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FOREGROUNDING THE NON-HUMAN IN JIM CORBETT'S *JUNGLE LORE*

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Abstract

During the long course of history, the 'human centre' has displaced all that is 'uncivilized', into the peripheries of invisibility. Civilized humanity leaves its deliberate and inadvertent marks everywhere. Anthropocentrism - the self-placement of Man at the centre has spawned an enterprise that can only grow. It is time to probe the anthropocentric worldview that has sponsored civilization's limitless expansionism and yielded a world that is out of balance. Jim Corbett's 'Jungle Lore' tries to reconstruct imaginatively what survival might mean to the vast category of those non-human-others whom anthropocentric bias has managed to delineate over centuries. Through the autobiographical memoir of Jim Corbett, this paper studies how the author spiritually sublimates the resplendence of man-nature interaction. It explores Corbett's parallelism of confrontation and co-existence that bears a universal message of environmental harmony. The human footprint, wreaking havoc on the non-human, poses an alarming threat that resounds through 'Jungle Lore', bringing to bear upon the faculties of the readers, the need to pause, think and empathise. The paper analyses how in foregrounding the non-human, Jim Corbett's 'Jungle Lore' reinforces the fact that a dialogic relation with nature is imperative for both the human and non-human to survive.

Keywords: anthropocentric bias, non-human, uncivilized, expansionism.

Literature and the arts are vital locations for the analysis and construction of thought-initiated-worlds which allow us to reflect upon our role and place in this world. Literary imagination can contribute to the creation of more sustainable relationships with the non-human world by promoting an empathetic approach that consists in seeing the non-human not as the 'other' against which we measure ourselves, but as a subject worthy of recognition in its own terms.

The anthropocentric consciousness conceives nature as separate from humans and an overly anthropocentric worldview results in a fractured relationship between the two. The interests of non-humans are only considered when they have an instrumental impact on the well-being of humans. Questioning anthropocentrism goes much beyond an academic exercise, debating the dominant cultural motif of placing humans at the centre of material and ethical concerns and asking as

to who and what, as a consequence of human-centredness, becomes displaced to the periphery. The displacements over the long course of history have been innumerable, but might be grouped into two comprehensive categories: the “ideational and material dislocations” (Rodman 650) of non-humans, and wild nature into the fringes of earthly landscapes and human mindscapes alike. The ideational displacement has been instigated by means of a Western cognitive framework that has regularly inquired into the nature of the human by posing the question: How are humans different from all other life forms? The dominant ideas of the Western tradition have primarily not only exalted Man and his attributes, but simultaneously portrayed non-humans to be deficient by comparison.

Alongside hierarchical notions, have been the material displacements of the ‘other than civilized empires’. Societies have destroyed forests, ploughed grasslands under, drained wetlands, dewatered, diverted, and controlled rivers, dominated lakes and seas, and used nature for material ends. Alongside these impacts on natural landscapes, wild animals have been killed, persecuted, enslaved, forced to flee to ever more remote places, and driven to regional or total extinction. The ideational and material dimensions of anthropocentrism have reinforced one another in the pattern of a positive feedback loop.

As long as no adverse repercussions arose to discomfit civilized humanity’s march, the consequences of no limitations have been either unproblematic or unperceived. Animal populations have declined precipitously, sea animals have taken a nosedive, while forests have receded, deserts expanded, topsoil evanesced, and rivers and lakes been thinned of life. The price of anthropocentrism has been exactly that: As civilized Man’s power over the natural world has grown, so has his blindness to the wonder of the biosphere’s existence as well as to the grievous violence he has unleashed within it. Thus, civilized humanity has kept expanding, and everything annihilated on the way has been deemed losable and forgettable.

Yet today, there is something new under the sun: A dawning recognition of the need to contain the ill side effects of human expansionism. This need has arisen because the disregard of any limits to economic growth, population increase, industrial food production, energy use, and the spread of human settlements and industrial infrastructure is backfiring against humanity itself. It is time to probe the anthropocentric worldview and re-define our view of and relationship with the non-human. Through the representation of the non-human in literature, as it happens also in films and other media, there is a possibility of accessing a different understanding of them, which may bring us to more compassionate attitudes emanating from the processes of identification involved in reading. Critics today look at animal representations in literature and ask themselves questions about the role animals play in a certain narrative, or what they tell us about who we are as humans. Critics even try to see the world through the animal’s eyes, where having animals at the centre, studies tend to be species-, nationality-, or genre-specific or concentrate on particular themes affecting the lives of animals such as captivity, extinction, scientific experimentation, hunting, or any other form of victimization.

Jim Corbett’s *Jungle Lore*, a nature odyssey, has remained on the fringes of environmental studies exploring an ecological faith, having been categorised as an autobiographical work exploring Corbett’s love for the jungle. Significant parts of *Jungle Lore* are set in the jungle, a realm radically different from the human. The wilderness becomes a liminal space on multiple levels. Landscapes and nature play a pivotal role; typically depicted as domesticated or as exotic. The jungle, on the other hand, stands opposed to this mode of representation. As Arjun Appadurai has pointed out, localities, in the sense of relational, contextual communities, are made up of neighbourhoods as social forms, which are often defined in opposition to their other:

Neighbourhoods are inherently what they are because they are opposed to something else and derive from other, already produced neighbourhoods. In the practical

consciousness of many human communities, this something else is often conceptualised ecologically as forest or wasteland, ocean or desert, swamp or river. Such ecological signs often mark boundaries that simultaneously signal the beginnings of nonhuman forces and categories or recognizably human but barbarian or demonic forces (183).

The jungle becomes crucial for action and a key element that sets the very tone of the novel. It is a radically different world, populated by spirits, mysterious beings, and half-animals. Whoever enters it, leaves the safe communal space of the town or home and faces the unknown; it is in the jungle that individuality becomes foregrounded. It becomes a kind of mindscape, sometimes it is a character; it is also a stage, a territory utterly unmarked by civilisation. The narrative structures emphasise the jungle's 'otherness', a radically different space, where the familiar order of society is no longer valid.

The creative use of the category of 'animal' can be literalised and an ecocritical rendering of animals might as well try to conceive of them as embodied beings. However, as Coetzee in *The Lives of Animals* expressed, "The mistreatment of animals over the historical continuum is inseparable from the arrogant belief in sovereign reason, a belief that has historically been used to legitimize dominion over the entire animal kingdom, as well as over large numbers of allegedly "inferior" members of the human race" (29-30).

Coetzee also undermines those discourses of power that claim to speak for animals – the disempowered ones – who have only their silence left with which to confront us. There is another danger imminent in trying to replicate their discourse, one which Bell Hooks explored in trying to examine the veracity of the academic in ventriloquising the subaltern:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that

it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk (54).

How then to confront or resist the overarching anthropocentric concern that lies at the heart of most literary representations of animals, placing the burden of moral truths or human qualities on their shoulders? Jim Corbett's *Jungle Lore* is constructed on this peculiar tension of imparting to animals, their real selves, in order that they are made credible for what they are, and not as vehicles of a moral fable. Corbett wrote his memoirs at a time when the term 'Ecocriticism' was not prevalent, but the staunch preservationist that he was, he wrote about the big cats with the foresight of a seer. The paradox that runs through the breathtaking tales is that when he recounts his experience as a hunter, he advocates for the wild life and nature in the same breath.

Corbett was a strange embodiment of both destroyer and preserver of nature. On the one hand is his habit of taking photographs of dead animals as vanquished adversaries, and on other hand, the documentation of living animals brings up the real glory and their share in our world. When we see a picture of the regal Bengal tiger lying dead under the foot of the hunter, Corbett- the hunter overpowers Corbett- the conservationist. Despite this, the writings of Corbett express his love and reverence for the non-human world in a simplistic way. His works are not a simple catalogue of his experiences but they function as a kind of self-confession and repentance for environmental violence. 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 has almost faded into the pages or into the tapes of documentary films of National Geography or Discovery. His reverential demeanour towards the lord of the jungle manifests itself in his autobiographical work, *Jungle Lore*, which also echoes his fear of losing the most glorious creature in the wake of anthropocentric practices.

Corbett moans the damage we perpetrate upon the non-human world, not only with the firearms and electric saws, but also the more subtle damage that is wrought with the help of the unobtrusive tool of language. The carnivorous animals are frequently described as something evil, cruel, and bloodthirsty. Corbett, on the other hand, never uses an appalling appellative, like terror, devil etc. to crown the animals he had to kill, as these adjectives create a negative impact on the readers' mind and create a dread of the otherwise harmless wild animals, the dread sowing the seeds of animosity between man and nature. The adversaries are, hence, named after the places where they first started their man-eating journey.

A striking feature of *Jungle Lore* is the attitude of the hunter after a successful chase. Corbett never puts the blame on the man-eaters and calmly unveils the secret of its turning into one. 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 does he mark him with the attribute of the devil, yet the last lines of this singular story are 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 (81).

Corbett's writings have environmentalist virtues at the core and the gradual decay in the

reverence that humans felt towards the animals is a moot factor in the rapid destruction wrought on nature and the natural entities. But surprising as it may appear, the first conservationist plea came from the hunters. Corbett's works need to be read as passionate, environmentally focused works seeking reverence for the non-human and not as thrilling adventure tales. *Jungle Lore*, penned with a strong conservationist bent, reflects the real soul of Corbett and his love for the people, jungle and animals of the Kumaon hills. A rich book about life in the jungles, it charts the journey of Corbett from childhood to adulthood. The twelve chapters in *Jungle Lore* reveal Corbett's concern for the environment and his ecological sensibility.

Corbett wanted to learn the habits of the animals, their language and the part they played in the scheme of nature. In his boyhood, Jim Corbett had explored the strip of jungle between the two watercourses near his house at Kaladhungi followed by the Garuppu jungle. Corbett comments:

Starting out as the sun was rising and moving noiselessly on my base feet, I saw all the animals and all the crawling creatures, until a day came when I was able to identify each by the track it made (50).

Based on his understanding of the fauna, Corbett devised a unique classification of birds and animals: The deer, antelopes and monkeys are classified as the ones that beautified nature's garden; animals that help to regenerate the garden by opening up and aerating the soil are bears, pigs and porcupines; whereas the animals that warn of danger are deer, monkeys, and squirrels. The tigers, leopards and wild dogs are classified as animals that maintain the balance in nature; and hyenas, jackals, and pigs are the scavengers. He classified the birds on the basis of their role as beautifiers, melody providers, regenerators, guards against danger, scavengers and balance maintainers. Further, he divides the crawling creatures into two groups of poisonous snakes (cobras, kraits, and vipers) and non-poisonous snakes (python, grass-snakes, and rat-snake). This classification of wild life by Corbett indicates his systematic and scientific methodical study of wild life as well as his awareness of their

significant presence in the eco-system. This is Corbett's ecological perspective - he shows the interrelationship of living creatures with each other and to their environment.

Corbett became an expert in searching tracks of the wild animals. He had trained eyes to determine the species, its size and its movements and could easily identify the pug marks of different animals in the jungle. Corbett derived his own method of counting the number of animals in the herd from their pug marks. In one of his jungle detective stories, while narrating an incident that occurred at Sandni Ganga, near Powalgarh, Corbett reveals his subconscious recording of the track. He describes the movements of each and every animal on the track vividly and with proper logical reasoning. He comments:

On entering the jungle on the left the bear had disturbed a sounder of pig and a small herd of cheetal, for they had dashed across the road into the jungle on the right (74).

Like pug marks, Corbett emphasizes the significance of jungle sounds or calls of the animals. He observes the difference in the calls of animals and also of birds. He asserts that calling for different reasons is not to be found in the call itself, but in the intonation of the call. There is a difference between the bark of an anxious mother calling her young one and the bark of the hind warning the herd of the presence of human beings. He discriminates between community calls, territory calls, protection calls and courtship calls. He observes that all the birds in the Kumaon produce orchestral music and melody to welcome a new-born day and appreciates the song of the whistling thrush. The presence of the tiger is mentioned by the collective alarm call of the peafowl. Other animals in the jungle, a kakar, sambhar and a herd of cheetal warn the jungle folk about the tiger's presence. From these warning calls, Corbett concludes that the tiger quite evidently is "returning home from a kill" and is indifferent as to who sees him (103).

Corbett's graphic depiction of the social pattern of wild animals with the help of their calls further delineates the diversity of the jungle ecosystem. His conclusions on the behaviour of wild

animals are based on very minute observations and personal experiences. His remarkable study on - the bears as not being habitual meat-eaters, the difference in the behaviour of langurs and red monkeys and the group activities of each, the aggressive and collective bark of the red monkeys when they see a leopard, in contrast to only the leader and the oldest female member giving the alarm call in the group of langurs, the common habit of both the tiger and leopard to lift their kill while crossing a road in order to avoid any mark or a scent trail for bears, hyenas and jackals to follow, his observation and experience on how big cats like tigers and leopards cleverly bring down their prey without causing any injury to themselves, how killers come up from behind or at an angle and with a single spring or short rush so as to hold the prey with their claws and then instantly, with great speed and power, seize it by the throat - and scores of other animal behavioural patterns have been sprinkled throughout the narrative with an ease of understanding that bespeak his oneness with the non-human world.

Corbett's inference on the subtle link between wild animals and birds and their co-existence underline his authority on the subject. He also comments on the migration of birds:

The migrant birds are packing into small groups. These groups will join others, and on the appointed day and at the command of the leaders the pigeons, parquets, thrushes, and other fruit-eaters will fly up the valleys to their selected nesting grounds while insect-eaters flitting from tree to tree in the same direction and on the same quest will cover at most a few miles a day (137).

He chronicles the life-cycle of birds in the region like a naturalist who maintains record of the events in the jungle, not as an outsider, but as one who is at home among the non-human world. Corbett portrays the ecological supremacy through the laws of the jungles. The nature has its own laws and order within which all its elements function. The memoir very beautifully infuses the ecological system with human civilization. According to Corbett, co-existence is only possible through minor

adjustments and compromise. The harmonious co-existence of the Kaladhungi villagers exemplifies the simplest manner of environmental conservation. Corbett believes that the notion of 'happening to know everything about the jungle' is an impractical one and while he takes his readers out on a jungle safari, his lifelong experience of jungles aids him.

A distinct quality of Corbett's *Jungle Lore* is that he focuses on the relationship amongst the various wild species in the jungle. In an attempt to foreground the non-human, he criticizes the traditional irrationalities and myths associated to jungle life. He describes the myriad aspects of jungle life from the perspective of a neutral observer, and not as a coloniser - how different animals behave with each other when they meet unexpectedly or accidentally, social patterns and social life of animals that live in a community or groups, the relationship between the male and the female of a species and how they perform different roles within a community, the myth about the banshee, an evil female spirit abounding in the dense forests, that later turned out to be an unknown species of a bird resembling the golden-eagle, the communication system between two or many animals which live together in their natural habitat etc.

Jungle Lore is like a safari carrying the readers from one adventure to another through various time-periods and spaces. It celebrates and records the hunting expeditions of Corbett leading to the poignancy of unnecessary exploitation of the forest ecosystem. The stories are paradoxically intertwined with both violation and a warm caring for nature. Though he indulges senselessly in hunting varieties of birds on a regular basis himself, he also criticizes the way forest lands are being cleared for developing agriculture. This criticism by Corbett is significant beyond ecocritical perspectives. He also lashes out at the violence induced by capitalism and feudalism in India during the colonial period. Corbett's grief is captured in the following words:

I might have done, the fault is mine, for I had ample opportunities of doing so. Opportunities which will never be enjoyed by another, for pressure of population has brought under cultivation large areas on

which I, in my game, wandered at will; while standardization of forests, with all evils it brings in its train of wild life, has resulted in the total destruction of the trees that bore the flowers and the fruit that birds and animals live on (236).

Corbett never forgets to make the reader aware of his natural consciousness. He ends *Jungle Lore* with a deep insight, claiming that jungle sensitiveness can intervene in critical moments to ensure one's safety. The simple methodologies adopted by Corbett for environmental preservation matured further by the Chipko movement. It has become a political landmark for fuelling new ecological insights and also highlighting the social and political powers of women. In the era of globalization, massive industrial developments are causing irrevocable natural damage. The contemporary era has politicized the aspects of natural degradation in a much generalized way through the rural-urban conflict. Parts of western and north-eastern India have experienced severe centre-state struggles over the preservation of forest and agricultural greens. The humans seem to become aware of the mystical natural rhythm only when it lies on the verge of destruction. In this narrow sense of anthropocentrism, environmental policies can be justified solely on the grounds that they benefit human individuals and human society. This ecological insensitivity acts as the fountainhead of the colossal environmental crisis that stares contemporary man in the face.

Jim Corbett's *Jungle Lore* advocates for the wild life and nature in the same breath. His works are not pegged with any critical scientific or geographical ideas. This is what mystifies Corbett's existential coherence and simplifies the multifarious ways of conserving the flora and fauna. His familiarity with the habits, habitats, behaviour, environment and life system of the non-human world, his deep interest in acquiring systematic knowledge of the wild life, not as objects of study but as subjects in their own right, has reaped a rich harvest for the reader and engages him ecologically. He consistently avoids any kind of exaggeration and glorification and aspires to present wild creatures and bird life in their natural habitat instead of any

artificial surrounding like a zoo. He, in advocating the significance of preserving wild life in the eco-system, emerges as a devoted conservationist who wrote for the cause of wild animals. Before humanity commits ecocide, the politics of development needs to be uncovered and theoretically informed readings of anthropocentric texts need to be undertaken for consciousness-raising regarding this restriction of moral concern to human beings which is arbitrary, unjust and illogical.

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