

Jungle Mystery: A Study of Plot, Character and Setting in Jim Corbett's Work

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Abstract

The present research article attempts to study Jim Corbett's work, analyzing the features of detective fiction imbibed within. He coined a new genre of jungle detective narratives based on his real-life experiences. These man-eaters' narratives are the classics of jungle detective stories aptly formed in the formula of detective fiction. Jim Corbett operates on a different landscape, the canvas of the world of nature, where his wits clash with the instincts of the animal world. The crimes are nature-oriented and investigated through an ecocritical lens, exploring the typical genre conventions. The role of an investigation agency is crucial in a mystery narrative where Corbett emerges as an apt Sherlock Holmes of the Wild. These stories have all the essential elements of a mystery or detective fiction: the crime, the criminal, the investigator who is a master of jungle skills, the mystery and suspense of the chase, the supernatural element and the final verdict. Continuous action is the prime prerogative of detective fiction and Corbett's narratives are full of action that imparts thrill. These man-eater adventures are the form of a fast-paced thriller that presents the clash of wits and courage, surpassing all the superficialities of fiction.

Keywords: Crime; Jungle detective; Mystery; Natural landscape; Suspense.

Introduction

Detective or Mystery is a literary genre that combines quixotic aspects of nature, individualism, and intense emotions with elements of terror, darkness, and death. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1794) paved the way to an unknown world of mystery, terror, supernatural, death and darkness known as Gothic. "Ronald Knox and S.S. Van Dine each established a set of guidelines for crime fiction writers, with Knox's 'Decalogue'

stating that a detective story must focus on unravelling a mystery presented early to engage the reader's curiosity, which is resolved at the end." (Detective fiction, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 29 April 2011, in Wikipedia) This gave birth to a new subgenre termed detective fiction or crime fiction. Mysteries come in the form of detective fiction. The crime, the perpetrators, their motivations, and the ultimate discovery are all essential to the story. Detective fiction features a complex plot-focused story with clues from which the identity of the criminal is deduced before the solution is revealed at the end of the book.

The other way of revelation is a socialized kind in which the crime is committed under apparently impossible circumstances, such as a locked room in which no intruder could have entered or left. One more type is the inverted detective story, where the identity of the criminal is exposed in the start and the chronicle describes the process of investigation. The prerequisites of a mystery fiction are action, suspense and a meticulously constructed theme that moves at a quick pace. Robin Winks (1980) noted that "detective fiction is central to debates on the legitimacy of studying popular culture because it combines traditional scholarly materials, such as printed books. He emphasized that detective fiction is widely read, rapidly evolving, and often criticized." (3-16) Rachel Franks (2014) concurred, noting that "...The mid-1920s was a point in time which had witnessed crime fiction writers produce some of the finest examples of fiction published and when readers and publishers were watching, with anticipation, as a new generation of crime fiction writers were readying themselves to enter what would become known as the genre's Golden Age." Evans (2019) added that "T.S. Eliot was likely the first to codify rules for detective fiction, publishing his guidelines in a 1927 issue of "The Criterion." These rules emphasized the avoidance of elaborate disguises, predictable motives, no reliance on the supernatural, and a detective who is intelligent but not superhuman, allowing readers to follow the reasoning process." W.H. Auden gave a elementary rule of a mystery fiction, "...a murder occurs; many are suspected; all but one suspect, who is the murderer, are eliminated; the murderer is arrested or dies" (407). According to John G. Cawelt (1997), the detective tale genre has always included a subversive aspect, potentially dating back to the equivocal blend of logic and decadence, notwithstanding the conservatism of Doyle and most other prominent writers of the "golden age" of the genre.

Jim Corbett coined a new subgenre, namely jungle detective narrative, based on his real-life experiences. These narratives of man-eaters are the classics of jungle detective stories aptly formed in the formula of detective

fiction. The prerequisite of conventional mystery fiction is a human landscape and the clash of human wits and intelligence. Jim Corbett operates on a different landscape, the canvas of the world of nature where his wits clash with the instincts of the animal world.

Jungle Narratives

Jim Corbett's narratives present an interconnection between nature and crime that seeks to present localised ecological crime with an eco-consciousness in a universal context. The crimes are nature-oriented and investigated through an ecocritical lens, exploring the typical genre conventions. The investigation brings to light the conflict between the human and non-human world while negating any approval of the destruction of the flora and the fauna.

The physical setting of the crime scene, which establishes the story's physical background, is described. Every mystery has a unique topography that, depending on the author's talent, sets the scene for the action and is essential to the story's resolution or narrative. The settings of Jim Corbett's stories are exotic locations amidst natural environments. The characters are unique, such as the man-eater tiger and other animals. The man-eater hunts depict a full-scope character of the carnivore with its personality traits. All man-eater stories have the jungle detective with human characters—comprehensive with peculiarities, flaws and qualities. All these components are made alive by an engrossing and flowy narrative style.

The prime suspect is not a human, but a man-eater tiger. He creates a world of suspense and thrill. The reader escapes into a natural world, known yet alien and full of mysteries. The man-eater commits a crime against the laws of the human world and incurs punishment. Corbett chases the man-eater day and night, daring the dangers and difficulties of the non-human world. He is constantly on the move, shifting his camp in a radius of hundreds of miles, where the man-eaters operate. The readers move up and down the hills, on the tree tops, through the water holes, mountains, rivers, valleys, and under the shadow of man-eaters.

Crime Reporting

Crime is the motive component of a mystery narrative and is central to the theme. A mystery dramatizes crime, criminals and their motives. The commission of crime prompts action on the part of the investigator. The motivating element of a mystery is the commission of a crime. Corbett's

method of crime reporting entraps the readers in the suspense. He renders the crime reporting through illustration of some incident, his personal experience or statistical data. He makes efforts to clarify the circumstances of the crime and the reasons for the conversion of a tiger into a man-eater. In a career spanning over forty years, Corbett, on record shot twelve man-eaters that were responsible for the death of more than fifteen hundred human lives.

He undertook these hunting operations skillfully and courageously. These man-eaters were reported to Corbett, either by government agencies or by the tormented villagers. He assimilated detailed information on the nature of crime and criminals. Impressive reporting of crime establishes the authenticity of the criminal and creates a sense of urgency for quick action on the part of the investigating agency. He establishes the severity of crime by a detailed and bold illustration of dates, places, the number of kills and the impact of the crime and the criminal on society at large.

In the case of "The Champawat Man-eater", the criminal and the crime were reported to Corbett by the Deputy Commissioner of the Naini-Tal, Berthoud. The tigress had arrived from Nepal as a full-fledged man-eater. Many elite hunters of the time had tried to shoot the animal but failed. The tigress killed two hundred people in Nepal and four years killed two hundred more in India. In the case of "The Chowghar Tiger", Corbett gives statistical data on the names of places and the number of human beings killed in five years. The tiger established a reign of terror over the eastern Kumaon villages. He emphatically points out the reported sixty-four kills and unreported mauled victims, who subsequently died; to highlight the graveness of the situation. Corbett's crime reporting is genuine and enhances the urgency of the action. The crime of the man-eater paralyses the village life, "The people of the village, numbering some fifty men, women and children, were in the state of abject-terror.... and I found the entire population inside their homes behind locked doors." (Corbett, *The Jim Corbett Omnibus* 15).

Corbett exercises ingenuity in narrating the events of the crime. His method of crime reporting is clever, original and inventive. The Mohan man-eater's crime is reported with the illustration of the incident when it attacked a group of women and killed the first human kill, a girl of sixteen. The narration is dramatic and builds an atmosphere of terror. He establishes the crime of the man-eater in bold words. It becomes an obligation for him to shoot the carnivore. The severity of the crime of "The Kanda Man-eater" is reported by presenting the letter written by the people of

Painaum, Bungi and Bickla Badalpur District. In the letter, the villagers urge Corbett to save them from the calamity that has nearly ruined their lives. The villagers sound helpless before the strength of the man-eater. The presentation of the shreds of evidence is dramatic.

Social Impact of the Crime

Robin Winks analyses that, for social researchers, the mystery is a literary form of particular appeal. According to social researchers, a crime is an intrusion into a law-abiding community that has a physical place, and every mystery has a “geography” that is frequently essential to the storyline. The crime of the man-eater has a large-scale effect on the individual, social and even the government level. The Mukteshwar man-eater killed twenty-four lives. The people and the veterinary officer of Mukteshwar Veterinary Research Institute solicit his help. The narrative of Pannar-Man-eater starts with the reporting of the crime. This man-eater killed four hundred humans. The government faced a difficult situation hence Corbett was asked to shoot the Pannar leopard. A workforce of around five thousand people was terrorised by the Thak man-eater, not to mention the villagers nearby. He draws a comparison between the impact of the man-eater and the Tsavo man-eating lions, which temporarily halted train construction.:

That a single animal should terrorize a labour force of these dimensions ..., would be unbelievable were it not for the historical, and nearly parallel, case of the man-eater of Tsavo, where a pair of lions, operating only at night, held up work for long periods on the Uganda railway (Corbett, *The Jim Corbett Omnibus* 212).

The terror of man-eaters paralyses the life of the villagers. Men dared not go out of their houses, the crop in the field remained uncut and doors were shut on the dying relatives. Man-eaters lose all fear of human beings and kill people in full public view, during the day as well as at night. The increasing number of victims added to the mounting pressure on the government. The effect of the man-eater’s crime is widespread and it encompasses the social, economic and political life in that area. The man-eating leopard of Rudraprayag was conferred in the House of Commons. The most feared man-eater, the leopard of Rudraprayag, was involved in the longest hunt. It took eight long years to shoot the leopard. It created a reign of terror over the Garhwal region and especially, over the pilgrims of Badrinath and Kedar Nath. By the evening the fear of the leopard enforced a curfew-like situation as it had developed an uncanny habit of entering the houses at night. On the personal front, simple villagers face

the fatal loss of their near and dear ones. The man-eater shows no mercy for the only child of an old woman or the mother of five small children. The man-eater's crime had a widespread effect on the social fabric of the Garhwal region. The emotional loss is immeasurable. Corbett's efforts to save the countryside from the horror of the man-eater were a result of the terrible scenes he witnessed while recovering a kill. The description of the left-over dead body highlights the cruelty of the man-eater and an urgency of action on the part of the investigator. The man-eater seems to tear the fabric of social harmony.

Examination of Crime-Spot

Examination of the crime spot for clues and evidence is vital for the success of the investigation. Corbett's reporting of the crime spot is skilful. The details of the crime-spot such as the surrounding geographical area, the position of the prey and the approach of the man-eater create suspense. The minute description of the crime spot increases the reader's curiosity. Investigation of the crime spot is indispensable for the detection of crime and the movements of the criminal. The forest floor, the depth of the pugmarks, the tracks created by dead bodies, the surrounding vegetation, and the position and the condition of the kill are the clues that lead the protagonist towards the criminal. Justification of the final verdict depends mostly on the intense crime reporting. It sets the mood of the mystery. Corbett's narratives begin with the detection of the crime, the identity of the criminal and the motive of the crime. In most cases, the motive of the crime is for food, but at times it is accidental or a result of provocation. He establishes the crime of the man-eater with the help of the evidence: either eyewitnesses or the jungle signs. The large number of human losses justifies the final verdict and creates sympathy for the victims. The intensity of the crime is highlighted through the impact of the crime on society at large.

Natural Landscape

Corbett's detective stories have an unconventional landscape. It creates a world of nature and wild animals. His canvas is visited by inmates of nature: the animals, birds, insects and reptiles too. This landscape presents two distinct yet connected worlds. Along with the world of nature, he presents the human world of simple, hardworking villagers, who live in perfect harmony with nature. However, the intrusion of the man-eater disturbs the harmony and creates a state of conflict. A conventional detective story revolves around the human world with materialistic motives,

infused by human emotions, but these man-eaters' narratives present a conflict of wits and courage between man and the wild animals.

Inverted Mystery vs Jungle Mystery

Corbett's jungle detective stories can be categorised into two types. The man-eater stories are set in the conventional pattern of inverted mystery or detective fiction and the other type is based on reading or judging jungle signs to reach a logical conclusion. The first type of jungle detective story starts with the commission of the crime that precedes the process of investigation and ends with punishment for the criminal. The second type of jungle detective story does not always start with the commission of a crime. Following jungle signs, Corbett is led to the scene of the crime, but the criminal does not necessarily invite a punishment. He explicitly describes the difference between a conventional detective story and a jungle detective story.

Fictional detective stories typically begin with evidence of a violent crime or attempted crime, and the reader becomes engrossed in the story, temporarily forgetting that he is reading fiction. is taken through thrilling moment after thrilling scenario until the offender is eventually found and compelled to pay a price for his actions. My jungle detective stories never begin the same way and they never conclude with the culprit getting away with it. (Corbett, *The Second Jim Corbett Omnibus* 269/270).He gives a very interesting illustration of a jungle detective story. Once camping at a forest bungalow, he noticed the pugmarks of a male leopard.

The pugmarks indicated that the leopard was interested in something. He followed the track of the leopard and found the imprints of a *Sambhar*. The depth of the footprint indicated that the *Sambhar* struggled and dashed into a tree. These inputs may sound useless for an amateur, but Corbett reconstructed the scene of the crime from the pieces of evidence of jungle signs. It was a hunting scene of a *Sambhar*. The leopard skillfully stalked, attacked, dragged and finally killed its victim. While wandering through the forest, Corbett subconsciously noted such jungle signs to reconstruct the scene of the crime. The tracks, footprints and other jungle marks lead Corbett to format a detective story as he writes. "In both the incidents I have related in these stories I did not know that a crime has been committed, and it is this uncertainty of not knowing what a small clue will lead up to that makes the compiling of jungle detective stories so interesting and so exciting." (Corbett, *The Second Jim Corbett Omnibus* 281)

Sherlock Holmes of The Wild: A Jungle Detective

The role of an investigation agency is crucial in a mystery. The history of mystery literature has a glossary of famous detectives. Prominent writers of mystery or detective fiction have created famous personalities of detectives, either professional or amateur. Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is the epitome of an ideal and finished detective. A detective has to possess several skills, including high levels of expertise, intellectual aptitude, keen observation, logical thinking, and scientific abilities. Finding the truth is the main goal of every mystery or detective fiction narrative, and finding the truth usually involves a complicated method that combines logic, observation, and a clear conclusion. Thus, the protagonist who is doing the investigation is the most important requirement for a mystery or detective story because he or she leads the plot and is present in every frame of the scene. Corbett's persona qualifies all the prerequisites of an investigator: high intellect, minute observation, logical analysis and courage. He can aptly be called the Sherlock Holmes of the Wild.

Unlike conventional detective stories, the evidence left behind by the man-eater is scattered in nature, amidst the wild. Nature has her own set of language and we as human beings require learning and absorbing the essence of nature to understand the alphabets of nature's language. Corbett possessed a unique kind of intellect and experience to understand nature's language. He was an expert in reading jungle signs. Long years of exposure in the Indian forest, exposed him to numerous interesting and curious aspects of the natural world. He developed his system of natural science based on his observation and experience. This natural science forms the base of all of his natural expeditions of the man-eaters. This detective is called upon not only to reinstate and to assure but also to endure witness, analyze, evaluate, grieve, and protest in the pursuit of biological righteousness.

Corbett through his man-eater thrillers presents a case through ecological lenses. He applied the theories of jungle signs to examine the clues and evidence left behind by the man-eater. The credit for the success of his man-eater hunts goes to his jungle skills. His investigation system is based on the classification of birds and animals, the language of the natural world, the skill to imitate the calls, comprehension of calls, the use of four winds, and animal tracks and the forensic conclusion of every act in the natural world. He read the jungle floor for shreds of evidence and clues against the man-eater. Corbett was endowed with an inborn ability for astute observation. His system of natural science is based on his

minute observation of natural phenomena. The conflict between man and beast demands a supreme amount of skill and intellect on the part of the investigator to stalk and hunt the man-eater amidst natural surroundings. He wandered into the forest after the man-eater examined the evidence in the form of jungle signs, being one of the jungle inmates himself. Corbett is the most perfect jungle detective, who hunts the man-eater on foot, masters all the skill and expertise needed for such crime and reaches the conclusion by logical reasoning based on the knowledge of jungle signs. While chasing his adversaries, Corbett is on equal terms with the carnivores as he has developed his senses at par with the wild animals.

The forest floor became a book of nature, with a treasure of information from which he could predict the mode of action of the birds and animals in nature. This knowledge helped him to sense the possible action of the man-eater. He visualised the movements of the criminal man-eater. Corbett reconstructs the whole scene based on found evidence and concludes. The primary concern of Corbett's man-eater detective stories is ascertaining the truth of the identity of the criminal and the usual process of drawing the truth is full of mysteries and involves a great demand of logic, observation and clarity of conclusion on the part of the investigator. Corbett, the investigating protagonist, is interesting and unique, partly because it is an account based on reality that lends credibility to these narratives. The investigating protagonist demands a great amount of courage to face the criminal and the possibility of a counterattack. Hunting man-eaters on foot requires the heart of a lion. Many times, astute observation and sheer presence of mind saved Corbett's life at the last moment.

Building Suspense

As per Knox's definition, a detective story's main component is the unravelling of a mystery and building suspense that arouses the curiosity of the readers. The primary concern of Corbett's plot is to solve the mystery surrounding the man-eater and its victims. These stories are certainly mysterious. The victims are killed in unknown circumstances. When Corbett arrives at the spot there is an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear among the villagers. He sets on to unravel the mystery of the murder. The identification and chase of the man-eater arouses the reader's curiosity. They follow the investigator through the forest, day and night for months together, until finally the last verdict is served. In the case of "The Champawat Man-eater", the suspense builds when Corbett chases the tigress who was carrying a dead young girl. Chill goes through the spine, when readers accompany him on rocky hills with dense vegetation in between,

after a growling man-eater. Each step is full of suspense and uncertainty, as it takes you near the man-eater, which is angry at the human advent over its kill; while avoiding falling deep into unseen caves. In such a nerve-breaking situation when the man-eater is just twenty feet away, the climax is almost unbearable.

Corbett found that the gun in his hand had not burst properly in the previous shot and may not work. The risk had to be taken to punish the man-eater as their crime was against humanity. In some of Corbett's narratives, the element of suspense is predominant. While some stories focus on realism, others lay more emphasis on gritty and bloody facts. The injured victims of the man-eaters have a horrifying tale to tell. The Chowgarh tiger's victim, a widow, jumped down a perpendicular hill to escape from its clutches. Corbett describes the pitiable condition of the girl, who later succumbs to injuries. (Corbett, *The Jim Corbett Omnibus* 73)

Blood-shed and Human Loss

Hard-boiled detective fiction, exclusively presents the gritty and blood-curdling descriptions. It revolves around the revenge motive, exhibiting an excess of blood-shed. Corbett's narrative involves a great amount of blood-shed and human loss. People are killed one after the other by the man-eater. While chasing the man-eater, Corbett witnesses some horrible scenes. The human loss prominently strikes at the crux of the narration. Corbett shot the Mohan Man-Eater in the most intense suspense, creeping inch by inch with the possibility of a sudden attack. To avoid the distinct click of the safety latch, he intelligently used the most innovative way of firing. He first pressed the trigger, maintaining a steady pressure on it and then pushed the safety latch. On some occasions, the criminal outsmarts the investigator. He tried to deceive the criminal by imitating a mating call. The horrifying conflict between the Kanda Man-Eater and Corbett would probably break the nerves of any sound person.

During the man-eater hunts, the prospect of a kill activates the plot and builds up the mystery. *The Man-eating Leopard of Rudra Prayag* is the only book Corbett has dedicated to a leopard. It was the longest hunt and took nearly eight years to shoot the leopard. This book has several moments of intense suspense and mystery, as the quarry eludes Corbett on every attempt. A mystery surrounded the leopard for his capacity to sustain all the attacks. The reader is constantly on the verge of unnerving moments. During the chase, the physical and mental endurance reaches the ultimate limit. It looks impossible to outwit the cunningness of the leopard, which

manages to avoid all the bullet shots and on the contrary closely chases Corbett, to kill him. He escaped an attack from the man-eater on more than one occasion. Mysteriously, the animal thrived on the deadly poison put on his kill. A cloud of mystery shrouded the man-eater and its queer ways of survival. Corbett's reasoning seemed to get hampered and pushed him towards the belief of the Garhwali's that the man-eater is an evil spirit, endowed with some supernatural powers. Even a deadly dose of cyanide did not harm the leopard.

Methodology

The present research investigates the primary and secondary sources related to the theory of mystery and detective literature in the English language. A review of literature is comprehended to present the journey and growth of the genre. Jim Corbett and his work is analysed while studying the features of detective fiction imbibed in his writing. A literary analysis of his contribution is undertaken to conclude. The additional sources include books, newspaper articles, research papers and personal reflections from academics.

Conclusion

Jim Corbett's narratives are the best examples of jungle detective stories. These stories have all the basic elements of a mystery or detective fiction: the crime, the criminal, an investigator, who is a master of jungle skills, the mystery and suspense of the chase, the supernatural element and the final verdict. Continuous action is the prime prerogative of detective fiction and these narratives are full of action that imparts thrill. The jungle investigator is constantly on the move, chasing the criminal, gathering pieces of evidence, inspecting the crime spot and anticipating future moves of the criminal. These man-eater adventures are cast in the form of a fast-paced thriller that presents the clash of wits and courage, surpassing all the superficialities of fiction.

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