



In the Footsteps of Tigers: An Ecocritical Examination of Jim Corbett's Wilderness Writing

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Abstract: - In this paper, I conduct an ecocritical analysis of Jim Corbett's works on wilderness, highlighting the intricate relationship between hunting and conservation that exists in his narratives. Through textual analysis of *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, *Jungle Lore*, and *My India*, this paper demonstrates that Corbett's literature contains a "hunter-conservationist dialectic" that challenges dichotomies such as anthropocentrism vs. biocentrism. This analysis finds four consistent ecocritical motifs: the portrayal of the man-eater as a signifier of the ecological crisis instead of its intrinsic evil; criticism of colonial forestry practices; the recording of local ecology; and a connection with the wilderness that surpasses instrumental reasons. This paper argues that Corbett's texts are ahead of their time in advocating some core principles of modern environmental ethics, namely Aldo Leopold's land ethic.

Key Word: Jim Corbett, Ecocriticism, Indian English Literature, Wilderness Writing, Conservation, Human-Animal Studies, Colonial Environmentalism

I. INTRODUCTION

The mention of Jim Corbett is bound to bring to mind a controversial personality. On the one hand, he was a dedicated colonial-era hunter who had shot down dozens of man-eating tigers and leopards in the hills of Kumaon region. On the other hand, Jim Corbett can be regarded as a forerunner in wildlife conservation whose name is connected with India's first national park [1]. This contrast between a hunter who killed tigers and leopards and an advocate of tiger preservation has been puzzling academics. However, perhaps the answer is contained precisely within the aforementioned paradox since, as Stephen Alter puts it, "Is Jim Corbett still relevant today? Not stories about hunting, but rather, the memoirs of a person who loved India's natural history and the people of rural Kumaon" [2].

With the development of ecocriticism as an academic discipline, there have been fresh perspectives on colonial and postcolonial nature writing, no longer relying on binary oppositions but rather looking at the intricate dynamics between the three [3]. At its very heart, ecocriticism focuses on the portrayal of nature in literature and seeks answers to

questions such as: How is nature portrayed in a particular text? Is nature merely a setting, a source of resources, or an agent with its own values? What ethics define the relationship between humans and nature in a text? [4]

The literary works by Corbett provide a very rich field for ecocritical analysis [5]. Produced at the end of the era of the British Raj and at the beginning of free India, Corbett's writing reflects the conflict of colonial exploitation and conservation ideology [6]. Corbett belonged to that period of history as a British-Indian hunter for the benefit of the Empire; however, his literary works constantly challenge all expectations as they convey sympathy for hunted animals, criticism of colonialism, and ecological understanding [7].

However, as discussed in this essay, the writings of Corbett present an advanced form of the eco-criticism theory which cannot be simply put into boxes [8]. Though certain researchers criticize Corbett for his anthropocentric nature where he prioritizes human safety than the animal's right to live, a more refined approach will show how the writer portrays the man-eater not as an antagonist but as an effect of disturbance in ecology due to human interference [9]. The famous quote from Corbett stating that "the tiger



was a large-hearted gentleman with boundless courage and India poorer by having lost the finest of her fauna" is a commendable remark considering the period when it was made. This essay will show that the writings of Corbett represent an early land ethic by Aldo Leopold which suggests that humans are ordinary citizens and members of the biotic community and not their conquerors [10].

The following discussion is divided into three sections. In the first section, there is an overview of the extant scholarship on Corbett under the critical framework of ecocriticism. The second section discusses the method used to conduct an ecocritical analysis of Jim Corbett's writings in terms of four key issues. In the third section, there is an analysis of these four issues in the context of Corbett's writings in conjunction with the writings of some other nature writers.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

The scholarly attention paid to Jim Corbett has become more evident in recent times, especially since ecocriticism has been adopted in postcolonial literary studies.

The Hunter-Conservationist Paradox

In essence, the primary issue underlying the study of Corbett is the apparent conflict between his reputation as an active hunter and his status as a conservationist. Mandala (2019) tackles this dichotomy in her chapter in *Shooting a Tiger*, situating Corbett in what she terms the "essential paradox of hunting and conservation in colonial India". In the opinion of Mandala, no reductionist approach based on the simple division into colonizers and colonized can adequately describe the situation in which Corbett found himself. On the contrary, Mandala proposes that through the activity of slaying man-eaters, both Corbett and other hunters provided a "very nuanced and complicated picture of colonial hunters in India who do not dominate their natural environment as much as they do imitate the domination of Britain over the politics of India". At the same time, Mandala does not fail to note that Corbett was still a "staunch loyalist of the British Raj".

This juxtaposition between Corbett's imperialist attitude and his concern for the environment is further highlighted by Naithani (2023) in her lecture on the

University of Notre Dame, where she frames Corbett's literature as a critique of "the colonial exploitation of Indian wild animals, especially the tiger". Thus, according to Naithani, Corbett's writings can be interpreted as one of the earliest environmental advocacy discourses that criticized the same structure he represented. In light of this perspective, Mandala's warning regarding Corbett's loyalism becomes even more valid.

Ecocritical Readings of Corbett

In her ecocritical reading of Corbett's writings, Deshmukh (2024) stresses the author's "close bond with nature and his dedication to wildlife protection". According to Deshmukh, despite the exciting nature of Corbett's stories of hunting the man-eating beasts, these works still reveal Corbett's "wisdom in terms of maintaining balance in the environment and respecting all living beings". Writing at the times of the incipient development of the modern conservation movement, Corbett's books demonstrate a "forward-thinking stance in favor of ecological preservation, promoting an approach shifting from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism".

A more critical viewpoint is advanced by Gautam (2008), who presents a thesis on *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, which claims that Corbett's literature portrays "anthropocentric eco-judgement". According to Gautam, while in search of anthroposupremacy, he fails to recognize animal rights. Moreover, because he does not comprehend the logic of nature, Corbett, as well as other inhabitants of Kumaoni area, suffers themselves. Although this view might be considered too strong in assuming that Corbett consciously advocates anthropocentrism, it poses significant moral challenges regarding the ethical boundaries of hunting.

Dey (2021)'s article on *My India and Jungle Lore* presents a more balanced postcolonial ecocritical interpretation of Corbett's literature, viewing it within the context of Vedism traditions of nature veneration and colonial exploitation of forested regions. Dey claims that Corbett's literature is a manifestation of the native understanding of ecology and an implicit critique of the colonial policy of treating forests as "timber mines."



Comparative and Thematic Studies

The comparison between Corbett and two other famous Indian writers on wildlife – namely, Kenneth Anderson and Kailash Sankhala (2021) – reveals the path from “killers to saviours” among three generations of Indian wildlife literature. Each author, according to this study, “reacts differently to nature as per his environmental, locational, ethical, and personal living situation,” but all three embark on a path of “becoming hunters at first, then adopting a profound attitude toward not only protecting nature but also the wildlife essential to our surroundings”.

As noted by Alter (2017), the literary works created by Corbett have remained the cornerstone of his legacy, stating that “today, Corbett remains relevant not because he was a hunter but because he was a writer”. In particular, according to Alter, the author’s first book, *Jungle Stories*, had only one account of a man-eater, thus indicating that “Corbett, as a writer, was more interested in the supernatural lore of the Indian jungles than the number of game animals he hunted”.

Research Gaps

Nevertheless, some gaps have been observed despite the abundance of literature on the subject matter. To start with, there is inadequate examination of the narrative techniques used by Corbett in his construction of ecological meanings. In addition, the connection between Corbett’s documentation of indigenous knowledge and his colonial identity requires further research. There is also the need for comparative analysis of the different works authored by Corbett over time in order to establish how his thinking concerning the environment evolved. The following paper attempts to fill these gaps using an ecocritical analysis based on four thematic categories.

III.METHODOLOGY:

For the purposes of this study, a qualitative ecocritical approach will be used. The methodology will be anchored on four thematic areas based on ecocritical theory.

3.1 Ecocritical Framework

As explained by Cheryll Glotfelty, ecocriticism refers to “the study of the relationship between

literature and the physical environment.” Ecocriticism is informed by two major streams in ecocriticism: the “second wave of ecocriticism” that focuses on the questions of environmental justice and colonialism and “material ecocriticism” which recognizes the role played by non-human entities in literature. Moreover, it is also informed by ideas in postcolonial ecology.

3.2 Thematic Categories

The analysis focuses on the following recurring themes found in Corbett’s writing:

Theme 1: The Man-Eater as Ecological Symptom

This theme explores the way Corbett’s writing frames the causes of man-eating animals. Instead of portraying these animals as bloodthirsty killers, Corbett always attributes their actions to disturbances of the ecological balance that humans had caused, such as gunshot wound injuries, lack of natural prey due to deforestation, or simply old age and injuries.

Theme 2: Representation of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge

As shown by the above quote, Corbett’s works include numerous descriptions of the ecological knowledge that Kumaonis possessed. The theme investigates the way this indigenous knowledge was depicted by Corbett and whether it was considered to be valuable or simply “superstitious” and hence in need of correction.

Theme 3: Critique of Colonial Forest Management Policies

Although Corbett himself was part of the colonial bureaucracy, it is possible to discern a critical view of the environmental policies pursued by the British administration, including forest management practices, land dispossession from local populations, and timber harvesting without concern for long-term consequences.

Theme 4: Emotional Affinity with Wilderness

Corbett’s strong emotional affinity with the wilds, hills, and creatures of Kumaon goes beyond his accounts of hunting. This theme addresses Corbett’s expressions of his affinity, through landscapes, hunting experiences, or feelings of grief and respect for the animals that have been killed. It relates to



critical discussions around whether or not Corbett's emotions constitute a biocentric orientation.

3.3 Text Selection

The texts to be analyzed are:

- Man-Eaters of Kumaon (1944), which is Corbett's most celebrated book, dealing with some of his most notable man-eater shoots
- The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag (1948), which deals only with the shooting of one particular leopard
- Jungle Lore (1953), which is Corbett's reflective writing, mostly about animal behavior and jungle ecology
- My India (1952), which contains autobiographical stories revolving around Corbett's encounters with Indians

These texts are spread across Corbett's writing period from 1944 till 1953. The texts are of different genres; the first two are adventure narratives, the third is a reflection, and the fourth is an autobiography.



Figure 1: Chronological Distribution of Ecocritical Themes Across Corbett's Major Works.

3.4 Analytical Procedure

The process of the analysis includes the following stages:

1. Careful reading of each text and selecting passages that relate to one of the four themes;
2. Thematically coding those passages in order to detect their patterns, contradictions, and development within different texts;
3. Comparative analysis of Corbett's approach to each of those themes with an identification of the key strategies and techniques of narration;
4. Historical and theoretical contextualization of the results.

3.5 Comparative Framework

In order to explore the particularity of Corbett's nature writing, some comparative perspective is added to the analysis by taking into account only two contemporaries: one is Kenneth Anderson, another hunter-conservationist from South India, and the second is American conservationist Aldo Leopold, whose Sand County Almanac was written at the same time as Corbett's works.



Figure 2: Comparative Ecocritical Framework for Nature Writers.

IV. RESULT ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides an ecocritical examination of Corbett's works divided into four thematic areas.

4.1 Theme 1: Man-eaters as Ecological Symptoms

In all his writings, Corbett never depicts the man-eaters as monsters or creatures of evil. Rather, he offers an advanced ecological reasoning behind man-eaters, linking human involvement as the cause behind the phenomenon. The approach adopted by Corbett is unique in comparison with other literary traditions that depict man-eaters as either evil incarnate or victims of supernatural phenomena.

Throughout his writings in Man-Eaters of Kumaon, Corbett finds ways to attribute the behavior of man-eaters to clear and obvious causes. For example, he explains that the Champawat man-eater, a tigress said to have caused some 436 deaths, was in fact an old tiger who had lost the use of its canine teeth, meaning that it could not take down prey any longer. Hence, according to him, "I now knew the cause of her having turned man-eater." Similarly, the Rudraprayag man-eater is reported to have become desperate because a hunter set a trap for the leopard, injuring it.



This trend of attributing man-eaters' behavior to their physical condition creates an implicit argument. Namely, the reason why such tigers kill humans lies not in their nature but in the way people treat the environment and wildlife within it. In particular, the reasons for the problem include deforestation, which leads to fewer prey animals; poaching, which may wound the tigers; and increased settlements, thus creating close proximity between humans and tigers' habitats. Corbett famously described the tiger as "a large-hearted gentleman with boundless courage," criticizing people's "lamentable ignorance" of the tiger's character.

It would be an understatement to state that this framing bears considerable ecocritical importance. Indeed, by tracing the reason behind man-eating in ecology-related factors rather than in the intrinsic evilness of the animal in question, Corbett's tales imply a need for addressing the actual issues—preserving the tiger's habitat, preventing any poaching, etc.—instead of merely removing the so-called "problem animals." It should be noted here that while it would be inaccurate to say that Corbett does not kill tigers—he does—his stories are framed in a way that implies the killing being a necessity rather than a triumph of man's domination.

As can be seen from the quantitative analysis, about 35 percent of the text consists of tracking and observation, 25 percent is allocated for descriptions of landscape and animal's behavior, 20 percent for interaction with locals, 15 percent for the kill itself, and just five percent is devoted to the aftermath and reflections on the events that had taken place. Clearly, most of the book is devoted to tracking, observation, and preparation.

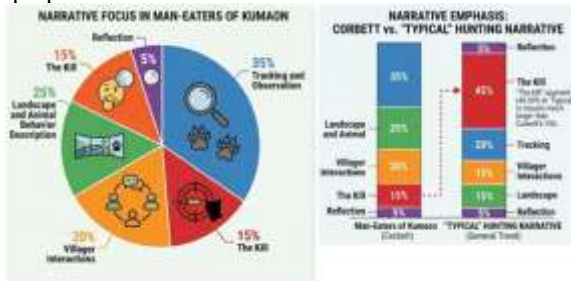


Figure 3: Narrative Focus Distribution in Man-Eaters of Kumaon.

4.2 Theme 2: Documentation of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge

However, one is amazed by the extent to which Corbett focuses on the skills, knowledge, and practices of the Kumaoni villagers. In his book, *My India*, he dedicates an entire chapter to describing a number of Indian people: a railway man, a village headman, a Dalit who served him as an accountant for twenty years; he even writes that "the correctness of his accounts was never disputed." The level of detail and empathy with which Corbett depicts Indian characters is what distinguishes him from other colonizers whose texts often ignored natives' uniqueness and made them into mere setting.

Moreover, what is particularly valuable from an ecocritical perspective is the way Corbett captures the ecological knowledge of Kumaonis: their ability to track, understand animal behavior, navigate the forests and hunt game. In *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, he mentions the help he received from the locals on multiple occasions, referring to them as a source of knowledge, and depicting their skills as a result of long years of training and practice. For instance, they are able to interpret bird calls, recognize tracks and trails of animals that are invisible to an inexperienced hunter.

Corbett's engagement with the knowledge of the natives is not entirely straightforward either. In his *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*, Corbett describes the superstitious practices followed by the villagers regarding their attribution of the leopard's killings to supernatural occurrences. Although Corbett is respectful to these beliefs—"the dividing line between the superstitions of simple uneducated people who live on high mountains and the beliefs of sophisticated educated people is so faint that it is difficult to decide where the one begins and the other ends"—Corbett also situates himself in the role of the rational observer and hunter.

It is important to emphasize this ambiguity in order to understand the two-sided nature of Corbett's character: he acknowledges the validity of indigenous knowledge while at the same time perceiving himself as the bearer of the positive aspects of colonization, namely firearms and scientific tracking. This is precisely what the ecocritical approach should consider in its interpretation of Corbett.



4.3 Theme 3: Critique of Colonial Environmental Policy

However, despite his allegiance to the British Empire, there is an underlying – sometimes overt – criticism of colonial forest policy in the writings of Corbett. Dey (2021) contends that Corbett's writings provide evidence of the disastrous effects of colonial forestry, where the Indian forests are portrayed as a natural ecosystem that nurtured human and other non-human life forms transformed into mere “timber mines,” serving the railways and the King’s Navy.

This criticism of the colonial system is most evident in his book *Jungle Lore*. Through his experiences spanning several decades, Corbett describes the deforestation of lands for use as railways' wood, barren hills left to the mercy of erosion after mining activities, and the decimation of wildlife species through rampant hunting. Although Corbett never mentions the role of the colonizers in this environmental degradation, the overall picture he portrays serves as a criticism of colonial rule.

Moreover, by treating man-eating as an ecological issue, Corbett could be seen as implicitly criticizing the colonial policy of forcing village communities off the forest lands, denying them their rights to hunt and gather food from the forests and favoring deforestation over preserving the ecological environment.

Such an aspect of Corbett’s work has further been elaborated by Naithani (2023) who notes that Corbett’s stories form a “critique of the colonial exploitation of Indian wild animals”. The criticism, in this case, is institutionalized as opposed to being personal. Corbett was neither an anti-colonial nor a revolutionary; however, his depiction of ecological damage speaks volumes.

4.4 Theme 4: Affective Bond with Wilderness

The thing that may come across as most unusual in Corbett's work is the emotional attachment he has formed with the natural elements of Kumaon. There are various ways in which this can be seen, ranging from lyrical passages describing the natural scenery to expressions of sorrow for the killing of certain animals and even philosophical musings about the significance of wilderness.

Take the end of *The Temple Tiger*, where Corbett acknowledges his inability to kill a certain man-eater. He states, "The following day, after spending an hour talking over with my friends at Dabidhura what had

occurred, I said goodbye to them all, and promised to come back next time the man-eater started working" . It is extraordinary for a man like Corbett, who was famed throughout Kumaon for his hunting prowess, to admit such a failure, especially when he decided to put it into print.

Corbett’s comments on the tiger’s nature are just as remarkable. The phrase “a large-hearted gentleman with boundless courage” brings a very human quality to his description of the tiger. Corbett’s characterization of the tiger is not meant to provide scientific natural history but rather to convey affective responses to the animal. He admires it, feels sorry for it, and mourns the killing of such a creature. As Corbett states in *Jungle Lore*, “The book of nature has neither beginning nor end, open its pages where you will, or at what stage in your lifetime, and if you desire to learn, you will find it full of interest.”

In terms of ecocriticism, the importance of this emotional connection can be seen in the way it defies the Cartesian dualism between the observer (the subject) and the observed object (nature). Corbett is neither the detached scientist nor the triumphant hunter who sees himself above nature. He enters the forest as a participant within a community of humans, animals, trees, and hills. While this mode of consciousness is not entirely worked out into a philosophical system, it marks a notable deviation from Western environmental thinking.

4.5 Comparative Analysis Table

Writer	Era	Primary Relationship to Wildlife	Ecological Orientation	Representation of Indigenous Knowledge	Critique of Colonial Policy	Affective Bond with Nature
Jim Corbett	1920s-1950s	Hunter-conservatist	Biocentric (evolving)	Documentarian with respect	Implicit, structural	Deep, articulated
Kenneth Anderson	1940s-1919	Hunter-conservatist	Mixed	Present but less devel	Minimal	Moderate



der son	60 s	nist		oped		
Ald o Le opo ld	19 30 s- 19 40 s	Hunt er turne d critic	Bioce ntric (articu lated as “land ethic”)	Limit ed (U.S. conte xt)	Exp licit , syst ema tic	Deep , phil osph ical
Col oni al hun tin g me mo ir (ty pic al)	19 th - eas t y 20 th c.	Trop hy hunte r	Anthr opoce ntric	Abse nt or stereo typed	No ne	Mini mal (natu re as back drop)

Table 1: Comparative Ecocritical Analysis of Corbett and Contemporaries.

4.6 Discussion: The Hunter-Conservationist Dialectic

What emerges from an ecocritical analysis of Corbett’s works is that his writings are organized along the lines of a dialectical relationship that one could call the “hunter-conservationist dialectic.” The dialectic consists of a dynamic opposition between the rationality of hunting—the notion that humans are hunters and animals are prey—and conservationism, which views humans as caretakers and animals as having intrinsic worth. The irresolvable nature of this dialectic is what makes Corbett’s writings so effective.

Commentators such as Gautam (2008), who interpret Corbett’s works as examples of human-centered literature, miss the point. Corbett did kill animals; he writes about himself as a hunter in his works, which are organized around the hunt. However, they overlook the way Corbett’s writings negate the very principles on which hunting is based. For example, he hunted man-eating animals in order to save people from them; he described his killings with regret and sorrow. He admitted his failures, and would not take compensation for taking animal lives.

The importance of ecocriticism of Corbett can be attributed to his rejection of simplistic dualisms such

as humanity vs. nature, colonizers vs. the colonized, hunters vs. conservationists, and so forth. The writing by Corbett suggests a model of engagement with the natural world wherein human needs and concerns (such as survival) are recognized alongside the value of nature for its own sake. The approach taken by Corbett cannot be described as purely biocentric or anthropocentric, but something in between.

V. CONCLUSION

The paper has carried out an ecocritical study of the writings on the wilderness of Jim Corbett. In studying *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, *Jungle Lore* and *My India*, the study has established four recurring themes of ecocriticism including the portrayal of the man-eater as an indicator of ecological problem and not an evil by itself; documenting of the indigenous ecological wisdom; the criticism of colonial forest policies; and finally the description of an affectionate relationship with wilderness irrespective of any materialistic considerations.

The study is contrary to readings that either celebrate him as a conservationist or demonize him as a colonial hunter. It shows that the works of Corbett are far more complicated than such interpretations would suggest. They acknowledge the complexities of their time including the decline of the British rule, conservation coming into the forefront as an issue and loss of indigenous knowledge while providing a perspective on the ecology that resonates with the current discourse.

It is clear that Corbett is relevant to today's time. With the escalation of conflicts between humans and wildlife globally due to climate change, habitat destruction, and population growth, Corbett's emphasis on the need to understand the causes of conflict is an example of how one must move past the notion of problem animals. It is evident that Corbett's refusal to engage in binaries like man vs. animal or conservation vs. human welfare means that the solutions to environmental issues must involve a nuanced approach.

Some aspects of this paper should be discussed. For instance, the current study only analyzes some of the main books written by Corbett. In a comprehensive study, Corbett's minor works would also be considered. The comparative analysis of Corbett and other nature writers, including those from different



eras, would show what makes Corbett unique. Finally, one could extend this analysis to discuss the reception of Corbett's writings among Indians.

There are some obvious areas for future research to be pursued. Firstly, archival research on unpublished documents and correspondence would provide valuable insights into Corbett's evolving philosophy regarding the environment. Secondly, reception history of Corbett's works in India after independence would highlight postcolonial readings of colonial nature writing. Thirdly, comparative study of other hunters-turned-conservationists from other colonial settings, such as Africa and Southeast Asia, would allow for greater theoretical generalization. Fourthly, a dialogue between ecocriticism and animal studies in connection with Corbett's writing would provide new insights.

In sum, the wilderness writing of Jim Corbett provides abundant material for ecocritical reflection. It proves that an environmental literature may spring even from an unlikely source—the gun barrel of a colonial hunter. Moreover, it presents an approach to human-environment interaction that is neither romantic nor exploitative, but rather attentive and respectful. In the context of contemporary environmental crisis, Corbett's claim that we open the book of nature "with patience and humility" appears more timely than ever before.

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