



Research Paper

## Jim Corbett's Scientific Narrative

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### ABSTRACT

A significant component of Jim Corbett's variegated spectrum of narratives that runs across his outstanding books on man-eaters—*Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1944), *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* (1948) and *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1954)—is the terse, scientific narrative. Jim Corbett's extraordinary power of observation and scientific temperament come to the fore here, endowing his works with an air of authenticity and credibility. The scientific narrative functions as the bedrock of the matchless dramatic action which is the most remarkable feature of the trilogy. Corbett's minute, first hand observations regarding tigers and leopards identify the causes of their turning man-eaters under oppressive circumstances, clearing several unfounded beliefs about these two species in general.

**Keywords:** scientific narrative, keen sight, hearing, sense of smell, wind direction, misconception

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As Jim Corbett was a keen observer of wildlife, his books contain a wealth of pioneering factual information about the habits of tigers and leopards, besides a number of other animals. He was one of the earliest experts on wildlife who made a close, first-hand study of tigers and leopards in their natural habitat. The narrative is scientific, terse and matter-of-fact when information on wildlife and ecology is disseminated. Jim Corbett, the observer, objectively presents the facts as he has observed them. He also displays the solid earth on which the action is going to take place but, according to an observation made by E.M. Forster and included by Miriam Allot in her compilation *Novelists on the Novel* (1959), "It isn't enough merely to observe; we must order and shape what we have seen" (69). Jim Corbett is not found wanting on this front, and in his works reality—observed reality—becomes a spring-board for art.

An important function of the factual, scientific narrative is to arouse a strong intellectual curiosity about the facts presented by the author. In his seminal book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth defines the cognitive function of fiction when he writes, "We are pulled forward by a desire to discover the truth about the world of the book" (125). Those who have read Jim Corbett's trilogy would admit readily that he has achieved this objective to perfection as page after page the reader is drawn deeper and deeper into the distant yet strangely fascinating world of the "jungle folk", breath-taking beauty of nature, and simple hill folk, with every nook and corner of this world oozing with an old-world charm.

Corbett's observations on tigers and leopards are so precise and authentic that put together they constitute an encyclopedic fact-file of the two predators. The narrative here is factual and concise. For instance, speaking of the tiger in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, Corbett observes that "tigers never kill in excess of their requirements" (51). Then he makes a discovery about the manner in which tigers kill their prey, "It is generally believed that tigers kill by delivering a smashing blow on the neck. This is incorrect. Tigers kill with their teeth" (78-79). He makes yet another precise observation in *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, "A tiger does not run down its prey; it either lies in wait or stalks it. In either case contact with its victim is made by a single spring, or by a rush of a few yards followed by a spring" (164).

Corbett brings up more factual information based on constant observation of the habits of the tiger when he points out, "tigers will on occasions visit an animal that is tied up for several nights in succession before they finally kill it, for tigers do not kill unless they are hungry" (201). Then there is an exceptional bit of information, "Tigers as a rule are not carrion eaters but they do on occasions eat animals they themselves have not killed" (203). He makes yet another startling revelation in *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon* when he points out that under a huge pile of dead leaves and twigs, "the tiger had hidden his kill, and

very foolishly I did not inform my companion of this fact, for he told me later that he did not know that tigers were in the habit of hiding their kills" (25). In the same book, he goes on to make some more observations that interest the reader a great deal such as: "tigers have no sense of smell" (30), and "tigers have very good eyesight" (30). On occasions when he could not track or stalk a tiger, Corbett resorted to call him up by producing the full-throated roar of a tigress. In this context Corbett informs the reader in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, "The conditions under which a tiger can be called up are (a) when rampaging through the forest in search of a mate and (b) when rampaging, wounded" (155).

According to Corbett, wind-direction is a very important factor while stalking a tiger as tigers always avoid attacking their prey by moving along the direction of wind. By doing so they are able to prevent the smell of their body reaching the prey ahead of them. When he articulates his ideas about the significance of wind-direction in a jungle in *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon* the narrative is remarkably precise and scientific:

When hunting unwounded man-eating tigers the greatest danger, when walking into the wind, is of an attack from behind, and to a lesser extent from either side. When the wind is from behind, the danger is from either side. In the same way, if the wind is blowing from the right the danger is from the left and from behind, and if blowing from the left the danger is from the right and from behind. In none of these cases is there any appreciable danger of an attack from in front, for in my experience all unwounded tigers, whether man-eaters or not, are disinclined to make a head-on attack. Under normal conditions man-eating tigers limit the range of their attack to the distance they can spring, and for this reason they are more difficult to cope with than wounded tigers, who invariably launch an attack from a little distance, maybe only ten or twenty yards, but possibly as much as a hundred yards. This means that whereas the former have to be dealt with in a matter of split seconds, the latter give one time to raise a rifle and align the sights. (160-61)

Corbett focuses his attention on yet another graceful predator—the leopard—in *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*. Here also, he imparts pieces of illuminating information to the reader such as, "man-eating leopards hunt at night" (32), and "Leopards—other than man-eaters—are the most easily killed of all animals in our jungles, for they have no sense of smell" (28). He observes in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* also that a leopard invariably gives a warning sign just before charging its prey by slowly raising and lowering the trip of its tail (37).

The leopard is a cunning animal particularly when it turns a man-eater. Hence in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* Corbett recalls an old jungle saying—"It is never safe to assume that a leopard is dead until he has been skinned" (39). However, it is less difficult to track and stalk a leopard as compared to a tiger, as Corbett observes in *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*:

The tracking, locating, and stalking of leopards, besides being exciting and interesting, is comparatively easy. For [sic] leopards have tender pads and keep to footpaths and game tracks as far as possible; they are not hard to locate, for practically every bird and animal in the jungle assists the hunter; and they are easy to stalk, for, though they are blessed with very keen sight and hearing, they are handicapped by having no sense of smell. The sportsman can therefore select the line of approach that best suits him, irrespective of the direction in which the wind is blowing. (29)

With his phenomenal knowledge as a naturalist, based on the rock-solid foundation of first hand observation and lifelong study, Corbett busted some misleading notions about wildlife that were prevalent in his time. For instance, in his "Author's Note" to *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, he lambastes the malicious and ill-founded theory about the tiger being a cruel and bloodthirsty monster, perpetrated by some less-informed and opinionated authors of hunting yarns:

The author who first used the words 'as cruel as a tiger' and 'as bloodthirsty as a tiger' when attempting to emphasize the evil character of the villain of his piece, not only showed a lamentable ignorance of the animal he defamed, but coined phrases which have come into universal circulation, and which are mainly responsible for the wrong opinion of the tigers held by all except that very small proportion of the public who have the opportunity of forming their own opinions. (xi)

In *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, Corbett clearly mentions that tigers are not temperamentally aggressive towards human beings, "Tigers, except when wounded or when man-eaters, are on the whole very good-tempered. Were this not so it would not be possible for thousands of people to work as they do in tiger-infested jungles, nor would it have been possible for people like me to have wandered for years through the jungles on foot without coming to any harm" (153). This idea is prefigured in the "Author's Note" to *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* where he highlights peaceful co-existence of man and tiger:

... again I think of the tens of thousands of men, women and children who, while working in the forests or cutting grass or collecting dry sticks, pass day after day close to where tigers are lying up and who, when they return safely to their homes, do not even know that they have been under the observation of this so called 'cruel' and 'bloodthirsty' animal. (xii)

Such observation-based, scientific and original inferences sprang from the fact that Corbett was born in the Kumaon hills and had lived among the hill folk for nearly seven decades between 1875 and 1947. Although he was fully sensitive to the suffering of the local people at the hands of the man-eaters, he defends the tiger in the "Author's Note" to *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* in the face of heavy odds against it, "though sights have been seen which would have caused a stone to weep, I have not seen a case where a tiger has been deliberately cruel or where it has been bloodthirsty to the extent that it has killed, without provocation, more than it has needed to satisfy its hunger or the hunger of its cubs" (xii).

In his "Author's Note" to *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* Corbett provides the reader with a rare insight into the phenomenon of a tiger becoming a man-eater. Here he first defines a man-eating tiger as "a tiger that has been compelled through stress of circumstances beyond its control, to adopt a diet alien to it" (vii). He makes it quite clear that tigers do not relish human flesh, "Human beings are not the natural prey of tigers, and it is only when tigers have been incapacitated through wounds or old age that, in order to live, they are compelled to take a diet of human flesh" (vii).

The "Author's Note" to *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* is an excellent example of logical reasoning based on observation and scientific evidence. Hence Corbett follows up the aforementioned observations with a verdict that supports the beleaguered tiger in no uncertain terms:

A tiger's function in the scheme of things is to help maintain the balance in nature and if, on rare occasions when driven by dire necessity, he kills a human being or when his natural food has been ruthlessly exterminated by man he kills two percent of the cattle he is alleged to have killed, it is not fair that for these acts a whole species should be branded as being cruel and bloodthirsty. (xii-xiii)

Corbett always inspected the bodies of the man-eaters after shooting them down. By doing so he obtained vital information regarding the cause of their turning man-eaters. Therefore, he never castigated these predators as blood-thirsty vampires or devil incarnate. In *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon* he speaks painstakingly at length about the probable causes of the Muktesar tigress turning a man-eater. Its travails started following an unfortunate encounter with a porcupine:

In this encounter she lost an eye and got some fifty quills, varying in length from one to nine inches, embedded in the arm and under the pad of her right foreleg. Several of these quills after striking a bone had doubled back in the form of a U, the point and the broken-off end being close together. Suppurating sores formed where she endeavoured to extract the quills with her teeth, and while she was laying up in a thick patch of grass, starving and licking her wounds, a woman selected this particular patch of grass to cut as fodder for her cattle. At first the tigress took no notice, but when the woman had cut the grass right up to where she was lying, the tigress struck once, the blow crushing the woman's skull. Death was instantaneous....Leaving the woman lying where she had fallen, the tigress limped off for a distance of over a mile and took refuge in a little hollow under a fallen tree. Two days later a man came to chip firewood off this fallen tree, and the tigress who was lying on the far side killed him also ... it is possible that the sight of blood trickling down his body as he hung across the bole of the tree first gave her the idea that he was something that she could satisfy her hunger with. However that may be, before leaving him she ate a small portion from his back. A day later she killed her third victim deliberately, and without having received any provocation. Thereafter she became an established man-eater. (40-41)

Corbett's tell-tale observations made in the passage quoted here make it amply clear that the Muktesar tigress had been incapacitated to hunt her natural prey owing to the painful injuries and was starving. Her first human victim, the hapless woman who unwittingly ventured far too close to the tigress lost her life by upsetting the animal in distress. The second human victim also walked too close to her and was killed. In this case, attracted by the blood, she ate some flesh and began to see the human beings as a substitute to her natural prey. Thereafter, she became a compulsive man-eater.

Similarly, in case of the Champawat man-eater, Corbett observes in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, "the upper and lower canine teeth on the right side of her mouth were broken ... [as a] result of a gunshot wound ... [which] prevented her from killing her natural prey, and had been the cause of her becoming a man-eater" (26). The Chowgarh tigress had tell-tale signs of wear and tear due to old age, "The tigress's claws were broken, and bushed out, and one of her canine teeth was broken, and her front teeth were worn down to the bone. It was these defects that had made her a man-eater" (96). The body of the Mohan man-eater was stuffed with porcupine

quills, which according to Corbett was “quite sufficient reason for his having become—and having remained—a man-eater, for porcupine quills do not dissolve no matter how long they are embedded in flesh” (141-42). The Thak man-eater had a septic gun-shot injury which “could quite reasonably have been the cause of her having become a man-eater” (223).

In his “Author’s Note” to *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, Corbett records in graphic prose the reasons for leopards becoming man-eaters:

Leopards, unlike tigers, are to a certain extent scavengers and become man-eaters by acquiring a taste for human flesh when unrestricted slaughter of game has deprived them of their natural food.

The dwellers in our hills are predominately Hindu, and as such cremate their dead. The cremation invariably takes place on the bank of a stream or river ... when disease in epidemic form sweeps through the hills and the [poor] inhabitants die faster than they can be disposed of, a very simple rite, which consists of placing a live coal in the mouth of the deceased, is performed in the village and the body is then carried to the edge of the hill and cast into the valley below.

A leopard, in an area in which his natural food is scarce, finding these bodies, very soon acquires a taste for human flesh, and when the disease dies down and normal conditions are established, the animal very naturally, on finding his food supply cut off, takes to killing human beings.

Of the two man-eating leopards of Kumaon, which between them killed five hundred and twenty-five human beings, one followed on the heels of a very severe outbreak of cholera, while the other followed the mysterious disease which swept through India in 1918 and was called ‘war fever’. (xiii-xiv)

Corbett makes all these important observations with a remarkable faithfulness to factual reality in order to clear the misconception that tigers and leopards are man’s enemies.

In *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*, Corbett strongly condemns the killing of leopards by using explosives as an unfair, dastardly and inhuman practice:

The easiest, and the most cruel, method of killing leopards for profit is to insert a small and very highly explosive bomb in the flesh of an animal which has been killed by a leopard. Many villagers have learnt to make these bombs, and when one of them comes in contact with the leopard’s teeth, it explodes and blows the leopard’s jaws off. Death is instantaneous in some cases, but more often than not the unfortunate animal crawls away to die a lingering and very painful death, for the people who use the bombs have not the courage to follow the blood trail left by the leopard to dispatch it. (28)

It becomes amply clear that the terse, scientific narrative is not merely a part of Jim Corbett’s wide spectrum of narratives, it performs the important function of disseminating to the reader crucial, first hand information about the predators as well as the setting of the action. Furthermore, in the scientific narrative, lie the seeds of Corbett’s pioneering ideas of conservation of wildlife.

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