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## **The Aporia in the Writings of Jim Corbett: The Paradox of Preservation and Destruction**

**Tuhin Sengupta**

Former Guest Lecturer,  
Indus Mahavidyala.

The most striking features of the writings of colonel Jim Corbett, perhaps the most famous man eater hunter even today, is their graphic description of the big game, their activities and above all the slayings of the man eaters that terrorized the hill villages of Himalayan India. Corbett wrote his memoirs at a time when the term Ecocriticism was not prevalent and as a result whatever he wrote, he chronicled frankly, even though the long years that passed between the events and their documentation blotted the memory a little, as it is apparent from the difference between the reports he sent to the newspapers during his year long search for the notorious man eater of Rudraprayag and the events as they are related in “The Man Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag”.

Himself a staunch preservationist, Corbett writes his golden opinion regarding the big cats with the foresight of a seer. The paradox that runs through the breath taking tales is that when he recounts his experience as a hunter, he advocates for the wild life and nature, as he saw and lived in- unmixed, unruffled and in its purity.

A simple counting may show the extent of his killings, and at the same time we ought to remember that he did not kill, at least in his advanced years, for a trophy, but only to save the terrorized hill folk from either a man eater or a cattle lifter. From his written accounts we come to know that he killed 9 man eaters, of then 7 tigers and 2 leopards. These man eaters claimed, as far as official records go, almost 2000 lives. Apart from the man eaters he describes the killings of 2 cubs who assisted in the gruesome killings of their mothers and 2 tigers mistakenly killed by him as the real man eater(). In his long endeavour to bag the most famous man eating leopard of Rudraprayag, he killed a trapped cattle lifter leopard, which was taken as the real man eater, and later poisoned another leopard which came to taste the kill of the man eater. Leaving these aside a clear list of the other huntings is necessary.

In “The temple Tiger” which narrates his rather uncanny and fruitless attempt to shoot the so-called protected tiger, a plucky Himalayan black bear, the largest Corbett ever saw was shot dead. We may justify by saying that I tried to attack him and the act was pardonable. In “Robin” Corbett slightly hints the shootings of numerous tigers and leopards but the narrative pivots around the hunting of a big male leopard, bagged only as a trophy, in “Chowgarh Tigers” a black bear is killed for stealing a ghooral, a leopard and a tiger is killed for being the culprits of cattle lifting and two leopards must give away their lives for snatchings the live baits intended for the man eater.

Yet the most disturbing case is that of the Bachelor of Powalgarh. The question – why did Corbett kill that tiger- perhaps will never be solved. Although he himself says he was persuaded to kill this abnormally large tiger so that the neighboring villagers may live peacefully, the appeal appears a lame pretext. The reason does not hold the ground. Corbett, with his famous jungle lore must have known otherwise. Is it then the same impulse to show the world that he was the best marksman? We cannot forget it was the largest tiger in India, measuring over 10`6.

Corbett vociferously argues, through the books, the relative superiority of the cine-camera to the gun. When the trophy made by the gun wears slowly and vanishes, the trophy claimed by the camera is ever lasting and can be enjoyed at pleasure. Yet, this same man kills the best tiger when he is equipped with a camera. It is also noteworthy that he himself was one of the precursors of the wild life photographers. The most important zoocritical idea of the modern age is the idea of documentation. Tiffin remarks that this documentation is very important to preach the value of animals and to add respect to their lives. She also calls for attention to the habit of taking photographs of dead animals as vanquished adversaries, the subjugation of nature. On other hand, the documentation of living animals brings up the real glory and their share in our world. Surprisingly enough, (or not so surprising?) what we do get is a picture of the regal Bengal tiger, lying dead under the foot of the hunter. What can be more ironic than the words of Corbett place against this picture? Why then did Corbett preach the value of photographs? Instead of the life like tiger we must be satisfied with a dead tiger, inert and without spark of life. Here surely Corbett, the hunter overpowers Corbett, the conservationist.

The case of the Pipalpani tiger is slightly different. When the tiger first received a wound from buck shot, it turned a cattle lifter but did not harm any people. When it was shot for the second time, Corbett thought it may turn a man eater and so decided to put it out of its misery. When he accomplished the self imposed work, he was sorry to find that the wound almost got healed.

Only in this two stories Corbett tells the killings of non man eaters.

In “My India” Corbett recounts his shooting of 4 leopards and 2 tigers. One of these leopards was his first bag, another was a cattle lifter, the third paid the price for being the largest leopard in Terai while the fourth became the target of his practice shooting.

So as recorded in his writings of his shootings of carnivore, in the following chart they are categorized.

Man eaters		Cubs of man eaters		Cattle lifter		On being attacked		Without valid reason(as trophies)	
tiger	leopard	Tiger	leopard	tiger	leopard	tiger	leopard	tiger	leopard
7	2	3	0	4	2	0	0	4	8

At the same time it must also be remembered that there are many that go unmentioned. If we read between the lines this becomes apparent. How much practice one needs to hit a leopard at a vital organ from a distance of about 300 yards? We must stop and think twice before congratulating a man eater hunter for the glorious deed. There is something left. The cause of a carnivore turning into a man eater must be investigated.

The matter that comes to the fore that of the 7 man eating tigers 3 turned man eaters owing to a buck shot injury, fired by some gunmen who apparently coveted the status of a hunter without having the guts and marksmanship. Neither had they the courage to put the miserable animal out of its misery. 4 tigers developed this habit after being injured by porcupine quills. In 2 cases the cause remains a mystery. The origin of the man eating leopard of Rudraprayag is also shrouded in mystery. Corbett's opinion is that it emerged as a man eater after the influenza epidemic that swept through India and took a heavy toll in Gurwal, having formed the habit of eating human corpses that were thrown in the jungle. When the easy supply was cut off, it naturally attacked human beings. But when Corbett gives the description of the dead leopard, he mentions buck shots embedded in the flesh and that when that "terror" was killed a man took the blame on himself saying he had injured that leopard in the same year in which it formed the habit. So we may arguably presume that both reasons are applicable. Man cannot wash his hands in the making of man eaters. Regarding the origin of two man eaters ( the man eater of Kanda and the man eater of Pannar) no specific reason is given but I may be presumed that in the making of Pannar man eater the scavenging nature of the leopard which had familiarized him with the test of human flesh may be responsible.

When it comes to the case of cattle lifters, it is nothing but the direct and inevitable result of the intrusion into the territory of a big cat. This issue is directly related to the complex relation between green revolution and wild nature. With the post colonization great emphasis has been laid on the expansion of agriculture, more land comes under ploughing. Unfortunately the land comes from virgin forest. The felling of trees and the consequent rapid deforestation results in the spreading of villages and mare grazing grounds. The jungle animals cannot realize the difference between an owned animal and a free. The grazing cattle are slow and become alluring food to the tiger. They become habituated to go for the less powerful and the less swift cattle. This brings the conflict between the carnivore and man, a conflict which goes always for the more intelligent and hence more powerful. A friend of Corbett writes, " ..he did not like to kill any. It has turned a cattle lifter. Well the tiger is the lord of the forest and his toll must be given." Yet this same Corbett has killed many cattle lifters, at least 6.

The tendency of self excuse after hunting is very common among hunters, whether he is killing a cattle lifter, man eater, or otherwise normal tiger. Corbett also is no exception. But when it is easily pardonable in the cases of man eaters, in the age when India has but 2100 tigers, the killing of normal tigers prick the conscience of readers. Mahasweta Devi, another eminent preservationist calls such narratives "mental shocks." She writes-"it is hard to believe that

Corbett killed any animal except a man eater, and so we are driven to grumble, who told him to take the lives of the Bachelor and the Pipalpani tiger”.

Leaving these apart, the slaughter of some 39 tigers and leopards in which Corbett did not take active part, have been chronicled in these adventure stories. Some of them have been dealt in some details but most of them are passing references. So against the 9 man eaters Corbett actually narrates 70 big game hunting and without any iota of doubt leaves many untold. Before Corbett started tracking these man eaters, many tried their hands and must have killed some of the species. These futile attempts have not been recorded. We cannot blame the writer for the foreword of “The Man Eaters of Kumaon” says, “The sportsman will find much to entertain and inform him in Major Corbett’s book. If every beginner would study it before tackling his first tiger, fewer persons would be killed or seriously injured when hunting these creatures.” So it was intended in 1944 as a guide book to hunting. But it is not surprising that multifarious ecocritical views, an attitude that speaks for the continuation rather than the elimination of the species from earth, can be read in the same book. The same foreword says-“very often he has told me of the intense happiness he has derived from his observations of wild life.” This bond and affinity to nature bears distinct ecocritical note. At that time when killing a tiger from the safety of tree tops or from the backs of elephants was considered bravery of the highest sort; we cannot expect such minute details. In “The Man Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag” (1947) a recorded 22 leopards were killed to eradicate the real menace. The other man eaters failed to draw such public attraction but some of their must have paid the price for just developing abnormal food habit.

So the numbers are only the tip of the iceberg. The number of the ruthless bagging of animals cannot be determined. The result is invariable. Corbett ruefully writes recollecting his childhood, “when I see the expression, as cruel as a tiger..., I think of a small boy armed with an old muzzle-loading gun-the right barrel of which was split for six inches of its length,...-wandering through the jungles of the terai and bhabar in the days when there were ten tigers to every one that now survives.” So this passage brings to notice two environmentalist issues; the one is the alarming rate of the decimation of tigers and the second is the possible harmonious coexistence of nature and the natural man.

We get a vivid glimpse of a world, full of flora and fauna, vibrant with the calls of birds, reverberated with the sawing sounds of leopards, low moaning of the tigers; a world that had almost faded into the pages or into the tapes of documentary films of National Geography or Discovery; a world of which we wish to be a part but have no opportunity.

For the environmental critics more important will certainly be the less picturesque but more vital description of the eradication of nature. Corbett speaks of these in fewer details but they carry more weight. Corbett at once is reverential to the lord of the jungle and feels pity for it. He sadly remarks at a time when the government did not take any step to save tiger that if proper care is not taken India will soon lose her most glorious creature.

The reverence is due to the animal. They need not be pitied or taken care to; they can take care of themselves if left without human interference... But the damage we do is not only with the firearms and electric saws; more subtle damage is done with the help of unobtrusive tool of language. In the description the carnivorous animals are frequently described as something evil, cruel, bloodthirsty. Even R.K.Narayan in his "The Man-eater of Malgudi" describes the villain Vasu, in the terms of man eater tiger. Vasu, the sensual and cruel is repeatedly called a brute. Corbett in his "The Rule of the Jungle" narrates a memorable event. Two infants lost their way in a jungle frequented by tigers, leopards, bears, wild dogs, hyenas and wild boars. They were recovered without a scratch. Corbett draws the conclusion as a brief comparison with another big game hunter and writer of shikar tales, Kenneth Anderson, illustrates the intrinsic ecocritical and zoocritical value of Corbett's writings. Corbett never uses an appalling appellative to crown the animals he had to kill. They adversaries are named after the places where they first started their man eating career. This is the scientific method without any flabby emotionalism to distort the readers' comprehension. Anderson, though he belongs to a later generation and shares the environmentalist views of Corbett, does not follow this path. He, unlike Corbett, frequently names the man eaters with the help of such adjectives like terror, devil etc. These adjectives, though they clearly tell the psychological state of the victims, create a negative impact on the readers' mind. This dread of the otherwise harmless wild animals is the root of the animosity between man and nature.

Another striking difference is the attitude of the hunter after a successful chase. Corbett never puts the blame on the poor animal. He calmly unveils the secret of its tuning into one and begs pardon for it. He knows that it is not a supernatural power that prompted it to devour human flesh but sheer force of hunger. Only while chasing the Rudraprayag leopard he sometimes tends to attributes of the devil; yet the last lines of this singular story is as striking as lightning. "But here was no fiend, who while watching me through the long night hours had rocked and rolled with silent fiendish laughter at my vain attempts to outwit him, and licked his lips in anticipation of the time when, finding me off my guard for one brief moment, he would get the opportunity he was waiting for of burying his teeth in my throat. Here was only an old leopard, who differed from others of his kind in that his muzzle was grey and his lips lacked whiskers; the best hated and the most feared animal in all India, whose only crime- not against the laws of nature, but against the laws of man- was that he had shed human blood, with no object of terrorizing man, but only in order that he might live; and who now, with his chin resting on the rim of the hole and his eyes half-closed, was peacefully sleeping his long last sleep."

This difference perhaps comes from the origin of the two hunters. As Corbett comes from a village and has close relation with nature through all his life, Anderson is a city bred gentleman hunter and cannot claim such affinity with nature. As a result, when Corbett's writing have environmentalist virtues at the core, Anderson's has it only when he is conscious.

The gradual decay in the reverence the common men felt towards the animals is a moot factor in the rapid destruction wrought on nature and the natural entities. The post-independent, post-

colonial India is hardly led by the messages of ahimsa. The alluring western world of physical comfort has wiped out the moral core and prompted to gather money at the expense of everything, including precious nature. The large scale destruction was started by Europeans, and it was the Europeans who started the first conservationist work. The first conservationist plea, surprising it may appear came from the hunters. Corbett was the best hunter at his time; but his works must be read as something important and literary and not as thrilling adventure tales.

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