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Poetic And Philosophical Narratives In Jim Corbett's Writings

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Abstract: Jim Corbett's trilogy comprising *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* and *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon* is endowed with a poetic narrative which is not merely an ornamental indulgence but an integral part of his strategy of story-telling. This narrative reflects the aesthetic sensibility of the narrator-protagonist which is highly attuned to the sights, smells, colours and contours of nature. The magical concoction of sounds, sights and smells is unforgettable. Corbett's preoccupation with colours is quite evident here. In his poetic mood, Corbett moves quite close to the nineteenth century romantic poets. The richly suggestive, poetic narrative employed by Corbett is complemented by a philosophical narrative which is embedded in his stoicism and humanitarianism. Corbett's stoic resistance to pain and personal hardships and his near-obsessive concern for the well-being of the poor hill folk spring from his philosophical moorings about the harsh conditions which seem to control the life of the individual as well as the community. The philosophical narrative accomplishes a dual task—it leads to a beneficial inward journey into the dark recesses of his mind and helps him rationalize the terrifying feeling of primal fear which, in turn, fortifies his optimistic spirit of sportsmanship; simultaneously his humbling insight into the phenomenon of human suffering and the complex working of fate and death provides the moral basis for his abiding humanitarianism.

Index terms: poetic narrative, aesthetic sensibility, stoicism, humanitarianism, sportsmanship

Great writers are invariably endowed with an enhanced power of observation and often one of their preoccupations is their concern with visual and scenic beauty of nature. In this context, Virginia Woolf writes in the essay titled "Walter Sickert" in her book *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays*:

> The novelist after all wants to make us see. Gardens, rivers, skies, clouds … the colour of a woman's dress, landscapes … woods … novels are full of pictures like these. The novelist is always saying to himself how can I bring the sun on to my page? How can I show the night and the moon rising? ….All great writers are great colourists, just as they are musicians into the bargain; they always contrive to make their scenes glow and darken and change to the eye. (181-82)

Virginia Woolf's observation applies *in toto* to Jim Corbett's lyrical, poetic narrative which is not merely an ornamental indulgence but an integral part of his strategy of story-telling. This narrative reflects the aesthetic sensibility of the narrator-protagonist which is highly attuned to the sights, smells, colours and contours of nature around him and he has the exquisite gift of bringing alive each nuance of his experience in the pages of his books. This attribute of Jim Corbett brings to mind the remark made by Virginia Woolf in her book *Granite and Rainbow* that a great writer is a minute observer of life and he is all the time propelled by:

> …a sense that he is being stimulated and played upon by the subject matter of his art. Taste, sound, movement, a few words here, a gesture there … and all the reds and blues and lights and shades of the scene claim his attention and rouse his curiosity. He can no more cease to receive impressions than a fish in mid-ocean cease to let the water rush through the gills. (41)

Jim Corbett's prose is never pretentiously flowery even in his most rhapsodic passages; the prose remains beautifully evocative all through. Corbett seems to pre-empt the advice given by Virginia Woolf to the writers in the essay on Montaigne in her book *The Common Reader*, published a few years after the death of Corbett, as she says, "In writing choose the common words; avoid rhapsody and eloquence—yet, it is true, poetry is delicious; the best prose is that which is most full of poetry" (89).

In *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* Corbett describes the memorable entry of the magnificent tiger—known as the Bachelor of Powalgarh—in a highly suggestive language:

> … a moment later the Bachelor stepped into the open, from the thick bushes below me. For a long minute he stood with head held high surveying the scene, and then with slow unhurried steps started to cross the glade. In his rich winter coat, which the newly risen sun was lighting up, he was a magnificent sight as, with head turning now to the right and now to the left, he walked down the wide lane the deer had made for him. At the stream he lay down and quenched his thirst, then sprang across and, as he entered the dense tree jungle beyond, called three times in acknowledgement of the homage the jungle folk had paid him, for from the time he had entered the glade every *chital* had called, every jungle fowl had cackled, and every one of a troupe of monkeys on the trees had chattered. (97-98)

It is interesting to note here that not even once is the word 'king' used for the tiger, yet through the Bachelor's postures, movements and attitude the narrator paints before the reader a regal figure in kingly glory. The tiger's "slow unhurried steps" make it amply clear that he is the one who rules the jungle. As he walks "down the wide lane the deer had made for him", he obviously exercises his kingly right to make first use of the passage. He drinks at the stream all alone as no other beast has the audacity to share a drink with him. And finally, before leaving the scene, he calls thrice to acknowledge "the homage" paid to him by every bird and beast present at the scene.

Then there are occasions when Corbett creates a beautiful blend by fusing fact and poetry. Here is an instance from *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*:

> Further, there was much of interest to be looked at, for it was the month of May, when orchids at this elevation—4,000 to 5,000 feet—are at their best, and I have never seen a greater variety or a greater wealth of bloom than the forests on that hill had to show. The beautiful white butterfly orchids were in greatest profusion, and every second tree of any size appeared to have decked itself out with them. (127)

On this occasion, he starts off by giving the reader a specific piece of information about orchids and then breaks into the realm of poetry as he is dazzled by the treasure of nature—the "wealth of bloom". A little later, he speaks of the rain having washed away the "heat haze" (131)—a very suggestive, poetic coinage.

Corbett was hooked to fishing as a passionate pastime. In the chapter titled "The Fish of my Dreams" in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* he observes, "In these [beautiful] surroundings angling for *mahseer* might well be described as the sport fit for kings" (144). He always found the romantic ambience created by the sylvan surroundings much more appealing than the size or quantity of the fish caught:

> The weight of the fish is immaterial, for weights are soon forgotten, not so forgotten are the surroundings in which the sport is indulged in. The steel blue of the fern-fringed pool where the water rests a little before cascading over rock and shingle to draw breath again in another pool more beautiful than the one just left—the flash of the gaily coloured kingfisher as he breaks the surface of the water, shedding a shower of diamonds from his wings as he rises with a chirp of delight, a silver minnow held firmly in his vermilion bill—the belling of the *sambhar* and the clear tuneful call of the *chital* apprising the jungle folk that the tiger, whose pugmarks show wet on the sand where a few minutes before he crossed the river, is out in search of his dinner. These are things that will not be forgotten and will live in my memory, the lodestone to draw me back to that beautiful valley, as yet unspoiled by the hand of man. (148)

Here the reader cannot miss the lovely poetic expressions such as "fern-fringed pool", "gaily coloured kingfisher", "a shower of diamonds", and "a chirp of delight". The metaphor of the lodestone has indigenous connotations as Kaladhungi—the place of Corbett's winter residence—was well-known for its iron ore and foundry. The magical concoction of sounds and sights is unforgettable and will "live in my [Corbett's] memory". However, this nostalgic Wordsworthian passage ends with a tinge of poignancy resulting from an awareness of the growing defilement of nature by man as he refers to "that beautiful valley, as yet unspoiled by the hand of man". Corbett's profound ecological concerns come to the fore here.

In *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*, Corbett breaks into a poetic vein while describing the beauty of Golabrai, "the water cascades unconfined and merrily over rocks draped with moss and maidenhair fern, through luxurious beds of vivid green water cress and sky-blue strobilanthes" (3). He does not forget to savour the beauty of nature around him even while sitting up for the dreaded man-eater of Rudraprayag, "The sun was near setting, and the view of the Ganges valley, with the snowy Himalayas in the background showing bluish pink under the level rays of the setting sun, was a feast for the eyes" (39). Corbett loved to watch sunsets with a photographic eye and his descriptions are full of sensuousness. On another occasion he observes in *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*, "Our sunsets in the Himalayas are mostly red, pink, or gold. The one I was looking at that evening from my seat on the pine tree was rose pink, and the white shafts of light, starting as spear points from valleys in the cardboard snows, shot through the pink clouds and, broadening, faded out in the sky overhead" (123).

In *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* Corbett describes a hailstorm that occurred during a visit to Kashmir in 1918. The description is particularly striking for Corbett's sensuous, romantic play with different shades of colour as he writes:

> The moment the hail stopped the sun came out, and from the shelter of the tree I stepped into fairyland, for the hail that carpeted the ground gave off a million points of light to which every glistening leaf and blade of grass added its quota. Continuing up for another two or three thousand feet, I came on an outcrop of rock, at the foot of which was a bed of blue mountain poppies. The stalks of many of these, the most beautiful of all wild flowers in the Himalayas, were broken, even so these sky-blue flowers standing in a bed of spotless white were a never-to-be-forgotten sight. (124)

The expressions such as "a million points of light", "blue mountain poppies" and "a bed of spotless white" create a vivid picture of the magical valley which, according to Corbett, was "a never-to-be-forgotten sight". Digging deep into his vast and vivid storehouse of memories while writing such poetic passages of everlasting appeal must have constituted for Corbett a truly Wordsworthian experience—"Thoughts recollected in tranquillity".

At times Corbett is so much overcome by the spell of nature that the description is strongly tinged with a feeling of nostalgia. In one such passage in *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, Corbett describes the picturesque camp at Bindukhera:

> Nowhere along the foothills of the Himalayas is there a more beautiful setting for a camp than under the Flame of the Forest trees at Bindukhera, when they are in full bloom. If you can picture white tents under a canopy of orange-coloured bloom; a multitude of brilliantly plumaged red and gold minivets, golden orioles, rose-headed parakeets, golden backed woodpeckers, and wire-crested drongos flitting from tree to tree and shaking down the bloom until the ground round the tents resembled a rich orange-coloured carpet; densely wooded foothills in the background topped by ridge upon rising ridge of the Himalayas, and they in turn topped by the eternal snows, then, and only then, will you have some idea of our camp at Bindukhera one February morning in the year 1929. (116)

Corbett's preoccupation with colours is quite evident here once again as he speaks of "white tents", "orange-coloured blooms", "red and gold minivets", "golden orioles", "rose-headed parakeets" in the same breath. The splendour of this brilliant riot of colours is sublimated by endless rows of imposing Himalayan peaks and "the eternal snows" in the background.

Further, Corbett's awareness of the smells of nature is similar to that of the great romantic poets of the nineteenth century. Regarding the intoxicating effect of such smells, he observes in *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, "when the air is crisp and laden with all the sweet scents that are to be smelt in an Indian jungle in the early morning, it goes to the head like champagne" (117). The image of the air laden with sweet scents which intoxicate the senses evokes the eleventh stanza of P.B. Shelley's ode "To a Skylark" wherein he speaks about the mildly inebriating effect of the sweet smell of a hidden wild rose:

Like a rose embowered
In its own green leaves,
By warm winds deflowered,
Till the scent it gives
Makes faint with too much sweet these
heavy-winged thieves. (30)

Here is yet another example of Corbett's romantic imagination from the same book, "We were now facing the Himalayas, and hanging in the sky directly in front of us was a brilliantly lit white cloud that looked solid enough for angels to dance on" (118). Here the romantic association of the bright cloud with the dance of angels is strongly reminiscent of the third stanza of P.B. Shelley's ode "To a Skylark":

In the golden lightning
Of the sunken sun,
O'er which clouds are bright'ning,
Thou dost float and run;
Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun. (29)

The joyous movement of the skylark indicated by the phrase "float and run" is akin to the aerial dance of angels. Furthermore, the skylark is a divine entity as suggested by the phrases "blithe spirit" (28) in the first stanza, and "a star of heaven" (29) in the fourth stanza (30).

In his poetic mood, Corbett moves quite close to the nineteenth century romantic poets. While describing the Himalayan April in the following passage in *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, his romantic sensuousness flares up as it comes across the "objects and sounds which please the senses" (131):

> April on the northern face of a well-wooded hill in the Himalayas. In April all Nature is at her best; deciduous trees are putting out new leaves, each of a different shade of green or bronze; early violets, buttercups, and rhododendrons are giving way to later primulas, larkspurs, and orchids; and the birds—thrushes, bablers, minivets, tits, and a host of others—that migrated to the foothills for the winter are back on their nesting grounds and vie with each other in their joyous mating songs. Walking carefree and at ease in a forest in which there is no danger, only those objects and sounds which please the senses are looked at and listened to with any degree of attention, and all the other less-arresting sights and sounds blend together to form a pleasing whole. (131)

When Corbett speaks of the "sights and sounds [that] blend together to form a pleasing whole" in the concluding sentence of the passage quoted above, he brings to the reader's mind William Wordsworth's poem "Tintern Abbey" wherein the great poet of Nature speaks of "all sweet sounds and harmonies" in line 142 (20).

Corbett never separated the beautiful landscape from the simple hill folk who inhabited it. Hence, while lying on a projecting rock at Rudraprayag, waiting for the notorious leopard, he presents the following description of the valley below:

> Immediately below me was the beautiful valley of the Alaknanda, with the river showing as a gleaming silver ribbon winding in and out of it. On the hill beyond the river, villages were dotted about, some with only a single thatched hut, and others with long rows of slate-roofed houses. These row buildings are in fact individual homesteads, built one against the other to save expense and to economize space, for the people are poor and every foot of workable land in Garhwal is needed for agriculture. (120-21)

Here the poetic beauty of the landscape merges into the grim sociological and economic reality of the people. This trait is typical of Corbett's narrative technique—not even once he allow the reader to forget that while he adores the breathtaking beauty of the region, the poor people that eke out their living here are his primary concern.

The richly suggestive, poetic narrative employed by Corbett is complemented by a philosophical narrative which is embedded in his stoicism and humanitarianism. Corbett's stoic resistance to pain and personal hardships and his near-obsessive concern for the well-being of the poor hill folk spring from his philosophical moorings about the harsh conditions which seem to control the life of the individual as well as

the community. The philosophical narrative accomplishes a dual task—it leads to a beneficial inward journey into the dark recesses of his mind and helps him to rationalize the terrifying feeling of primal fear which, in turn, fortifies his optimistic spirit of sportsmanship; simultaneously his humbling insight into the phenomenon of human suffering and the complex working of fate and death provides the moral basis for his abiding humanitarianism.

The uniqueness of Jim Corbett as a hunter lies in the fact that he did not accomplish the arduous task of shooting the notorious man-eaters for the sake of rewards, money or fame as he was always moved by a humanitarian concern for the hapless victims—the simple, lovable, hard-working hill folk. In *Man- Eaters of Kumaon*, after listening to the villagers' terrifying account of the killing of a young woman who was little more than a girl by the Champawat man-eater, Corbett philosophises the situation as he observes:

> With experiences such as these to tell and retell through the long night watches behind fast-shut doors, it is little wonder that the character and outlook on life of people living year after year in a man-eater country should change, and that one coming from the outside should feel that he had stepped right into a world of stark realities and the rule of the tooth and claw, which forced man in the reign of the sabre-toothed tiger to shelter in dark caverns. I was young and inexperienced in those far-off Champawat days, but, even so, the conviction I came to after a brief sojourn in that stricken land, that there is no more terrible thing than to live and have one's being under the shadow of a man-eater, has been strengthened by thirty-two years' subsequent experience. (14)

In passages like this one, the author's mood is deeply philosophical as he articulates his views on primal terror in a "stricken land" of "stark realities". Living "under the shadow of a man-eater" and "the rule of the tooth and claw" is an unmanning experience that evokes dark and terrifying memories of a primeval Palaeolithic era in the racial consciousness of "one coming from outside". This inward journey strengthens his resolve to rid the innocent people from the menace of man-eaters on the prowl.

Corbett describes his meeting with a victim's sister, a woman who had been dumb for twelve months as a result of shock, "Except for a strained look in her eyes the dumb woman appeared to be quite normal and, when I stopped to speak to her and tell her I had come to try and shoot the tiger that had killed her sister, she put her hands together and stooping down touched my feet, making me feel a wretched impostor" (11). Here Corbett shows a deep and rare awareness of his limitations as a hunter and as a human being which makes him feel "a wretched impostor" when the woman touches his feet. This abiding humility is the hall-mark of Corbett as a writer as well as a human being.

On another occasion, Corbett philosophises on inordinate human suffering and misfortune in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*:

> Of the many incomprehensible things one meets with in life, the hardest to assign any reason for is the way in which misfortune dogs an individual, or a family. Take as an example the case of the owner of the cow over which I had shot the leopard. He was a boy, eight years of age, and an only child. Two years previously his mother, while out cutting grass for the cow, had been killed and eaten by the man-eater, and twelve months later his father had suffered a like fate. The few pots and pans the family possessed had been sold to pay off the small debt left by the father, and the son started life as the owner of one cow; and this particular cow the leopard had selected, out of a herd of two or three hundred head of village cattle, and killed. (I am afraid my attempt to repair a heartbreak was not very successful in this case, for though the new cow, a red one, was an animal of parts, it did not make up to the boy for the loss of his lifelong white companion). (75-76)

Characteristically, Corbett has no pretensions of having any profound insight into the working of fate which he clearly admits as being an "incomprehensible" phenomenon. The strange history of the family chastens the mind of Corbett as well as that of the reader. The tenderness towards the end of the passage springs from Corbett's profound understanding of the bond of companionship between man and cattle, and his boundless compassion for men and animals alike.

In *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* also, Corbett writes about the suffering of the people at the hands of fate in a deeply philosophical vein:

> The working of the intangible force which sets a period to life, which one man calls Fate and another calls *Kismet*, is incomprehensible. During the past few days this force had set a period to the life of a breadwinner, leaving his family destitute; had ended in a very painful way the days of an old lady who after a lifetime of toil was looking forward to a few short

> years of comparative comfort; and now, had cut short the life of this boy who, by the look of him, had been nurtured with care by his widowed mother. Small wonder then that the bereaved mother should, in between her hysterical crying, be repeating over and over and over again, 'What crime, Parmeshwar, has my son, who was loved by all, committed that on the threshold of life he has deserved death in this terrible way?' (142-43)

Typically, the agonizing question of the bereaved mother at the end of the passage has been left unanswered, for Corbett admits that such questions belong to the domain of "incomprehensible" mysteries. Corbett is fully aware of the sombre phenomenon of the human suffering which Wordsworth describes as "The still, sad music of humanity" which has "ample power / To chasten and subdue" (18), in his poem "Tintern Abbey".

Often Corbett had to dig deep into his vast resources of patience, perseverance, fortitude, stoicism and optimism to overcome despair resulting from repeated failures to bring down the elusive man-eaters in the wake of their continuing atrocities against mankind. He was not a ruthless hunter and strictly followed an unwritten code of ethics. On rare occasions he was forced by the stress of circumstances to reluctantly resort to practices that were against his stern game ethics. In *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* he describes one such situation, "There was no hope of the leopard returning to the kill. However, to salve my conscience for not having done so the previous night, I put a liberal dose of cyanide in the carcass of the cow. Truth to tell I hated the very thought of using poison then, and I hate it no less now" (76). Clearly, Corbett was not the one to be shattered by failure, nor did he approve of some common practices that he recognised as unsportsmanlike. Hence he writes in *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*:

> I need not tell those of you who have carried a sporting rifle in any part of the world that all these many repeated failures and disappointments, so far from discouraging me, only strengthened my determination to carry on until that great day or night came when, having discarded poisons and traps, I would get an opportunity of using my rifle as rifles were intended to be used, to put a bullet truly and accurately into the man-eater's body. (109)

Like a true hero, Corbett is propelled by repeated failures and disappointments to pursue the Rudraprayag leopard with renewed vigour. Here he speaks of "having discarded poisons and traps" with a sense of immense relief and satisfaction as he was not an unscrupulous, mercenary sportsman.

In *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon* also, in spite of his best efforts Corbett was not able to shoot the temple tiger. But he had no regrets whatsoever:

> Anyway, I had tried my best to shoot him; had paid compensation for the damage he had done to the full extent of my purse; and he had provided me with one of the most interesting jungle experiences I had ever had. So I harboured no resentment against him for having beaten me at every point in the exciting game we had played during the past four days. (35)

Corbett, being a true optimist finds himself amply compensated for his abortive efforts by his presence on the scene of a rare and furious battle between a brave Himalayan bear and the mighty temple tiger. Being a great sportsman he admits that he had been "beaten" squarely by the tiger at the "exciting game" that they had played. This admission of defeat also reflects the respect he had for the tiger all his life.

The optimistic pattern of Corbett's man-eater hunting tales exudes a heartening message of hope for traumatized humanity—no matter how terrifying these man-eaters were, at some point or the other, the messianic hero and champion of the people would outwit them eventually. In fact, Corbett looks at each hunting exploit of his as an evenly matched contest which offered a sporting chance to each stalwart involved in it with an outcome which could go either way, as he writes in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*:

> Even before looking at the pads of her feet I knew it was the Chowgarh tigress I had sent to the Happy Hunting Grounds, and that the shears that had assisted her to cut the threads of sixty-four human lives—the people of the district put the number at twice that figure—had, while the game was in her hands, turned, and cut the thread of her own life. (93-94)

The dramatic turn of events which leads to the death of the Chowgarh man-eater, imparts a sombre, philosophical colouring to the narrative. Here Corbett has drawn the image of the shears that cut the threads of human lives from Greek mythology in which there are three Fates—Clotho, who spins the thread of man's life; Lachesis, who measures it; and Atropos, who cuts it off with no regard to merit. As observed by D. C. Kala in his illuminating biography *Jim Corbett of Kumaon* (1979), the term 'Happy Hunting

Grounds'—the American Indian concept of heaven—has been borrowed by Corbett from the works of Fenimore Cooper who was one of his favourite authors since childhood (33).

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