fall into a redundant cycle of theory vis-a-vis experience. Gyan Prakash, in underscoring the work of the Collective, comments that "Although all the contributions attempted to highlight the lives and the historical presence of subaltern classes, neither the thorough and insightful research in social and economic history nor the critique of the Indian nationalist appropriation of peasant movements was new" (1478). Although Prakash does not specify which movements he refers to, his comment does indicate that the Collective's work, while valuable, was still building on existing scholarship rather than breaking entirely new ground.

What is most interesting is how the Collective's work, although noble in its attempts to recover subaltern voices, largely remained within its academic discursive box. Spivak's critics have always had one prevailing point of contention with her – that her writing is entirely inaccessible to the very people she believes lack accessibility (with even well-versed academics finding it challenging to understand her writing). The Subaltern Collective's work, laden with its academic jargon and codification of theoretical structures, may enable an understanding of subaltern historiography. However, it also limits direct engagement by the subaltern groups that the intellectuals are essentially speaking for. It is not within the subaltern's power to interject or correct what is being stated because they have not been allowed a direct position in

the discourse circulating them. Instead, they are simply spoken for and their narratives are packaged into theories that they cannot contest against. Instead of having a direct position in the discourse, subaltern groups have their experiences mediated by intellectuals who often risk reinforcing the silences they seek to overcome.

2.3. The Subaltern: An Ongoing Mystery

At the crux of presenting the subaltern identity and experiences remains an enigma that refuses to be solved, either due to the large volumes of discourse surrounding what the subaltern truly is or through the expansive stories and narratives that are often not talked about enough. To a great extent, the enigma that the subaltern groups are enmeshed within is not a net they have created by themselves but rather is woven by the critics, academics and theoreticians who constantly push the subaltern further into a crisis. It is for stating this that Spivak received the bulk of criticism directed at her, with thinkers such as Jill Didur and Teresa Heffernan claiming that Spivak is more concerned about "identity politics" and has "problematised agency and the voice of the colonised" (1). The critic Bruce Robbins directly argues that Spivak works to actually speak for the subaltern: "The critic who accuses another of speaking for the subaltern… is of course also claiming to speak for them" (Moore-Gilbert 104).

Amidst her critics, Terry Eagleton provides one with scathing humour in his article "In the Gaudy Supermarket", calling the study of postcolonialism itself something of a marketing tool for academics, with post-colonials propagating theories so much so that it has lost its own value, "the idea of the post-colonial has taken such a battering from post-colonial theorists that to use the word unreservedly of oneself would be rather like calling oneself Fatso" (Eagleton). Eagleton's commentary on Spivak is mostly exaggerated humour, but it almost hits a bullseye. The Collective's work has largely pulled itself further into the abyss of Eurocentric thought instead of truly resisting it and even prominent members of the Collective are aware of this misalignment with Partha Chatterjee stating:

> The project then is to claim for us, the once-colonized, our freedom of imagination. Claims, we know only too well, can be made only as contestations in a field of power. Studies will necessarily bear, for each specific disciplinary field, the imprint of an unresolved contest. To make a claim on behalf of the fragment is also, not surprisingly, to produce a discourse that is itself fragmentary. It is redundant to make apologies for this. (224)

Ranajit Guha also addresses the problem of homogenising the subaltern into an academic inquiry, stating, "The challenge is to avoid making the subaltern into a subject of academic inquiry without addressing the lived complexities of their existence" (10). Essentially, in drawing out the elitism of the subject, Spivak and the Subaltern Studies Collective entrap themselves into a conundrum of over-relying on Western thought and becoming paratroopers of elite intellectualism over lived realities. Another of Spivak's prominent critics, Benita Parry addresses her work as "it highlights the limitations of postcolonial intellectualism, often falls into the very trap it seeks to critique—intellectual elitism. Her opaque writing and reliance on Derridean deconstruction create layers of abstraction that distance her from the realities of subaltern life." (34).

However, then the question arises whether the subaltern can truly speak. The subaltern's muteness is not one from not being able to represent themselves or to talk about their experiences, but rather of the reluctance of those who refuse to listen. This reluctance, which equates to an intentional "deafness" of sorts, is also given to the fact that there is a constant search for the "authentic" subaltern voice. There is a constant need for both critics of and against the Subaltern Studies group to underscore who is the real subaltern, and the constant tug-and-pull for this all-encompassing identity is problematic because it consistently strengthens the dichotomy of the "Self/Other" or the "Subject/Alterity" position. This would

always indicate that the subaltern requires mediation and representation to be heard. Maggio comments that:

> The subaltern can speak as long as they speak in a "language" that is already recognized by the dominant culture of the West. Reason and rational communication, mediated via the market or the academy, prevail as the meta-language, and the subaltern are forced to compete in a bazaar of ideas where the deck is stacked against them by years of colonial rule (431).

In such a state of constant conundrums, this thesis offers a simple resolution: the primacy of all understanding should be in listening first. The subaltern can speak if we learn how to listen better. As academics, we put the greatest emphasis on constructing theoretical frameworks, dismantling theories to invent more theories, and discussing lived experiences with multiple conjectures of what-it-is and what-it-means. This thesis intends to do the fool's errand of suggesting that we leave our academic hats for a little while, sit down and listen to those who want to speak.

Chapter 3: The Sundarbans

My decision to do a thesis on the act of listening was not a deliberate academic choice but rather a personal one. From growing up listening to stories to now listening to people talk about their experiences, I have learned that the wonder of human existence can only be understood if we pay heed to the stories that constantly surround us. The art of listening is not however in the act of lending ears solely, but rather in actually taking to heart the stories that people have to share.

When reading about the Sundarbans in Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie's novels, the idea of listening to the subaltern emerged with staggering vivacity. In both novels, the depiction of the Sundarbans remains significantly elusive to the protagonists, but when properly listened to, the place and its people become so vividly colourful that they shine through the pages in an almost kaleidoscopic state. Neither Kanai nor Saleem are able to shake away the experience they have in the Sundarbans, but both remain almost mystified with an understanding they cannot fully realise. The antidote to their near-paralysis is simple: they need to listen when the subaltern speaks.

3.1. The Sundarbans as Subaltern

The Sundarbans, which literally translates to 'beautiful forest' in English, is an interesting choice matter for Subaltern Studies, largely because it is emblematic of the subaltern struggles and states that are typically ascribed to them in a homogenising lens. Pramod K. Nayar frames the Sundarbans as emblematic of postcolonial dispossession, stating that it is "unhomely," not only because its inhabitants, many of whom are Dalits and refugees, are "out of place" and lack a stable position within history or society, but also because the land itself is inhospitable and resistant to settlement (89). This "unhomeliness" speaks to the region's history of failed colonisation by both European powers and impoverished Indian settlers, which Ghosh also illustrates in *The Hungry Tide*. Nayar argues that the Sundarbans' shifting, unstable

landscape of "now-land, now-water" prevents it from being a secure home, a space that traditionally offers stability and freedom from fear. This spatial and existential instability, he suggests, evokes a sense of the “postcolonial uncanny” (89). However, it is important to recognise that the Sundarbans has been home to indigenous groups for centuries. For these communities, the land is not unhomely or alien, but a deeply familiar, lived space—a vital contrast to the outsider's perspective.

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* reflects this duality of "home" and "not home." His protagonists, Kanai and Piya, both outsiders, experience the Sundarbans as an uncanny space—familiar yet difficult to understand. Similarly, in Salman Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children,* the protagonist Saleem also finds himself in the Sundarbans, where both the place and its inhabitants are presented in a mystical manner that eludes clear understanding. In both texts, the subaltern—embodied by the Sundarbans—is not only marginalised but rendered almost ghostly, as something that cannot be fully understood or "canny" within the frameworks of the protagonists' experiences.

This perception of the subaltern as elusive or invisible is not unique to these characters but reflects a broader intellectual trend. Homi Bhabha articulates this in his discussion of the subaltern’s “anti-dialectical movement,” which, as he puts it, “defers the object of the look—‘as even now you look/but never see me’” (79). Bhabha’s observation aligns with the Derridean notion that subaltern identity is marked by invisibility and absence, existing on the margins of dominant discourses. He explains that in this framework, “a subversive political line is drawn in a certain poetics of 'invisibility', ellipsis, the evil eye and the missing person” (85). This reinforces the idea that the subaltern, like the Sundarbans, is often perceived as an enigmatic, marginalised entity, seen through the eyes of outsiders but never truly understood.

It is of no wonder, then, how the subaltern escapes all forms of recognition and becomes such an elusive matter to academic thought that they require mediation to be properly

represented. By identifying the Sundarbans as "uncanny", scholars posit the subaltern and its ecology in such a liminal or "in-between" state. The term "uncanny" originates from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, which defines it as something simultaneously familiar and strange, evoking a sense of discomfort or unease. Nayar elaborates on this concept by describing the uncanny as "the experience of double perception of any space which is at once familiar and strange, safe and threatening, 'mine' and 'not mine'" (89). While this can be said of many spaces, the Sundarbans is uniquely positioned within postcolonial discourse because of its shifting, unstable landscape, where it is both difficult to settle as inhabitants while simultaneously being a home for many. This duality makes it a particularly interesting site for exploring subaltern states and their representations.

However, this reading of the Sundarbans as a "postcolonial uncanny" has implications for how the subaltern is perceived. By rendering the Sundarbans as a place of ambiguity, mysticism, and invisibility, it risks reinforcing the notion that the subaltern cannot speak for themselves. This framing can entrap the subaltern in a state of perpetual marginalisation, where their voices remain unheard, and their identities are subsumed into the mythical or mystical. It is also important to recognise that Ghosh does not exclusively present the Sundarbans as a ghostly, unreachable entity either. The Sundarbans plays a crucial role in the history of Bengal as a space that facilitated cosmopolitan exchanges and multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic interactions, particularly since the Sultanate era and Ghosh is very aware of both the history of the land as well as how non-islanders perceive it.

Ghosh's description of the Sundarbans' ever-shifting landscape underscores this nature. He writes:

> the Arakanese, the Khmer, the Javanese, the Dutch, the Malays, the Chinese, the Portuguese… It is common knowledge that almost every island in the tide country has been inhabited at some time or another. But to look at them you would never know: the

speciality of mangroves is that they do not merely recolonise land; they erase time. Every generation creates its ghosts. (Ghosh 50)

Here, Ghosh makes a reference to “ghosts” that the tide country creates generation after generation, and while this depicts the mystical element that shows how subaltern is imagined or thought of by outsiders who see only the shifting lands, there is another layer to Ghosh’s narrative. He also refers to the fluid, mobile nature of the Sundarbans, where new land (or *chars)* is constantly formed while old land disappears. The reference to "ghosts" is not purely a metaphor for the mystical state of the land’s self-erasure but also a comment on the continual renewal of the land, which leaves behind traces of past inhabitants while making way for new ones.

Every incident surrounding the tide country seems elusive, almost supernatural in how it manifests. One incident involves a *koimach* (a fish) being found dead in a woman’s bed, away from the water. While the *koimach* is an amphibious fish capable of navigating muddy land, its appearance in such an unexpected, intimate space as a bed, far from its usual habitat, symbolises the unsettling and unpredictable nature of the Sundarbans. Similarly, the Sundarbans itself is a landscape in constant flux, where Ghosh writes on this changing state: “The birds were vanishing, the fish were dwindling and from day to day the land was being reclaimed by the sea. What would it take to submerge the tide country? Not much - a minuscule change in the level of the sea would be enough” (215). This reinforces the idea that the Sundarbans is a place where natural forces are always in motion, blurring the boundaries between what is stable and what is ephemeral, making it difficult for inhabitants and outsiders alike to fully grasp or control its dynamics.

There’s also Piya’s amazement at how the Irrawaddy dolphins, subjects of her lifelong ecological studies, behave very differently in the Sundarbans than what she had studied

elsewhere. But perhaps most remarkable is the presence of the tigers, the giant cats that are known to inhabit the Sundarbans, yet are rarely seen by human eyes:

> This was in itself an astonishing sight, almost without precedent, for the great cats of the tide country were like ghosts, never revealing their presence except through marks, sounds and smells. They were so rarely seen that to behold one, it was said, was to be as good as dead — and indeed the sight caused several of the women on the embankment to lose consciousness. (108)

Though not truly "unseen," the presence of the Sundarbans tigers feels spectral because they are so rarely encountered directly. This rarity, combined with the local lore surrounding their sightings, contributes to the mystique of the Sundarbans as a place where the boundary between the real and the elusive constantly shifts. The nature of the *koimach,* the Irrawaddy dolphin, the tigers and even the land presents an environment that is difficult to map out because it is so unpredictable.

These descriptions of the tide country create a sense of a landscape that is simultaneously real and elusive, one that resists easy comprehension. As Nayar notes, "In *The Hungry Tide,* the land is what does not readily give itself up to interpretation – it is encountered yet disappears, sensed but not always seen, like a secret glimpsed at but not fully revealed" (93). The "uncanny" resides in this form of secrecy where Nicholas Royle in his book *The Uncanny* states that it is a "secret encounter…apprehension… of something that should have remained secret and hidden has come to light" (2).

Interestingly, Nayar takes a different approach in terming this condition, calling the "uncanny" instead an "indigenous canny" (90). He explains how the "indigenous canny is driven by the local, folkloric, mystical and ungraspable forms of knowing embodied in Fokir's (a fisherman in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide)* life and death" wherein this is what

makes the "frightening uncanny of the Sundarbans a home" (91). This reversal of the condition of the "postcolonial uncanny" into the "indigenous canny" suggests that what appears elusive and mysterious to outsiders is, in fact, familiar to locals, who have developed their own methods of living and understanding the land. The subaltern's knowledge and experience of the land they inhabit are deeply intertwined with its myths, spirituality, and practices of survival, making the land not just a scene or setting, but an active environment that shapes and participates in their everyday lives.

But before assessing how the subaltern escapes the intellectuals' understanding and imagination, we must first see how extensively the Sundarbans can be identified as a subaltern entity. Lying on the periphery of both Bangladesh and India, the topography has a "network of tidal rivers, creeks, islands, and mangrove forests" where both the Indian and Bangladeshi land areas are recognised as separate UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Ghosh 4). Anthropologist Annu Jalais, however, identifies the multitude of problems that the Sundarbans' inhabitants face, from its harsh ecological environment to the social and political forces that shape the land and its people. The Sundarbans is a dangerous environment—tigers, crocodiles, and the unpredictable ebb-tide frequently take lives. Jalais reports that around "300 islanders in West Bengal and Bangladesh are killed each year by tigers and crocodiles alone" (336). Yet, far from simply victims of their environment, the people of the Sundarbans have developed ways of living with its unpredictability. For example, they pay tribute to specific deities, such as Bon Bibi, the forest goddess who is believed to protect the inhabitants from the dangers of the forest. This adaptation reflects the local "indigenous canny," where survival is not merely a reaction to nature's dangers but is deeply woven into the cultural and spiritual life of the people.

3.2. Morichjhanpi Massacre: The "Uncanny" Against the "Canny"

The gravest modern historical incident in the Sundarbans arises from the Morichjhanpi massacre, which Ghosh also references in *The Hungry Tide.* This massacre is tied to the mass

displacement and migration that happened both after the 1947 Partition between India and Pakistan and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, especially in ethnic and religious communities. These events led to significant refugee movements across the newly created borders between India and Bangladesh. In the late 1970s, thousands of Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) sought to settle on Morichjhanpi, an island in the Indian side of the Sundarbans, after being displaced. However, the Indian government, fearing an influx of refugees into protected forest land, responded harshly. The island was "encircled, the refugees fired at, their houses were burned down, and all signs of prior human activity were wiped off" (Jalais 338). Annu Jalais notes that "we shall never know exactly how many died as the media was prevented from accessing the area; however, it is a fact that hundreds died" (2458). Jalais continues stating that this was the "beginning of a politics of betrayal by what they (the refugees) saw as a government run by the urban elite" (338).

Spivak's identification of the subaltern resonates strongly with the marginalisation and silencing of the Bengali refugees by dominant power institutions (the government and media) when discussing the incidents of and after the Morichjhanpi massacre. The massacre was largely conducted by the Indian government in an effort to safeguard the tigers around the island, wherein the mark of the Sundarbans being a World Heritage Site by UNESCO put more emphasis on having the Royal Bengal tigers safe rather than the people living there. The dominant narrative, propagated by urban elites and conservationists, had the Sundarbans put up a romanticised image of regal tigers roaming around the land. It identified them as "*bhadra"* tiger, carnivores that apparently had a "gentle in-offensive nature" when in reality, the tigers, safeguarded by the government, had "grown to see poorer people as 'tiger-food'" (339). This reversal of the tiger image from its "*bhadra"* status to "man-eater" was propagated by the islanders in a manner of "reclaiming the forgotten pages of a history, which had relegated them

(the villagers) to oblivion, an injustice they felt that had been done by the urbanised elite" (339).

Part of the problem lies in the romanticised representations that continue to circulate about the Sundarbans. The "postcolonial uncanny" - a concept that emphasises the mythical and mystical qualities of such lands - perpetuates this romanticisation. The land, its people, and its wildlife are often viewed through a mystical lens, which distances the realities of the inhabitants' struggles and experiences. While the subaltern (in this case, the islanders) essentially fights the dominant narrative with legends and stories to highlight their states of being, such as with the tale of Bon Bibi, Dokkhin Rai, Dhona and Dukhey, intellectuals and dominant structures of power resist these by conjuring their representations of the subaltern. This does not mean that the subaltern as individuals cannot speak, in fact there is significant evidence of how they do speak in modalities that are diverse and have a confluence of narratives, but rather that these stories go to deaf ears because dominant powers intend to map these to their understanding of representation. Even in the matter of tigers, the islanders have their systems of safeguarding themselves but their understanding of their own ecology is hardly taken into consideration by the urban elite that emerges with their separate conservation practices, which are often influenced by romanticised ideologies of the land as a "beautiful garden" and the tigers their showpiece. Annu Jalais speaks resolutely on this matter:

> How can we talk of or represent the Sundarbans without taking into account its people and their understandings of the place? As argued by Saberwal and Rangarajan, a failure to provide people with a stake in conservation will simply result in an alienation of these communities, an alienation that has in the past resulted in an active undermining of state-initiated conservation policies (340).

The postcolonial uncanny which represents the subaltern in its mysticised state becomes an actual problem, wherein the "indigenous canny" which Nayar proposes as an

antithesis showcases how the subaltern can participate in their own historiography because their knowledge presupposes more legitimacy due to their lived experiences. It is with Ghosh's very first words on the Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide* that we view this clash between the postcolonial uncanny and the indigenous canny clearly. The tide country has a life of its own that cannot be understood by the "reliable" or scientific knowledge of Kanai, Piya or Nirmal. To a great extent, the characters are unable to grasp both the Sundarbans and those who inhabit the land, and this failure to fully understand what surrounds them as indigenous experience and environment can be seen as a microcosm of the larger failure of postcolonial discourse to be able to represent or even understand subaltern voices. It is their pre-informed states, injected with Western scientific or academic knowledge, that tints their perception. On the other hand, indigenous voices that are truly listened to allow for greater clarity where the "uncanny" confuses.

Chapter 4: The Subaltern's Speech

The manner in which the subaltern expresses themselves is diverse. This is done through various forms, spanning oral traditions, folklore, cultural practices and lived experiences. While these may be dismissed by outsiders as "uncanny" or outside the realm of conventional knowledge, these narratives do hold profound insight into the subaltern's realities. In the context of the Sundarbans, the legend of Bon Bibi, for example, takes great precedence in highlighting both the marginalised and the empowered state of the islanders. This narrative provides understanding of how the islanders navigate daily life in an environment that is "ever-shifting", one filled with myriad of challenges, and yet one they call home.

4.1. Kohe Maa Bonbibi

The legend of Bon Bibi is a remarkable one, not simply because it is an ancient folkloric tale of an environmental stewardess who ensures protection and balance between both human and non-human subjects, but also because of how the figure and tale are received, maintained, and produced. For the research on this project, I went to India to meet Amitav Ghosh at the 2024 Kolkata Literary Meet, an annual literary festival where he was a keynote speaker. I asked him whether he saw Bon Bibi as a figure to identify the states and experiences of the marginalised, to which he replied this in verbatim:

> The Bon Bibi figure is an interesting one because she creates this balance between humans and other beings. The very interesting part is that she's represented as having come from Mecca because her father is a Sufi saint. And even though people often describe her as a goddess, within the Muslim tradition, she can perfectly well be considered a saint because the Muslim world is full of local saints who protect local regions …I think it's a very interesting phenomenon because this creates a very eclectic tradition that can be participated in by Hindus, Muslims, Christians, everybody. It is

also a powerful tradition because I do think it protects both forests and islanders ("The Resource Curse", 00:39:10-00:40:28)

Ghosh writes on the Bon Bibi myth in two of his texts, *The Hungry Tide* and the *Junglenama*. The latter is an extract of an original piece written by Munshi Mohammed Khatir in the 19th century in his Bengali epic titled ''Bon Bibi Johuranama" ('The Narrative of Bon Bibi's Glory'). Ghosh's narrative of the Bon Bibi legend in *Junglenama* begins with the predominance of Dokkhin Rai as a fearsome spiritual entity that plagues the Sundarbans. His anthropomorphic identity as a devious spirit in the avatar of a tiger is characterised by hunting and preying on the human inhabitants of the jungle. Against this backdrop of a non-human antagonist, there is also the human antagonist, a man epitomic of the typical coloniser, named Dhona which translates to the "Rich One". Dhona commands a fleet of seven ships to venture into the mangrove forest for "honey, wax and timber" – all coveted natural resources ripe for monetary gain. Within this backdrop, the sharp contrast against all these characters is Bon Bibi, one who emerges with vivacity and power, claiming herself as the sovereign, "I am the queen of the forest. I am its keeper" (Ghosh 28).

Bon Bibi's role and stature is interesting not simply because she is the protectress but also because of how she represents the lived experiences and states of all beings in the Sundarbans. There is a reason she is an eclectic figure, who despite having Islamic origins in her tale is still culturally and ritually practiced by both Muslims and Hindus. In a documentary made by Sabrang India and released on YouTube titled "Tales of Bonbibi: The Forest Goddess worshipped by Hindus and Muslims"**,** the inhabitants of the Sundarbans express how they see Bon Bibi. One woman stated that: "Even though we are Hindus, while praying to her we have to chant 'Allah', so if we need to chant 'Allah' to pray to Bon Bibi, we do it…We don't think that we shouldn't do it because it belongs to the Muslims because without the Mother Goddess, we don't stand a chance" (00:03:02-00:03:24). Another Sundarban inhabitant says, "Why

would you not have faith in her? I've seen a tiger charging towards a human. I've seen the tiger going away when the person prayed to the Mother. I've seen it with my own eyes" (00:03:36-00:03:42).

In *The Hungry Tide,* when Kanai, the protagonist, says that he doesn't know what the tale of Bon Bibi is, his island compatriot, the young Kusum gasps and says, "You mean you don't know the story of Bon Bibi?...Then whom do you call on when you're afraid?" (101). Kanai, hurt by the statement and possibly challenged by a form of experience that he does not understand, goes to his uncle Nirmal, another person who signifies the Eastern intellectual with Western influences. His reply to the Bon Bibi legend is this: "It's just a tale they tell around here. Don't bother yourself with it. It's just false consciousness, that's all it is" (101).

This is an interesting episode that highlights the two realms of knowledge and understanding moving against each other like opposing tidal waves. Where the indigenous practice and reverence of Bon Bibi are placed within the belief that she can genuinely protect people from being eaten alive by the island wildlife, specifically the tigers, the scientific knowledge that is propounded both by Nirmal and Kanai questions this as "just false consciousness". The indigenous consciousness, which is clearly present and expressed, is "rationalised" into a postcolonial uncanny" wherein the clear expression made by the tale and its ritualistic practice of subaltern states (both at human and non-human levels) are dismissed from being listened to. It is important to note that neither Kanai nor Nirmal (both of whom are educated people from Calcutta) represent dominant power structures, they are both Indians who have lived in the Sundarbans, and experienced the same states as them, but their intellectual judgment alongside their need to represent the subaltern (it is Nirmal who finds a duty within himself to represent Kusum after she is murdered in the Morichjhanpi massacre), enmesh them in the same conundrum that intellectual mediators have constantly fallen into. They do not listen to the subaltern when they speak, but rather they add disjointed accounts of their own

experiences and intellectual thought to narratives that already exist independently of them. Bon Bibi's tale has lived since at least the 19th century and traversed through languages and countries, existing with great reverence in the faith of islanders and yet, the "intellectual" sees this only as a "false consciousness".

But what happens when we do not question or interject but simply listen? When Kanai goes to the performance of the Bon Bibi legend with Kusum, he finds that he is seized with a feeling he cannot explain:

> Kanai had expected to be bored by this rustic entertainment: in Calcutta he was accustomed to going to theatres like the Academy of Fine Arts and cinemas like the Globe. But much to his surprise, he was utterly absorbed. The terror he had felt when the demon charged Dukhey was real and immediate…No less real were the tears of joy and gratitude that flowed from his eyes when Bon Bibi appeared at Dukhey's side (105).

This experience is one of epiphany that results in Kanai's relearning of "consciousness". He understands that what he experiences is not a "false consciousness" or the "uncanny" – a make-believe tale of a goddess – but rather something visceral and eclectic, one which is not actually mystifying but rather "real". A critical inquiry initially tells Kanai or Nirmal that the legend of Bon Bibi is simply a folkloric tale, but an experiential understanding that emerges from genuinely listening to the tale presents the narrative as a true state of being. Towards the end of the novel, this change in how the two "intellectuals"[3] view the islanders becomes abundantly clear, particularly in Piya who tries to learn about the legend of Bon Bibi and then asks Fokir to sing to her, although it is in a language she does not know, "Tilting back his head, he began to chant, and suddenly the language and the music were all around her, flowing like a river and all of it made sense; she understood it all" (360).

[3] Nayar directly calls Kanai and Piya as 'representatives of a postcolonial condition' (95). I wanted to mention this term as well because it provides a rather homogenous state of how both Western and Eastern intellectuals who have any hand in subaltern studies have fallen into a 'condition' of being postcolonial critics where the academic lens takes more precedence than the grassroots narratives of postcolonial or subaltern subjects.

There is little doubt on whether the subaltern can speak, because Ghosh's novel shows all sides of the when and how the subaltern speaks and how it is received in different ways. Piya's understanding of Fokir doesn't necessarily mean that she has adapted to hearing the subaltern better because she is still a part of the identity that wants to represent the subaltern (she creates a foundation for scientific pursuits in the name of Fokir posthumously). Yet, she does highlight how once you start to listen to the subaltern, you understand that their tales are not enigmatic or the "uncanny" that has to be spoken for but rather that they can speak on their own experiences. The dominant structures of knowledge and power that mutes the subaltern, which Spivak speaks of, are ones that the "intellectual" body (both Western and non-Western) has created and propagated. It is in the simple act of listening that the presupposed muteness of the subaltern becomes clear where their knowledge also challenges dominant narratives built around them.

4.2. On Listening

When the Sundarbans emerge in Salman Rushdie's literary world, it takes such a profound presence that despite having only one chapter about the place, it provides more breakage, force, and resonance than any other chapter or incident. If Rushdie's protagonist, Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* had enemies and compatriots in the entire novel, the Sundarbans is when he has nothing and everything all at once. He is neither the midnight's child nor the orphan or 'Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and Piece-of-the-Moon'. His identity (and the subsequent loss of it) before the chapter is subsumed by what he experiences in the Sundarbans, where the "uncanny" renders him a different man. It is amazing to see how the same narrator changes from the beginning of the novel with his vehement claim of being the leader of all the midnight's children, "I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well" (4). This same man cannot even speak in the first-person later but refers to himself as the third-person Buddha who in the

Sundarbans "were leaving infancy behind for ever, and then forgetting reasons and implications and deafness, forgetting everything" (418).

This "deafness" and "forgetting" is central to how the "postcolonial uncanny" is seen because until now, Saleem who had been so interconnected with his national collective sense, being a kind of radio telecast for the new India, has lost everything in a space where time and history no longer matters or even exists, " The jungle which is so thick that history has hardly ever found the way in. The Sundarbans: it swallows (him) up" (413). So brilliant is this transition from the boy-child who calls himself the "swallower" of his nation-state (being the man who represents the whole of newly independent India with his midnight birth) to now the man who is being swallowed by the same land he does not understand. When journeying into the Sundarbans, Saleem feels "as though some invisible force were directing their footsteps, drawing them into a darker heart of madness, their missions send them *south south south,* always nearer to the sea" (412). Furthermore, Saleem alongside the soldiers who accompany him find themselves in a state of punishment for all the crimes they had done before, saying "they fell into a state of mind in which they would have believed the forest capable of anything; each night it sent them new punishments" (418).

What, therefore, prompts this state of being mindlessly confounded by the setting of the Sundarbans? The repetitive words that Saleem uses are important here, because nothing that Saleem and the soldiers experience in the Sundarbans is actually seen but rather heard: "(they) escape from the accusing, pain-filled voices of their victims; and at night the ghostly monkeys gathered in the trees and sang" "in the throes of that awful hallucination, he thrust the treacherous mud of the rain-forest into his ears" "they seemed to prefer the diseased deafness to the unpalatable secrets which the sundri-leaves whispered in their ears" (417-418). Among this, it is only Saleem who continues to listen, "Only the buddha left his ears unstopped (one

good, and one already bad); as though he alone were willing to bear the retribution of the jungle, as though he were bowing his head before the inevitability of his guilt" (417).

In this dichotomy between deafness and hearing, Saleem finds his sense of self again. Kuhelika Ghosh writes that:

> As the jungle scenes drive the bildungsroman forward, the narrator attributes the forest's role within the narrative to the larger purpose of serving human beings and nationalism by helping the soldiers reclaim their identities. Through the struggle of living in the forest, Saleem remembers who he is and commits to the nation-state once again (7).

It is interesting the power that the Sundarbans holds, not just in Saleem's regaining of his identity and memory but also in how it influences the very course of time and history. This experience is not only felt by Saleem but shared by Ghosh's characters in Piya and Kanai as well. It is these visitors to the land who cannot understand the fear that they experience, being more terrified or unnerved by what happens around and to them. In completely different contrast, we see Fokir navigating his course into the Sundarbans because of fear. It is not that the fear of the land frightens him into almost an immobilised state, but rather he knows that fear is a driving force, a catalyst that moves him into the correct path. The very "uncanny" feeling that outsiders of the land feel is the exact "canny" feeling that the indigenous people feel to keep themselves alive and navigate their way forward. The clearest example of this is when Fokir brings Kanai in close quarters to a tiger-infested land.

When Kanai is incredulous of Fokir saying that tigers are nearby because he questions how he could possibly know this without seeing anything, Fokir tells him that it is fear that shows him this. Kanai completely discredits this as a method of experience but Fokir explains further: "This was a place where you had to learn not to be afraid. And if you did, then you might find the answer to your troubles" (323). It is this same fear that Saleem and his soldier

compatriots feel too, and it is with that they have the answer to their troubles. Both Rushdie and Ghosh's novels align in this matter that the strangeness of the land experienced by those who visit can only be taken as a form of reality, an understanding rather than a mystifying ordeal if you let into your fear. This, however, does not bode well for Kanai who finds fear to be something "accumulated" (emanating from knowledge rather than instinct). It is only when the fear grips him to pieces in Garjontola where he falls into quicksand with tiger prints nearby that:

> His anger came welling up with atavistic explosiveness, rising from sources whose very existence he would have denied – the master's suspicion of the menial; the pride of caste; the woman's mistrust of the rustic; the city's antagonism towards the village. He had thought he had cleansed himself of these sediments of the past, but the violence with which they spewed out of him now suggested that they had only been compacted into an explosive and highly volatile reserve (326).

It is in this instance that Kanai realises not only that he withholds sentiments that perpetuate a form of antagonism against the subaltern, but also that he cannot move away from his learned experiences. He is not able to listen to the subaltern because he has grown up in academic and national states that teach him what to feel and what not to feel. Could this man, and all other academics or instruments of knowledge systems (Spivak, Chatterjee, Chakrabarty, Guha or even me writing this thesis) be able to represent or analyse the conditions of the subaltern from within? For the "intellectuals", the subaltern states are the "Hell" that Saleem and Kanai faces, a punishment state or purgatory that has to be separated from reality, as Kanai also states that "Fokir had brought him here not because he wanted him to die, but because he wanted him to be judged" (327).

But what is this esoteric judgment that Kanai and Saleem sees which Fokir sees as reality? While Kanai accuses Fokir of deliberately frightening him, Fokir finds this rather a

space for understanding and self-awareness, saying, “Frighten you? But why would you be frightened? Didn’t I tell you what my mother said? No one who is good at heart has anything to fear in this place.” (325). It is also in this state that Kanai finds their positions completely reversed, “it was as though stepping onto the island, the authority of their positions had been reversed” (325). Throughout this incident, Fokir very resolutely clarifies the experience of the Sundarbans, how you are driven by fear to be more aware of yourself and to also place yourself in self-judgment and awareness. It is Bon Bibi who shows you the way, Fokir tells Kanai. And yet, Kanai does not believe this until he falls into the quicksand and sees a tiger coming right towards him before moving away and leaving him. The question we must ask, then, is this: had the subaltern not already warned us, and was it not our failure to truly listen and understand their knowledge and perspective?

Chapter 5: Rethinking Representation

In establishing the fact that the subalterns do speak and have the ability to share their experiences by themselves, the next question that one must ask is: *where* and *how* do we listen to them speaking? The issue of subaltern representation has long been fraught with problems of mediation, misinterpretation, and silencing. Throughout both colonial and postcolonial intellectual discourse, the subaltern has been forced into a space where their narratives are not merely obscured but often spoken for by those with power—academics, historians, and political actors who impose their frameworks onto lives they do not live. To "represent" the subaltern is to speak on behalf of them, a process that all too often leads to distortion. Therefore, the act of listening to the subaltern must take place within the spaces where they live, work, and express their experiences - whether through oral traditions, community practices, activism, or other local forms of knowledge - and must be at the heart of any genuine discourse.

Spivak's theories would argue that it is not enough to give voice to the "voiceless" for that itself implies a hierarchy of those who can speak and those who cannot. Yet, these continue to propagate the idea that the subaltern does not have the agency or ability to engage in their own stories, which is untrue. The problem lies not with the subaltern but with the intellectual frameworks that continue to resist acknowledging their agency, instead filtering their voices through ideological lenses that distort their meaning. To break from this, we must reject the need for "representation" in the sense of speaking for or interpreting the subaltern, as well as "re-presentation" (following Marx's distinction between *darstellen* and *vertreten*), which involves framing their lives through external, preconceived ideas. Instead, we must move toward an epistemology of inclusion, where subaltern voices are heard and respected for what they express, without imposing assumptions about their needs or meanings.

The first step in this process is recognizing our own patterns of what Spivak calls "epistemological violence," where we project our narratives onto the marginalized and assume

their experiences can only be understood through our methods. This dichotomy happens because of the constant propagation of the "Us/Them" conundrum, wherein the subaltern is fixated apart from the "intellectuals" or the "representatives" of their experiences. I do not call for the erasure of the term "subaltern" but I do express the fact that in creating a separate discourse for the "subaltern" per se, wherein factions such as *The Subaltern Collective* are made and marketed, those who are marginalised continue to be enmeshed in the same scaffolding left by colonialisation. This results in a form of double colonisation, where even well-intentioned efforts to "represent" the subaltern perpetuate their marginalisation by centring the conversation on whether or how they should be represented, rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. The key to recognising the subaltern as active participants in their own narratives lies in acknowledging the subaltern not as subjects of study, discourse or identities to be spoken for. It is important for the subaltern to cease to be a theoretical construct, the same concept that draws so many lingering eyes of Eastern and Western academics, and acknowledge them as a living, breathing part of the intellectual and social fabric that includes their histories, desires and struggles.

5.1. Speaking With, Not For

The language of the subaltern is not always transferrable because it is not understood in dominant languages, i.e., languages used predominantly both nationally or internationally. This does mean that translation plays a key role in amplifying the stories of the marginalised, and proper translation can also circumvent the problematic notions of representation and the concerns related to "voicelessness". In contrast to re-presentation, translation does not seek to speak *for* the subaltern but rather translates their voices, making their meanings accessible across linguistic, cultural and epistemological divides.

Walter Benjamin in his book *Illuminations* identifies the nuances of translating, wherein he believes that the "receiver" of translation, that is, the translator, is a negligible

concept. Translation, according to him, is not about equivalency, nor can it fully replicate the original content but rather it exists as a "movement" between languages and culture, stating that "Even the greatest translation is destined to be part of the growth of its own language" (73). Maggio states that Benjamin focuses on translation as a form of "coming to terms with" the foreignness of types of communication and to "elevate" the original, where the "task of the translator is to 'echo' the original in a way that helps illuminate the intended meaning" (432). Benjamin's concept underscores that there is no "perfect" translation, just as there is no perfect way to "represent" a subaltern subject. Instead, the subaltern's expressions should be viewed as a type of cultural and linguistic "foreignness" rather than voicelessness. This way, the role of the listener – whether academic, activist or otherwise – is not to reframe the subaltern's voice but to allow their individual narratives to be expressed in a wider space of discourse with them as an active participant in their own stories.

Yet, at the same time, we must be wary of the power dynamics inherent in translation. Roland Barthes exemplifies how translation can be misaligned to impose more dominant narratives rather than opening up the space for diverse narratives to proliferate. His concept stands in creating culture as an artifact that could be translated into academic discourse, wherein he is "interested in the semiotically rich resources of an emerging consumer society" (Moran 22). The reason why this is a problematic way of treating translation is because it turns all symbols of culture that play into popular ideologies, which leads to more misunderstanding and puts us into the state of "epistemological violence" that Spivak vehemently warns us of. This structuralist framework of translation studies offers no space for the multiplicity of language and cultural life that pulsates in subaltern stories.

Spivak and Benjamin share a core method of thinking about translation, which is that it is a process of "inhabit"(-ing) the host language, where the translator must settle into the "many mansions, and many levels of the host language" (95). She further comments that "The

translator should make an attempt to grasp the writer's presuppositions. Translation is not the stringing together of the most accurate synonyms by the most proximate syntax" (93). This, in both Spivak and Benjamin's understanding, is the work of a responsible translator. But where does Spivak see a limitation? Her underlying commentary still lies in the matter that the subaltern is unable to take action or speak for themselves and their speech cannot be translated. Much like Kant's framework, Spivak believes that with the universal rules of knowledge and power dynamics, the subaltern is constantly going to be muted because they will be judged by how the dominant epistemes work. Yet, Spivak's ideas place the subaltern as a category in academic or discursive thought, which is a problem in itself and even a form of "epistemic violence". Rather it is important to "translate" them to simply "understand" them as they are instead of "know" them in specific frameworks. Maggio is on par with this point, stating, "We must recognise that translation, understood in the broadest sense can help us understand, respect the subaltern" (435).

5.2. When Voices Are Not Lost in Translation

In the art of translation, the common adage of being "lost in translation" is not an entirely inaccurate phrase. There is a need to understand how to be an ethical translator. During my research for my thesis, I also happened to work as a memoir writer for Hameeda Hossain, the founder of Ain o Salish Kendra and a chief founding member of KARIKA – both foundations that cater to highlighting and bringing social justice to females, particularly in marginalised positions. It is within this work that I learned of the process of listening, not simply because the bulk of my work was focused on listening and translating stories into the pages of her memoir but also in learning the stories she had heard over the years which placed into her work. She actively listened to the stories of all the women connected to her organisations. When I asked her what began her work in KARIKA and Ain O Salish Kendra, she told me that she had gone out and listened to all the stories that came to her. This act of

listening eventually led to creating platforms where marginalized women could stand up and share their own experiences, rather than having others speak on their behalf.

Ain o Salish Kendra's book, *Rising from the Ashes: Women's Narratives of 1971,* for example, includes the translated stories of many women on Bangladesh's Liberation War, and these translations don't simply encompass their actual speech but also mention moments of silences — the pauses and hesitations. One story is of a woman named Zebunnessa Begum who witnessed her husband being murdered by Biharis in March 1971 while they besieged her home, where her ten children were also present. Before translating Begum's narrative, the writer notes, "She (Begum) could not continue speaking for a long time. While talking she would look away and would abruptly fall silent … After we had interviewed her for three days, she made it clear that she had nothing more to say" (Zaman et al. 10). This glimpse into her experience shows us a subaltern woman exercising control over what she chooses to share and what she holds back, conveying her story on her own terms and comfort. In one part of her account, Begum says, "Before, if anybody asked me to tell them what happened during those days, I was unable to speak. Nowadays when I speak, many people shed tears, but there are no tears in my eyes. I have grown hard." (Zaman et al. 29). By choosing to withhold parts of her story, being silent at moments, or elaborating on her experiences when she wishes, Zebunnessa Begum demonstrates complete agency as a storyteller constructing the narrative of her own life. In this context, the storyteller simply tells their story, and the translator listens and translates it, without imposing external interpretations.

In understanding the speech of the subaltern, it is important to understand the everyday language with which they speak. This is not just the literal language but also in mundane senses of life, the "everyday" culture which conveys their values on how they live or see life. It is also not simply in languages that we should be restricted to, but the voice of the subaltern rings loudly through even simple gestures that are practiced. There are songs, paintings, legends, the

mundane tasks of life that all encompass the speech of the subaltern. For example, there is the Gazir Pat, which encompasses the practiced folk art of Patuya painters and depicts the life of Gazi Pir, a warrior saint whose songs are often sung in rural villages. These paintings and songs depict a form of culture that is expressed clearly within the subaltern states. Some of the paintings of Gazi Pat, drawn by an indigenous artist named Shambhu Acharya, are attached in the Exhibit section of this thesis.

It is in the idea of translating culture that we can begin to understand subaltern voices and be the pedestal for them to represent themselves. Yet, translating is admittedly a sensitive position, and it is only within the role of an *empathic* translator that we can get a true mediator between subaltern voices, where the voices are understood rather than put into frameworks of knowledge. Both Bejamin and Spivak alongside others point out that the "translator" must be aware that they are not the "equivalent with the original, not is she or he offering a wholly imaginative translation… The translator is certainly trying to 'capture' an aspect of the original and convey that but is not trying to 'represent' or 're-present' the original" (437).

Maggio also speaks of this when talking about the subaltern's speech and translation: "Yet with the case of the subaltern, one must first decide to recognize the language of communication as a valid mode. In other words, we(st) must try hard to listen to people in all of their forms of communication. The subaltern speaks all the time: We are simply unable to hear them" (437). When we, as theoreticians, academics, activists or even simple storytellers, try to formulate the subaltern into our understandings of knowledge epistemes, it is undoubtable that their voices shall not be heard. This is not simply a problem in the arena of subaltern studies but in the entirety of our lives as human beings: we give more prominence to attaching others to our sets of knowledge, beliefs and structures rather than listening to all the stories that they have to share. Therefore, the subaltern can speak – as do all of us – and it is

not only in the restrictions of knowledge that we find their expressions but in a plethora of everyday life. It is within, for all of us, a need to *listen.*

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This paper has worked largely to explore the complexities of subaltern speech and representation, aiming to question how the academic world and the global perspectives view subalterns and their agency. From the different ways that the subaltern has been defined, or attempted to be defined, by Western or non-Western academic groups is a problem because of the constant impositions that are made in understanding what is essentially, people's unique perspectives and experiences. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's assertion that "the subaltern cannot speak" has formed the bedrock of this inquiry, emphasising the myriad of ways in which the subaltern voices are often silenced or misinterpreted through the lenses of those in power — whether political elites, academics or intellectuals. However, my analysis does not seek to question Spivak's statement, but rather ask instead: What happens when we truly listen? What can we learn from the voices that are marginalised, and how can we begin to understand them without confining them primarily to theoretical constructs or subjects of study?

The concept of representation remains fraught with issues of mediation. Throughout colonial and postcolonial histories, the subaltern has often been spoken for, represented within frameworks that distort or erase their experiences. Despite Spivak's critique of representation through Marxist notions or the Renaissance Subject from the Kantian perspective, the discourse that both she and the Subaltern Studies Collective put out still inadvertently perpetuate the very power dynamics they seek to dismantle. It is here that I argue for a shift in our approach: from speaking for the subaltern to creating spaces where their voices are heard without the filter of external frameworks.

The Sundarbans offer a microcosm of the larger issues of representation and silencing that the subaltern communities face, where the place is exemplified as both "uncanny" and "canny". Through the voices of Ghosh's characters Fokir and Kusum and the legend of Bon Bibi, we witness a world that is rich in knowledge and tradition. Despite being such a challenging place

to live in and especially confusing and difficult to navigate for an outsider, the Sundarbans harbour myriad of systems and structures known intimately by its inhabitants. Whether through the retelling of folklore, such as the legend of Bon Bibi, or through the political resistance seen in incidents like the Morichjhanpi massacre, subaltern communities have developed their own methods of understanding and interacting with the world. These methods, however, are often overlooked or dismissed by dominant intellectual structures that do not engage with them on their terms. The stories of the subaltern, therefore, do not require mediation or representation; they require an audience willing to listen without prejudice or preconception. It is in this way that Rushdie's protagonist Saleem also finds a sense of self and understanding because he begins to actually listen, trying to understand the place that he is in instead of imposing his own perceptions.

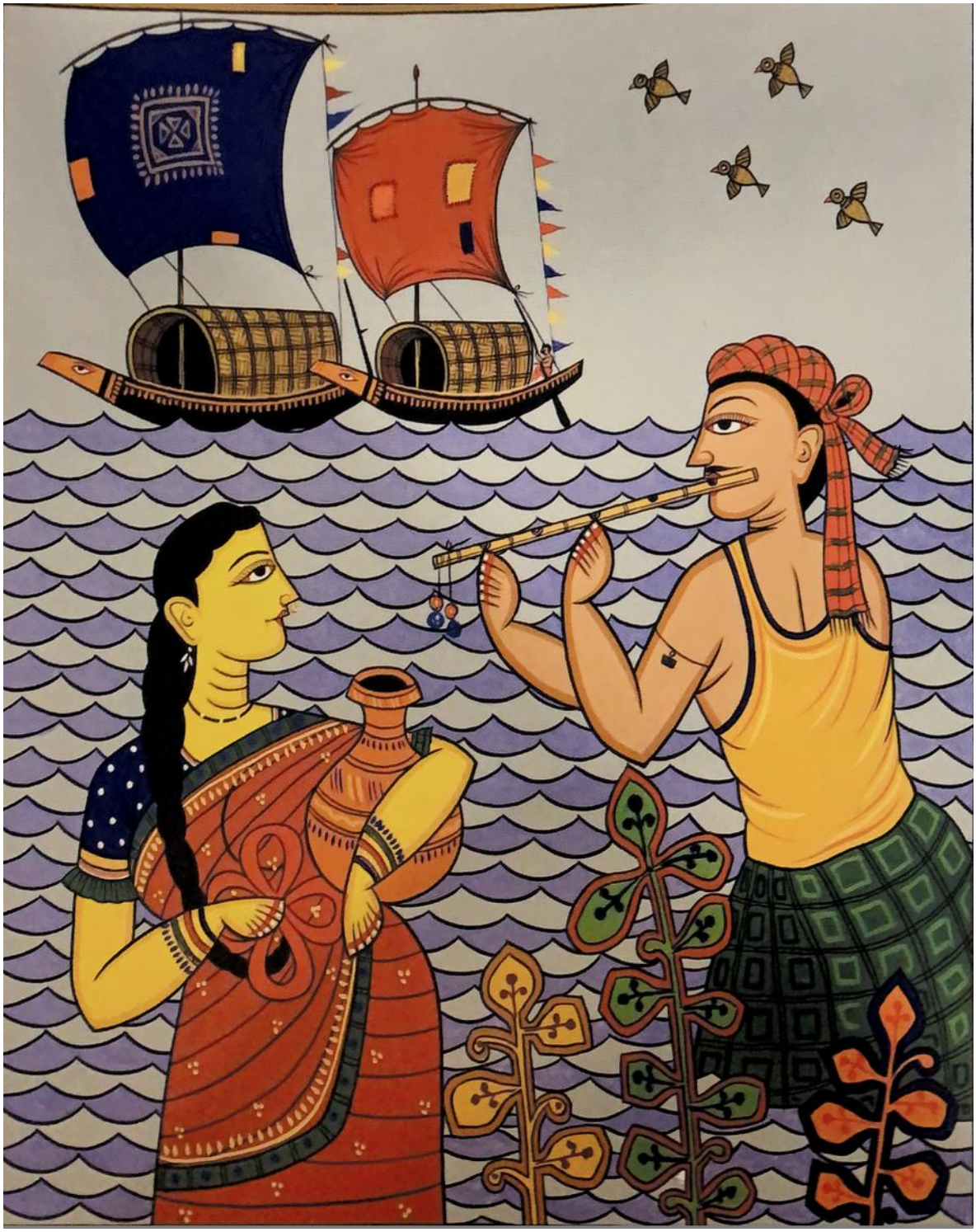
Listening, in its truest form, is an act of humility and openness. It demands that we set aside our intellectual arrogance, our tendency to categorise and dissect, and instead approach with empathy and respect. It's about acknowledging that our frameworks and theories, no matter how well-intentioned, can often become barriers rather than bridges. The stories I have encountered, from reading about the Sundarbans to the tales of the women in *Rising From the Ashes*: *Women's Narratives of 1971* have highlighted that when given the space, the subaltern articulates their experiences with clarity and depth that no external representation can capture. It is also in my experience of listening that I understand how important it is to be an open canvas for the stories that surround us, where our work is not to impose but to faithfully receive and, when appropriate, translate what we hear.

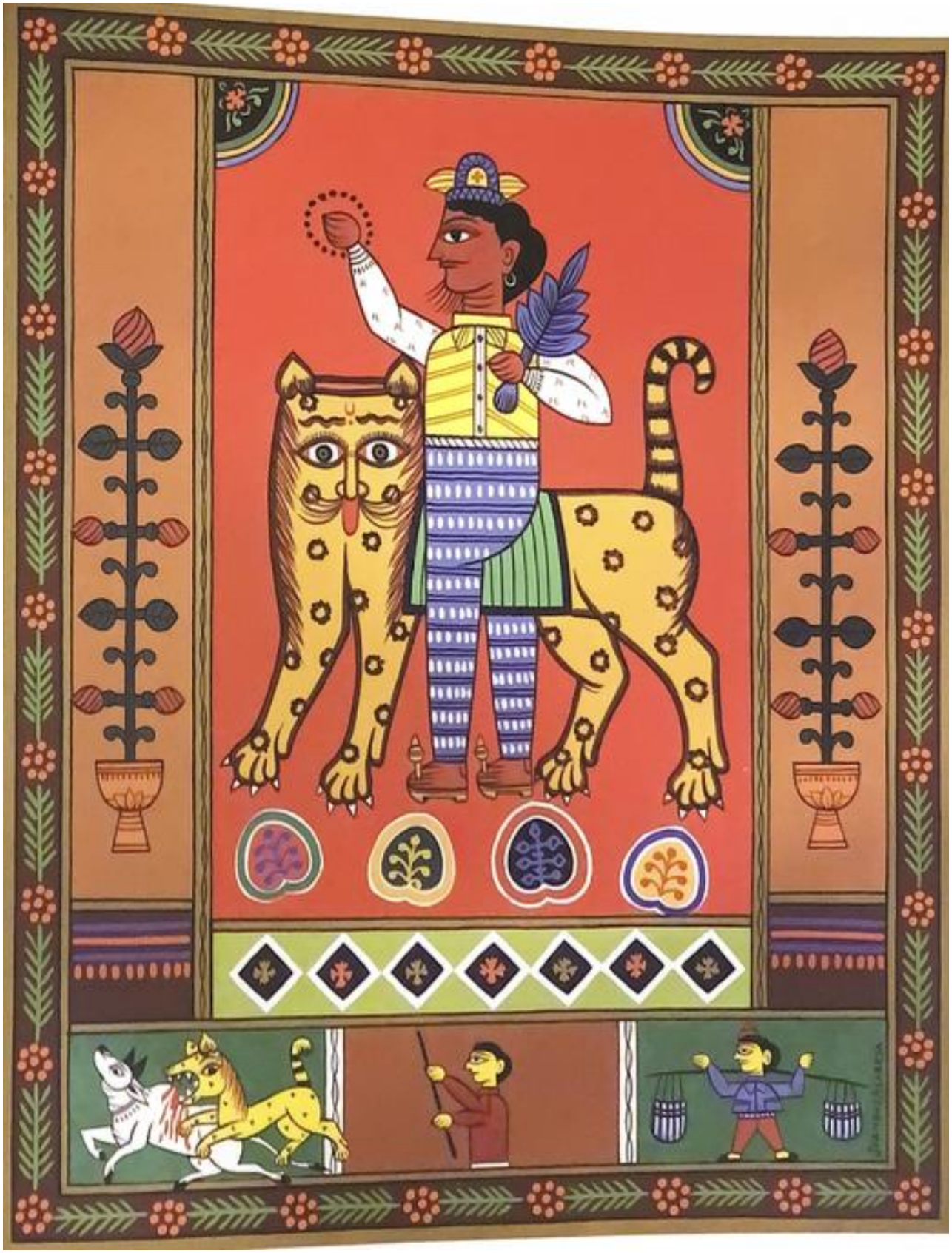
This thesis began as an academic inquiry but evolved into a personal revelation. It taught me that the quest to "give voice" to the subaltern is, in itself, a misplaced endeavour. The voices are always there — whether in speech, acts, painting, songs, legends or the everyday behaviour

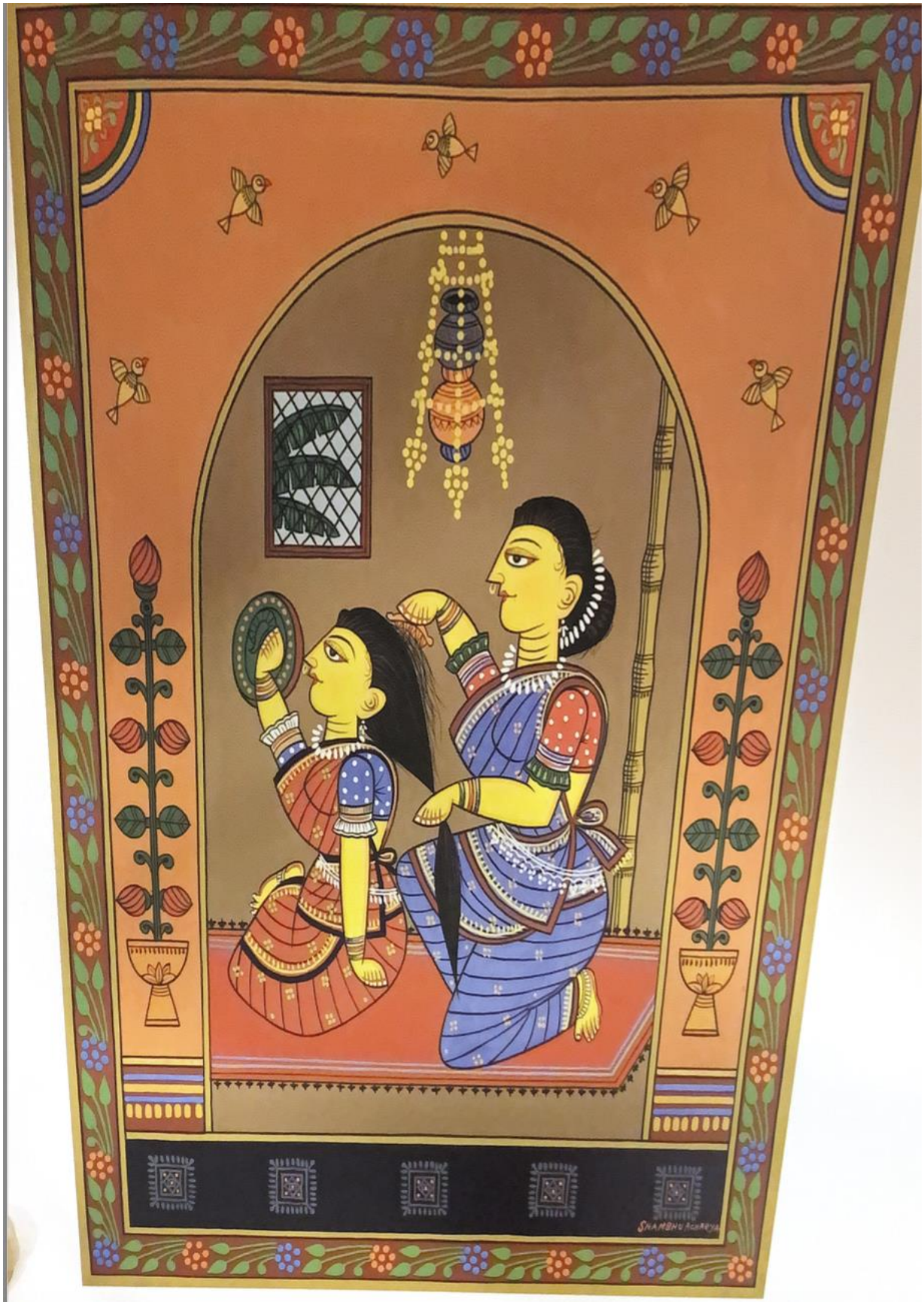
— and it is an amazing experience to listen to and observe them. It is a simple act, yet one that holds the potential to redefine relationships, dismantle hierarchies and bring about true understanding. In the end, the most profound learning is that when we truly begin to listen, we also allow their voices to reshape our own perceptions. It's in this mutual exchange that we find the possibility for real change—a shift from representation to participation, from speaking about to engaging with.

Therefore, the research for this thesis and the stories that have been explored intends to do a simple thing: it is to ask for a change in how academic discourses are predominantly structured. The inquiry into subaltern studies stands as a microcosm for a broader intention of changing the manner of discourses. At the end, such discourses intend to understand human experiences more deeply. While this thesis does not offer a definitive solution to the problem of subaltern representation, or representation in general, it does suggest a path forward: one grounded in the act of listening, in allowing subaltern voices to shape their own narratives. For it is in listening that we find connection, and in connection, the seeds of a more just and empathetic world.

Exhibit:







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