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Queering Tropical Nature: Decolonising Hetero-Ecologies through Indigenous Epistemes in *My Father's Garden* and *Man Tiger*

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Abstract:

Queer ecologies, an emerging debate in studies of the humanities, is an intersectional appeal for inclusivity of gender, sexuality, and ecology to dismantle hetero-ecological perceptions and embrace strangeness within nature. Relocating decoloniality through the framework of queer ecology, this paper confronts hetero-ecologies through the Indigenous epistemologies of two novels, one set in India and the other in Indonesia. The *Adivasi* Sarnaistic knowledge and practices, as showcased in the Indian novel *My Father's Garden* (2018) by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, firmly hint at queer nature as perceived by the Indigenous communities who live in the Indian state of Jharkhand. In turn, the Indonesian novel *Man Tiger* (2004) by Eka Kurniawan, dismantles the hierarchical, heteronormative, and androcentric views regarding nature and gender by moving beyond the bio/ontological boundaries of the human and embracing a biophilic desire between human and tiger. The paper analyses these queer intersections within tropical naturecultures that shapeshift the entire human-nonhuman matrix.

Keywords: Decolonial queer ecologies, queering hetero-ecologies, Indigenous epistemes, Adivasi Sarnaism, biophilic desire, queering tropical nature

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Introduction: Decolonising Hetero-Ecologies

Non-normative behaviours and relationships among various species of animals and plants are abundant in nature. From genderlessness in various microbes to same-sex pairings in birds to gender fluidity in certain fish, the natural world defies rigid hetero-ecological notions of sexuality and gender. Birds are often known for their queer traits. Gay and lesbianism are scattered through the Swan species, and "almost a quarter of black swan families are parented by homosexual couples" (Goudarzi, 2006, para. 11), while the Laysan albatross exhibits same-sex bonding, with individuals forming life-long partnerships. The world of fungi defies the very notion of a binary taxanomic system of plant and animal kingdoms; furthermore, "it is rare for a fungus to have only two biological sexes, and some fungi, such as *Schizophyllum commune*, have as many as 23,000 mating types" (Kaishian & Djoulakian, 2020, p. 10). These phenomena counter the assumption that the natural world is exclusively binary and heterosexual and speak to the complexity of relationships in the more-than-human world.

Indigenous societies have often revered nature and its non-normative behaviours, viewing them as a symbol of balance and harmony. This episteme is based on an ethos of interconnectedness where lands, plants, animals, and humans coexist in relation. Many Indigenous communities fostered an alternative vision of gender and sexuality, which is related to their understanding of nature. They "recognized third and fourth genders and acknowledged roles for tribal members whose gender expression existed outside a naturalized male/female binary" (Tatonetti, 2014, p. x). Spirituality also played a crucial role in non-binary sexuality of Indigenous cultures, with androgynous, transgender, third gender, and even fifth gender individuals, traditionally revered as healers, spiritual leaders, and shamans. Queer Indigenous individuals may acquire specific roles within spiritual practices that contribute to the overall spiritual fabric of their community, and this spirituality is always strongly entwined with nature. Such indigiqueer individuals have held an important place in the cultures of the varied regions of the tropics. However, this delicate relationship involving nature, Indigenous queer individuals, and spirituality was gravely threatened during the waves of Western colonialism, which violently swept across the tropics. The effects of colonialism are still present today in destroyed environments, decimated Indigenous communities, and the desecration of traditional spiritual practices. Neocolonialism, in the form of neoliberal modernisation and development, continues the ethos of the colonial agenda with policies of extraction (of people, land, forests) and legacies of extinction.

Given the above context, the critical theory/nexus of decolonial queer ecologies, conceptualised by Gregory Luke Chwala (2017), is pertinent to this paper, which aims to examine the queer ecological notions prevalent in two novels set in Indigenous communities in the Asian tropics. The article first explores the Indigenous *Adivasi* philosophy of Sarnaism within the tropical topography of Jharkhand (eastern India) through Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's novel *My Father's Garden* (2018). Secondly, the paper aims to elucidate the biophilic desires as portrayed in Eka Kurniawan's novel *Man Tiger* (2004), set on an equatorial island of the Indonesian archipelago. We have allocated separate sections for the critical analysis of each novel. The section dealing with *My Father's Garden* aims to unravel how Shekhar, in his eco-queer fiction, illustrates an image of a garden that has become a bio-zone of intersection where human and non-human agencies come together, indigenising and decolonising the garden as a queer spatial antithesis to the engineered colonial parks created along heterosexual lines. The section which focuses on the novel *Man Tiger* reads it from a queer ecological perspective, aiming to understand the more-than-human world by moving beyond human bio/ontological borders, and embracing the idea of nature as a queer, entangled, and interconnected entity.

Queer Ecologies in Novels from the Tropics

Rooted in the combination of 'indigenous' and 'queer,' the term 'indigiqueer/indigequeer' coined by Theo Cuthand (2004) acknowledges diverse gender identities and sexual orientations among Indigenous people. The term aims to dismantle and deconstruct binary and dualistic understandings of identity and gender (Cuthand, 2017, para. 11) and serves as a confrontational and empowering expression of identity, gaining recognition in academic and social contexts. Although indidiqueer was coined in the context of subarctic Canada, Indigenous queer communities are likewise present across the world's tropics, including countries such as Brazil, Indonesia, and India, and the regions of Africa and the Pacific. Around the belt of tropics, colonisation has disassembled many Indigenous cultures and their rich and diverse queer non-binary sensibilities by establishing Western values and a temperate morality, thus imbuing a sense of shame in their ancestral beliefs, values, and practices. As decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo notes of colonialism in Latin America (but applicable across the tropics), the major shift after the advent of colonialism was:

> the emergence of a structure of control and management of authority, economy, subjectivity, gender and sexual norms and relations that were driven by Western (Atlantic) Europeans (Iberian Peninsula, Holland, France, and England) both in their internal conflicts and in their exploitation of labor and expropriation of land. (Mignolo, 2011, p. 7)

Colonialists reviled Indigenous communities as homoerotic for their varied notions of gender and sexuality. Colonialism proceeded to wipe out many Indigenous communities through genocide, and their ways of living have been effaced by epistemicide, linguicide, and culturecide (Omanga, 2020, para. 5). Following colonisation, the epistemological and ontological beliefs of Indigenous people succumbed to the epistemic blow received from the 'logic of coloniality' (Mignolo, 2011, p. 5). Many Indigenous cultures surrendered to the power of colonial assimilation, with their traditions incorporated into Western concepts or morphed into modern forms. In *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (1989), Donna Haraway describes these colonial tendencies as "cannibalistic Western logic that readily constructs other cultural possibilities as resources for Western needs and actions" (1989, p. 247). Their thinking and beliefs on nature, culture, sexuality, gender, and ecology have gone through a process of assimilation. Nevertheless, a rich variety of ecological and queer practices still reverberate within many existing tropical Indigenous cultures. Decolonial queer ecology thus aims to rethink and relocate traditional Indigenous ways of thinking by decolonising Indigenous epistemologies, queering the relationship between natureculture and dismantling heteronormative gender binaries.

Decoloniality, a concept popularised by Walter Mignolo, "seeks to dismantle the hegemonic and oppressive structures of Eurocentric epistemologies. It promotes reflection on how texts and knowledge production perpetuate othering and oppression" (Ghosal & Modak, 2023, p. 174). It is a process of "epistemological disobedience" (Mignolo, 2009, p. 3) and incorporates non-modern ways of seeing and thinking. Decoloniality is a response to the "oppressive and imperial bent of modern European ideals projected [on]to and enacted in the non-European world" (Mignolo, 2011, p. 2).

Queer ecology, having a rich history and diverse influences, holds immense potential when placed in this decolonial framework to unfold as a vibrant and evolving approach to defining the complexities of nature and understanding humans within it. An intersection of environmentalism and queer studies, the Western roots of queer ecology can be found in the late twentieth century, when, on one side, there was an emergence of a more visible and vocal queer community and, on the other, a growing interest in the discipline of

ecocriticism. One of the influential precursors of queer ecology is the concept of ecofeminism, which challenged androcentrism and determined "solutions to the problems of environmental destruction and the unjustified subordination of women and other subdominant groups" (Warren, 1997, p. 3). It laid the groundwork for questioning dominant power structures and understanding the interconnection between social and environmental issues. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, in their book *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses* (1972), argued against the exclusion of women and queerness from the dominant narratives of science and nature. Carolyn Merchant continued the trend of intersection in *The Death of Nature* (1980), where she addressed the origins of women's suppression and environmental exploitation. Later, Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* (1993) focused on the fact that our body materialised due to its continuous exposure to environmental agents and claimed, "a rethinking of 'nature' as a set of dynamic interrelations suits both feminist and ecological aims" (p. 4). These early influences fuelled the emergence of queer ecology in Greta Gaard's essay "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism" (1997), which was then spearheaded by scholars such as Catriona (Mortimer-)Sandilands, Timothy Morton, Bruce Erickson, David Bell, Donna Haraway, and others. This interdisciplinary movement formally began in 2010 with the publication of the anthology *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire,* edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson. Sandilands defines queer ecology as

> a loose, interdisciplinary constellation of practices that aim, in different ways, to disrupt prevailing heterosexist discursive and institutional articulations of sexuality and nature, and also to reimagine evolutionary processes, ecological interactions, and environmental politics in light of queer theory. (2016, p. 169)

The nexus of decolonial queer ecologies brings together decoloniality and queer ecologies. As explained by Chwala, following the movement of postcolonial studies, literature of the tropics started to be approached from a decolonial lens that critically analysed and rejected Western discursivity. This decolonial practice demands a 'queering' or "moving from the European colonial (now globalized) logic that informs our relationships with our environment to more sustainable non-modern ways of thinking" (Chwala, 2017, p. 29). This decolonial approach to queering has been explored in various ecological fictions from tropical regions of the world, including Australia, Indonesia, India, Brazil, the islands of the Caribbean, and countries in tropical Africa.

Australia's literary landscape of queering includes Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2007), an eco-magical tale of Aboriginal resistance against colonial aggressions. Wright celebrates

the enduring spirit of Indigenous ecologies, where the land becomes a distinctive character in the novel and an entity worth fighting for. Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013) is set in a post-apocalyptic Australia distorted by the aftermaths of climate change and tells the story of Oblivia Ethylene, a girl who has an explicit bond with black swans, a species famous for their queer sexualities. Against the backdrop of dystopia and political unrest, the novel challenges the modernist understanding of nature and builds on inclusive Indigenous ecological epistemes.

In Indonesia, a range of narratives elucidate queer ecologies. *Lutung Kasarung* is a Sudanese folktale that reflects the rich mythopoeic heritage of the Indigenous people of Western Java. By means of showcasing the interconnectedness between humans and nature, the reversal of gender norms, and the fostering of interspecies entanglement and shapeshifting elements, it unravels the non-dualistic essence central to all Indigenous ecologies. Ratih Kumala's *Tabula Rasa* (2004) records the incoherently shifting identities of the lesbian protagonist Raras, who does not succumb to any oppressive binaries. The story establishes that love is entwined with place and time. The novel *Saman* (1998) by Ayu Utami, though not explicitly queer ecological, hovers around the intersections of Indigenous spirituality, sexualities, and social realities.

India, the jewel in Queen Victoria's crown, was subjected to sweeping epistemic violence during the colonial era, yet it still reveals a diverse Indigenous view of nature and the natural world in its historical and mythological narratives. Shapeshifting, gender fluidity, ecological entanglement, and multispecies assemblages frequently manifest within Indian religious scriptures. This can be seen in epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata,* with genderfluid characters like Shikhandi, Bhisma, who vowed celibacy, and Arjuna disguised as *brihannala* (transgender), hinting at the diverse identities existing in harmony with nature. The queer ecological spirit of Indian culture was lost due to religious fundamentalism that was fuelled by the infiltration of colonial heteronormative codes. The processes of postcolonialism and decolonisation have helped rejuvenate the queer ecological stances in Indian literature, exemplified by novels such as Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977), which portrays how Indigenous ways of thinking and being with nature can be a weapon to defy British colonial extractivist warfare, and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), which advocates for queer heterotopic spaces to tackle the onslaughts of colonial and religious oppressions.

From Brazil, *Devassos, no Paraiso* (2018) [Debauches in Paradise] by João Silvério Trevisan is an ambitious non-fiction monograph that tries to capture the entire spectrum

of Brazilian queerness from colonialism to the present in terms of literature, society, politics, and history. *A Morte e o Meteoro* (2019) [Death and the Meteor] by João Carlos Reiners Terron is a harsh critique of neocolonial encroachment on the Amazon basin and its impact on Indigenous cultures and untouched environments, challenging the neoliberal heteronormative view of nature.

Again, the rich Caribbean mythologies blur the boundaries between humans and nature, promoting fertile grounds for queer desires and ecological consciousness. *The Kingdom of This World* (1949) by Cuban author Alejo Carpentier fuses histories, geographies, stories, sexuality, and magic of Latin America together against the backdrop of the Haitian revolution and paints a world that is beyond Wester heteronormative understandings of nature and culture. Shani Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) is a prominent example from Trinidad, radically revolutionising the understanding of nature through the depiction of queer traits of the botanical realm.

Although African countries went through profound epistemic violence and ethnic cleansing throughout their colonial history, contemporary African literature vividly portrays queer ecologies, disobeying, and thus decolonising the legacies of imperialism. *Dust* (2013) and *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor are two Kenyan novels that give non-oppressive and non-normative agencies to the more-than-human world and envision an agential intimacy between species in a way that reflects Indigenous values.

This small example of literatures, from just a few of the regions of the tropics, transgress the Western dualistic epistemology that separates nature and culture. The narratives have engaged in acts of decolonial queer ecology by challenging hetero-ecological ways of seeing the environment and exploring Indigenous ecological notions, thus providing us with a possibility of rekindling and rewilding our fragile nodes of tropical natureculture.[1] This is likewise the case for the two novels, *My Father's Garden* and *Man Tiger*.

Queering Jharkhand Topographies in *My Father's Garden*

The emergence of the Indian state of Jharkhand after its separation from the state of Bihar in the year 2000 was the result of several resistance movements and ongoing demands for a separate state for the *Adivasis* (Indian Indigenous peoples). Jharkhand gave the

[1] The term 'tropical natureculture' is used in an essay by Wiss (2023) to combine notions from the theory of tropicality with that of Haraway's natureculture.

impression of a most desired tropical paradise to the millions of Adivasis—a space of their own in which to reclaim and restore their Indigenous ontologies. Though their roots trace back to the Proto-Australoids, who are "considered as the second oldest racial group in India" (Ali, 2019, p. 9), Adivasis have never been able to escape their status as a minority ethnic group since the emergence of the Aryans in ancient times. The communities in Jharkhand are principally comprised of Santhal, Ho, Munda, and Oraon tribes, who collectively came to be known as Adivasis in the eastern region of India and continue to be deemed Scheduled Tribes within the Indian constitution. Like other Indigenous tribes across the tropical world, they have suffered from prejudice and are considered 'backward,' despite a rich cultural heritage that has existed for more than 50,000 years (Czekalska & Kuczkiewicz-Fraś, 2016, p. 191).

To understand the intersections of Adivasi Indigeneity, queer ecology, and decoloniality, we have to delve deep into the history of Indian forests during British rule, especially in the context of Jharkhand, which etymologically means 'land of forests.' It is through colonial history that this section explores the concept of ecological decoloniality through queering the forests of Jharkhand. The imperial West has always looked upon the lush forests of the tropics as a "standing reserve" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 302) of timber resources—this includes the *sals* (*Shorea robusta*) of Jharkhand. Forest rights activists Manshi Asher and Nidhi Agarwal state that "these communities and their livelihoods were threatened yet again, as the colonisers saw the extensive forest areas as a major opportunity for revenue and timber" (Asher & Agarwal, 2007, p. 11). This extractivist gaze of the colonials and settler colonies morphed the Indian forests into a zone of commerce to generate large revenues for the states. With the introduction of railways in the 1890s, forests started becoming the most valuable resource, and the British registered these forests as government assets to be managed under strict control by officials and landowners. This resulted in an absolute "deterritorialisation" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 195) of the Adivasi communities from their *jhars* (forest groves). This process of plundering native ecology by uprooting the Indigenous dwellers is understood as environmental colonialism or "ecological imperialism" (Crosby, 1986, p. 106). In the post-colonial era, when the colonisers finally quit India after robbing its resources and assimilating Indigenous peoples with the settlers, the Adivasis finally strived to "rethink, relocate and redefine" their "protective concepts of nature" (Plumwood, 2003, p. 62). *My Father's Garden* exhibits a similar resilience by Adivasi communities, who can be seen adapting the traditional Indigenous ways of nurturing nature by queering settler epistemologies of ecology.

In his semi-autobiographical novel, *My Father's Garden,* Shekhar explores the intricacies of Adivasi queer sexuality in addition to a queer ecological perspective. The author's choice of a queer narrator within an Adivasi framework is an act of decoloniality in itself, as it resonates with traditional homosexual practices of the Ho community, far ahead of neo-modern LGBTQIA2+ activism. As Murty points out:

> homosexuality or consensual sex between two members of the same gender may have been legalised now, but among the Ho tribe of Jharkhand it has always been socially accepted. Homosexual men are called Kothi Panthis in the region. There is no shame attached to being one. (2009, para. 1)

Within this context of contemporary Jharkhand, the community has opened public spaces for queer Adivasis to meet. In her outlining of queer ecology, Sandilands has similarly noted the importance of "access to…particular sexual, cultural, political, and other uses of public spaces (including nature)" (Sandilands, 2002, p. 134). However, in the case of the colonial history of India, the cultural assimilation of Indigenous tribes eroded traditional beliefs and practices and circumscribed ecological spaces, a theme explored in the novel's narrative.

The story unfolds through an unnamed Adivasi protagonist who embarks on a journey of self-discovery during his college years, engaging in multiple gay encounters to understand his sexuality and identity. His queer relationships with partners inevitably lead to painful separations due to the heteronormative social order of the modern Indian state. In the fiasco of these queer encounters, the protagonist ultimately finds solace in the tranquillity of his father's garden. In urban topography, ecology is conceived through engineered nature in the forms of gardens and parks that have challenged the traditional understanding of nature in terms of wilderness. Wild forests are home to various human and non-human agents; they are contact zones where various beings contest and thrive in an ecological balance. Gardens and parks, on the other hand, are engineered naturescapes that are created by humans and intrinsically uphold traditional family structures, imprinted (and imprinting), heteronormative connotations. Such nature spaces eliminate queer Indigenous notions and behaviours regarding nature and sexuality, and consider queer practices 'strange'. As Sandilands asserts, "natural space—including parks and other designated nature spaces—are organized by prevalent assumptions about sexuality, and especially a move to institutionalize heterosexuality by linking it to particular environmental practices" (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2005, para. 9). However, in the novel, the father's garden serves as a spatial antithesis to this modern urban garden that

promotes heteronormativity. The enchanting garden takes on a distinctly Indigenous character, intricately interwoven with Adivasi belief systems. The author eloquently captures this sense of a wild garden, stating, “My father had a vision for the jaher. He wanted it to return to its original form, a dense, orderly forest” (Shekhar, 2019, p. 76). He yearned to restore it to its wilding form, aiming to subvert the idea of a colonialist garden by embodying an Indigenous philosophy of coexistence with the more-than-human world. In this sense, the garden unfolds as a queer interpretation of natural space—a harmonious intersection where nature and culture coalesce. It exists as a liminal zone, blurring the boundaries between forest and garden. And it is in this ‘holding space’ of the garden that the unnamed narrator finds refuge after his failed homo-erotic encounters.

In the novel, Shekhar engages in a thorough exploration of the post-colonial Adivasi concerns regarding casteism, atrocities against tribal women, and the relocating of traditional Indigenous rituals and practices within the newly established state of Jharkhand. The title of the third section of the novel—“Father”—not only connotes the narrator’s father but also his grandfather and forefathers, who have cultivated Indigenous ways of thinking for generations. Shekhar unveils the depths of Adivasi rituals and festivals like *Baha*, *Maak Moray,* and especially *Jaherthan,* evoking eco-sustenance and fostering a queer and nuanced understanding of nature. The novel’s emphasis on Jaherthan (sacred grove, also called *jaher*), and the holistic rituals practiced in this sacred space are significant in making “strange our ideological consensus” (Quigley, 1999, p. 198) about nature, prompting a queering of nature through the lens of decolonial ecology. Jaherthan, as described by the narrator, is “the most sacred centre of our faith, where everyone prays during the Baha and Maak Moray festivals” (Shekhar, 2019, p. 67). In the novel, Kessorepur village in Jharkhand serves as the backdrop for the concept of jaher, “where farming was not allowed” and “the cutting of trees was forbidden, and they flourished there” (Shekhar, 2019, p. 67). As the narrator's grandfather was the *majhi* (head priest) of Kessorepur village, the welfare of the villagers was his responsibility, “and so was its jaher” (Shekhar, 2019, p. 67). However, his grandfather’s revolutionary zeal for reforming the poor socio-economic conditions of the Adivasis propelled him to join politics, prompting a departure from the practice of jaher. This political shift resulted in a temporary cessation of traditional practices, and thus the preservation of these Indigenous rites became the responsibility of the protagonist’s father. His father, who worked as a chemist on a private farm, decides to carry forward the Indian tribal legacy of *jal, jungle, jameen* (water, forest, land) that “reflects their rootedness in nature, which, even in this face of relentless development and change, remains resolute” (Ghosal & Modak, 2023b, p. 147).

During the colonial period, India experienced severe ecocide:

> British rule radically changed the focus of the country's resource use pattern from production of a variety of biological resources for local consumption to the production of a few commodities largely for export. The resulting ecological squeeze was accompanied by disastrous famines and epidemics between the 1860s and the 1920s. (Gadgil & Thapar, 1990, p. 209)

Indigenous people counter-challenged such ecological imbalances by "rewesternizing" (Mignolo, 2011, p. 36) the coloniser's conceptions with ideas of Indigenous harvesting and agriculture, which Shekhar's *My Father's Garden* seeks to showcase. Post-independence, the state government policies of Bihar prioritised material development, which prompted Adivasis to demand a separate state, 'jhar-khand', in the region, which, in the ancient time of the Mahabharata, was referred to as *Kark Khand* as it was near *Kark Rekha*, the Tropic of Cancer. In Jharkhand, the Adivasi could retain their indigeneity by inculcating their principal philosophy of 'Sarnaism'. Sarnaism is the central religion of the Adivasis in the Chotanagpur Plateau region, where the goddess *Jaher Ayo* is worshipped in their sacred grove, or *Sarna* (etymologically aligned with the sal tree). The Sarna "followers pray to the trees and hills while believing in protecting the forest areas. Believers of the Sarna faith do not practice idol worship, nor do they adhere to the concept of the Varna system, heaven-hell, etc." (Bhargava, 2022, para. 2). Rather, Sarnaism speaks of interconnectedness, coalition, coexistence, and symbiosis among various actants of the ecosystem and promotes sustainable and respectful utilisation of natural resources.

Harold Gaski, in his essay "Indigenous Elders' Perspective and Position" (2019), has emphasised the transmission of Indigenous knowledge through experienced elders. This theme is notably echoed in the novel, where the narrator's grandfather plays a pivotal role in sharing tribal ecological wisdom with the protagonist. Gaski (2019) defines these traditional teachings as "Indigenous Elders' Knowledge", which "belongs to the realm of traditional knowledge, which is experience-based and often holistic in its approach to Life, Land, and Spirituality" (p. 2). The narrator's resilient quest to preserve Adivasi agrarian knowledge is vividly expressed in his explorations of *Baha parab* (festival) and the chief Adivasi deities, *Marang Buru* (god of mountains) and *Jaher Ayo* (goddess of forests). *Baha* is one of the most significant Adivasi festivals, celebrated between February and March in the presence of the full moon. This is an Indigenous festival of spring, celebrated in delight of environmental serenity as the new flowers of the sal tree bloom during this

time. *Baha* is centrally focused on worshipping *Jaher Ayo*, the archetype of mother nature. These Indigenous festivals, hence, reflect a pantheistic approach and focus on celebrating ecological sustenance and biodiversity. By advocating these traditional ecological practices of the Indigenous tribes, Shekhar's *My Father's Garden* introduces an 'other' understanding of the natural world as opposed to the colonial-temperate concept of nature. His father's restoration of Jaherthan and recommencement of the spiritual Sarnaistic practices for reclaiming their ethnic beliefs of interconnectedness and coexistence is a clarion call for reconceptualising the true relationship of Adivasi's with nature, thus celebrating an otherness that "would place queer at the centre" (Sandilands, 1994, p. 20). This queering of ecologies away from Western-colonial notions of nature—as separate from, and under the dominion of humans—also acts to "open up possibility of wonder" (Sandilands, 1994, p. 20). The father's garden has been a decolonial agency for Shekhar to queer the topography of Jharkhand from the grip of the neocolonial-neoliberal notion of utility, to its Indigenous practices of jaher, where trees are deified, cared for, and preserved.

Queer Desires and Interspecies Intimacies in *Man Tiger*

Queer ecology has been a process of dislocating the heteronormative binaries between nature/culture. The word "queer" suggests a strangeness within nature that is perceived as unnatural per colonial Western understanding. Redefining and complicating oversimplified Eurocentric epistemologies of nature is to practice 'queering' from a decolonial lens (Chwala, 2017, p. 29). Contemporary fiction from the tropics has engaged in exploring decolonial queer ecological plots, in other words, plots that disobey colonial dualistic notions of nature. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erikson have elucidated that "[c]onnections, assemblages, and becomings form central concerns for many queer and nature writers, and possibilities offered by models and metaphors are truly quite limitless" (2010, p. 39). Therefore, to explore the convolutions and intricacies of relations between human and more-than-human worlds, and to understand 'queering' as a decolonial tool, this section explores the Indonesian novel *Man Tiger* (2004) by Eka Kurniawan which focuses on synergies between humans and animals.

The relationship between humans and tigers has been historically embedded in a web of complexities. We once revered these beings as powerful symbols of strength and majesty, but with the expansion of civilisations, we have also clashed with tigers for dominace over territories and resources. There are various myths among the communities in the Asian tropics where tigers are deified as an agency of protection of

villagers and ecosystems. For instance, we see human-tiger interactions and morphing in Malaysia, as described in K. S. Maniam's short story *Haunting the Tiger* (1996); from Thailand, Apichatpong Weerasethakul's film *Tropical Malady* (2004) portrays the interconnecting narratives of gay love and a shape-shifting shaman and ghostly tiger (Creed, 2011); while in North-East India, the Garo ethnic group of Meghalaya maintain diverse beliefs in weretigers, tiger-shamans, and a race of tigermen ruled by a matriarchal Tiger Mother (Brighenti, 2017).

In Indonesia, the Minangkabau ethnic group of the equatorial island of Sumatera retain a special place for tigers in their myths. The matrilineal Minang culture venerated tigers, calling them by a range of titles, including: *Inyiak* (tiger), *Inyiak Balang* (Grandma Belang), *Inyiak Rimbo* (Grandmother of the Jungle), *Datuak Penghulu* (elder or chieftain), or *Inyiak* Grandpa (Syahrul et al., 2022, p. 198). Such terms reflect how Minang people have high respect for tigers, whom they consider guardian spirits, protecting villagers from danger. However, following rapid modernisation and the emergence of neoliberal modes of development where forests were cleared for plantations and urbanisation, tigers have come under serious threat due to habitat loss, continuous poaching, and conflict with humans. In such a dire state, ancient oral myths and folklore are needed to regenerate care for these animals. The author Eka Kurniawan has come forward to relive these ancient myths in his fiction, remythologising the Minang lore of man and tiger in his work as an act of resilience against species extinction. Placing Kurniawan's novel *Man Tiger* at the centre, this section intends to queer our understanding of nature by breaking out of the Western epistemological binary through the process of rethinking and reconceptualising the Indigenous mythical understanding of the relationship between humans and tigers.

Fictions of the tropical regions have been widely influenced by their traditional archetypes of shapeshifting. *Man Tiger* has likewise incorporated the Indigenous Indonesian mythology of *manusia harimau*, shapeshifting tiger people who protect the forests and villages and roar the lores of wilderness. However, the author of *Man Tiger* chooses to stray from the traditional myth to remythologize the plot by infusing a female tiger with the male protagonist, Margio. This renovation of myth not only forces us to examine the plot through a queer ecological lens but also from the perspective of gender difference. *Man Tiger* is a decolonial magical realist novel set in Indonesia at an "unnamed township near the Indian Ocean" (Anderson, 2015, p. xii). From the socio-political situation of rural spaces in Indonesia to the reintroduction of traditional myths in contemporary fiction, the novel *Man Tiger* offers a unique ecological viewpoint by showcasing possibilities of

biosocial intimacy between humans and tigers and subverting the heteronormative binaries of gender.

Decolonial queer ecology adapts various means of introspection to show the entanglement between humans and the more-than-human world. Multispecies intimacy is a theoretical framework that examines human-non-human interactions from various angles for 'queering' our understanding of nature. At its core, multispecies intimacy focuses on dismantling anthropocentrism, which claims that humans occupy a central place in ecosystems and are above all other beings. The key to multispecies intimacy is that it not only talks about the relationship of species ecologically but also emotionally, socially, and culturally.

The queer dynamic between Margio and the tiger can be effectively explored using the concept of 'contact zone' by Mary Louise Pratt and the reconceptualization of the same from an ecological angle by Haraway in her book *When Species Meet* (2008). Of particular significance is Haraway's concept of 'naturecultures' in this context of multispecies intimacy. The term 'contact zone' has been defined by Pratt in her seminal work *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) as a ''social space where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths'' (p. 7). Used as a de/postcolonial tool of critique, the term refers to the social spaces of complex negotiations where individuals from various cultures encounter each other. Here, she highlights how the languages and communications in these spaces are not neutral but are based on power relations. Pratt talks about how the contact zone alters the focal point and perspective and creates a space and time where formerly separated subjects are "co-present" (Pratt, 1992, p. 8), hence highlighting the way subjects are formed through their interconnectedness. Haraway explores Pratt's contact zone from an ecological perspective of species co-presence and interaction. Thus, Haraway sheds light on the interactive and improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters, often overlooked in traditional accounts of conquest and domination, ultimately providing a framework for understanding ecological instances of contact between multiple species.

Redefining contact zones as "ecotones" (Haraway, p. 217), Haraway bridges the binaries between humans and non-human others. The instances of interaction between Margio and the tiger in Kurniawan's *Man Tiger* offer a touchpoint for the two different species to "meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (Pratt, 1992, p. 7) in mutual co-shaping and co-habitation. The white tiger in the novel is a spirit animal that Margio inherited from his

grandfather as his female companion. When he discovers the corporeal existence of the tigress for the first time, he is left amazed at her fierce beauty. This amazement turns into hypnosis, and within moments, it develops into a biophilic desire. Margio expresses his subconscious drive for a union with the tigress by "wrapp[ing] his arm around her neck, embracing her and feeling the warmth of her fur against his body" (Kurniawan, 2015, p. 44). This interspecies intimacy is further heightened by the narrator's account of biophilia, where the boy finds a partner within the tigress who "surrender[s] herself to him like a girl" (Kurniawan, 2015, p. 43). The hero receives bestial arousal through the tigress whose touch felt to him "like sharing an embrace with a girl on a cold morning, stark naked in bed, the most tender intimacy after a night of love-making" (Kurniawan, 2015, p. 44).

The biophilic attraction that is portrayed in the narrative is the initiation point of border breaking, the zone of contact where a human and a tiger proceed to form an assemblage "outside their comfort zone" (Haraway, 2008, p. 217). Their union provides us with the possibility to rethink the ecocritical assumptions outside the subjective understanding of self towards a post-humanist bio/ontological entity, offering insights to connect with various species. Margio loses his being and his self as a human, becoming more-than-human after this bestial intimacy. This union, this contact zone, has changed "all subjects—in surprising ways" (Haraway, 2008, p. 219). His encounter with the tigress challenges the dualism between humans and nature and offers possibilities of co-becoming as the tigress intrudes within his body, the "two of them inseparable until death" (Kurniawan, 2015, p. 45). This queer human-animal relationship between the man and the tigress creates a space for queering or interrogating the Western epistemological dualisms of nature/culture, man/woman, self/other, and human/non-human.

The queer ecological perspective in the novel is not just limited to the biophilic encounter between the man and the tigress; rather, it extends beyond it by co-shaping and fluctuating Margio's gender identity. The infusion of more than one gender in Margio's corporeal being closely resonates with the gender beliefs of the Indigenous Bugis community of south Sulawesi in Indonesia. The Bugis people have their own ethnic beliefs, which contrast with heteronormative gender binaries. They recognise five genders: *oroané* (cisgender men), *makkunrai* (cisgender women), *calalai* (transgender men), *calabai* (transgender women), and *bissu* (androgynous or intersex being). Margio's gender identity goes through a state of flux following his interspecies intimacy with the tigress, which can loosely be associated with that of *Bissu* (priest), who combines all aspects of gender (Syamsurijal et al., 2024).

The amalgamation of the tiger's corporeality within him has changed his former subjectivity, causing him to become a two-spirit being and a combination of all gender identities. The re-mythologisation of the Indigenous myth of *manusia harimau* in *Man Tiger* by replacing a tiger with a tigress not only queers the identity of the hero of the novel but also redefines nature from a queer lens. The incorporation of the Minang myth in the novel is not just a decolonial stance but is also an attempt to queer our ecological understanding by dismantling the heteronormative assumptions about nature. The choice of a hybridised, dualistic, more-than-human hero by the author is more than just the appropriation of a myth; it is an act of ecological resilience that queers our understanding of nature and gender and provides us with possibilities for cohabitation, assemblages, and entanglements.

Conclusion: Tropical Naturecultures

My Father's Garden and *Man Tiger*, as representations of tropical literature, have shown resilience against nature/culture binaries by revoicing Haraway's concept of 'naturecultures' that aims to justify an intertwined relationship between natures and cultures and challenge the conventional separation of the two. In the tropics, where there is an enmeshment of lush landscapes and complex Indigenous cultures, writers often engage with plots that embrace an intricate interplay between humans and environments. They are in defiance of the stereotypical representation of tropical nature as being exotic and untamed by reclaiming the landscapes not just as a backdrop for adventure but as a quintessential component of their cultural narratives.

My Father's Garden, as a tropical novel, "delinks" (Mignolo, 2017, p. 40) the temperate understanding of nature by relocating nature through the Indigenous philosophy of Sarnaism, where the narrator's father reintroduces the age-old Adivasi practices and festivities to reawaken Indigeneity within the community to foster care of their forest homelands. Jharkhand has been explored in this paper as a tropical space that aids in queering our understanding of nature by establishing a symbiosis between jhars (tree groves) and humans, which engage in mutual caring for each other. The novel *Man Tiger*, set in the equatorial tropics of Indonesia, takes up the myth of *manusia harimau* and remythologizes it into a queer decolonial tale of cohabitation, which emphasises the interconnectedness between humans and the environment, promoting a sense of interspecies being. The novel appears at a time when the endangered Sumatran tiger, referred to in revered familial terms in the Minangkabau language, continues to face severe threats due to loss of habitat and poaching. *Man Tiger* attempts to reawaken,

through a biophilic desire, the severed connection between natures and cultures, acknowledging and celebrating the diverse expressions of gender and sexuality in both human and non-human species.

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