



Jim Corbett: A Perspective in Light of Colonial Discourse

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to study Jim Corbett's literary work in the light of colonial discourse. The colonial discourse creates an incorrect and dishonest doctrine and in turn damage historical, social, cultural and economic representation of the colonies. However, dissimilar to the colonial literature, Jim Corbett's writing is devoid of indifference for the Indian culture. The attraction for the magnificent and exciting India is not undermined by a sense of racial supremacy. The delineation of Hindu culture is reverent and designates a profound understanding of the life philosophy of the colonized.

Key words: colonial, discourse, post-colonialism, domiciled, cultural identity

A society represents some philosophies, principles and imageries, which shape beliefs and values of human life. This indiscernible power constantly governs our life, society and mind. Colonial discourse exemplifies through unusual dogmatic images which are created by the ideas of authority and command over the native. The colonial discourse creates an incorrect and dishonest doctrine and in turn damage historical, social, cultural and economic representation of the colonies. The unique Indian culture and social pattern attracted and engaged the colonisers, but a prejudicial perception did not give them a reasonable understanding of the Indian philosophy and culture. Prominent colonial writers, Rudyard Kipling and E.M. Forster, through their art, slightly alter the tainted image of the colonial writers, but projects dichotomy. Rudyard Kipling was attached to the alien and complex Indian culture, but at the same time he supported the cause of empire. As Maria Couto has remarked: "Art creates an enthralling adventure story with loveable and credible Indian characters while endorsing imperial

rule Kipling's sense of being at home in India merges with his imperial rule" (81). By the time E.M. Forster emerged on the scene, the colonial department had softened a little. E.M. Forster's was an intermediate period, from colonial to post-colonial. Indian freedom struggle became more aggressive and writers like E.M. Forster sensed the futility of Empire and tried to create a passage to post-colonial era. Jim Corbett's work can be regarded as a non-fictional account of his personal adventures. A versatile person, his exposure to various issues and people during his life-time, enlightened his perception and imagination. His work exhibits his eventful life and presents the varied subject matter in real life situation. This paper is an attempt to study Jim Corbett's writing in the light of colonial discourse.

Regarding the methodology, this study is based on Primary and Secondary sources. Published research papers in various journals, articles of newspapers, magazines and books are used as secondary sources. A comprehensive analysis of the

available literature was undertaken by using both printed and internet sources.

Colonial literature signifies an ignorance about pre-colonial past with perceived assumptions about the cultural heritage of the colonies and misrepresentation of the native culture. Representation is very significant in literature as it influences interpretation. The “hegemonic colonial “influence”(Trivedi 131) had a stronghold over the presentation of native socio-cultural life hence it tends to be biased and influenced by pre-conceived notions. One prominent aspect of colonial literature is the dividing line between the rulers and the subalterns, the east and the west, that results in discrimination, disparity and estrangement. Hogan points out that ...the dichotomization of east and west as in part a response by increased Anglo-Indians to changing circumstances, a response designed to affirm their superiority and thereby bolster their superior social, political and economic position.” (5) The culture, history and language of the rulers is presumed as elite than the natives, and is marked by a sense of superiority and induces a sense of inferiority among the colonised. Colonial western ideology has constantly defined “... the East as absolutely other”, (Hogan 5) which is demeaning and negation of individual, cultural and social ideology. On the other hand, a search of self-identity leads the colonised natives to adopt the language and culture of the colonisers. In a way, the life and identity of the colonised is controlled by the colonisers. An inclusive comprehension of colonial literature became viable by considering the postcolonial approaches. Postcolonialism concentrates on the literature produced by the colonised, which takes colony and their society as the subject matter with themes like: relocation, slavery, oppression, confrontation, depiction, and difference of racism, caste and gender. The term postcolonialism gained momentum with Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak’s theory of orientalism and Subaltern, and initiated an enhanced literary outlook towards the colonial literature. Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’ (1978) presented the colonial writers and the fragments of the hollow empire in a new perspective. In *Orientalism* Said claims that the representation of

colonisers and the colonised is a kind of dual process which create unequal relationship between “occident” and “orient.” East or Other is portrayed as savage, randy, superstitious and bizarre.

The British empire spread in India and “consolidated their colonial power”, but “their regard for oriental texts seemed correspondingly to decline; their enhanced power over India neither facilitated nor seemed to depend on any enhanced knowledge of the country.” (Trivedi 123) The colonial writing is marked by an unusual sense of appreciation and indifference for the Indian culture. The colonials were attracted by the magnificent and exciting Indian culture, but in their writing the ecstatic experience of discovering a new and interesting culture is undermined by a sense of racial dominance. They mocked and disposed of the native culture as absurd and backward. The coloniser’s sense of racial supremacy imposed inferiority amongst natives. Colonial writing is deficient in empathy for the multicultural sensibility of Indian culture and in a way “sustained their colonial presence in India through.... structural, and cultural violence”. (Rahman, Ali, Kahan 3) The reflection of the “legacy of British colonial policy of forced assimilation, division, and subjugation by imposing the dominant language, religion, and culture against ethnic and religious minorities”, (Rahman, Ali, Kahan 20) finds an expression in colonial literature of the era.

In the tradition of Indo-Anglian authors, Jim Corbett emerges as the most famous writer after Rudyard Kipling and E. M. Forster. Jim Corbett’s encounters with the man-eaters are like a jungle version of detective fiction, which convey an explicit message of nature conservation to the world. His imagination and perception were shaped by his growing in India as he grew amidst Indian environment, culture, traditions and the natives of India, especially the people of Garhwal region, who exercised a profound influence on him. A sensitive person to the happenings around him, he has transformed personal experiences into stories.

Colonial discourse presents the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised to be of

conflict. The coloniser repressed the native with a sense of ethnic and cultural superiority. The protagonist of the stories by Jim Corbett obviously resembles to a typical colonial character, who lives in a distant land of wild animals and jungle and become the Robinson Crusoe; the savior of the local villagers by hunting the man-eaters. An adventurous man, who becomes the master of the local people; however, his writing has an unconventional colonial tone. The adventures of hunting are conspicuously marked by details of India, her culture, society and people, which add new literary dimensions. Representation of vibrant colors of India: the spirituality of Hinduism, social anthropology, the country life and the most important thing that was very close to his heart: the people of India, is devoid of a feeling of strangeness, which is a prominent feature of colonial writing. Corbett's stay in India was longer than Forster and Kipling, which left a lasting impression on him. Born and brought up in India, he lived nearly for seventy years in the land he considered as his home. He makes it categorically clear that though the poor people of India are denounced by the world, they are very close to his heart. He considers them as the true sons of the soil and writes in the following lines:

In my India, the India I know, there are four hundred million people, ninety percent of whom are simple, honest, brave, loyal hardworking souls whose daily prayer to God and whatever government is in power is to give them security of life and of property to enable them to enjoy the fruits of their labour. It is of these people, who are admittedly poor and who are often described as India's starving millions among whom I have lived and whom I love that I endeavor to tell in the pages of these books (Corbett, The Second Jim Corbett Omnibus 10).

Description of political events of the era or the Indian freedom struggle are conspicuously absent in these stories. Rather the protagonist, who is Corbett himself, observes the common Indians, their thoughts, psyche, desires and their perception of life. He strives to present the soul of the common people. One of the most noticeable aspects of his writing is the attraction and understanding of the

colonized. His sympathies are always with the poor hardworking people of India. Jim Corbett's presentation of Indian characters is in the framework of humanity. His attitude towards poverty in India is neither skeptical nor he mocks at it, on the contrary it is marked by a sense of responsibility towards India and her people. There are several instances in *My India*: he lends money to Lalajee to start his business, unties Buddhu from the shackles of village bania and pay compensation for the killed cattle to save the tigers. Two major aspects of Jim Corbett's Indian impression are: the vibrant and vivacious Indian village culture and the poor loyal people. He had tremendous faith in poor Indians, whom he trusted more than anybody else.

Traditions and customs create cultural identity of a society. The colonizers rejected cultural identity of the native civilization. The colonial description of Indian culture has a strong tone of unfamiliarity and strangeness, yet it is an important part of colonial obsession. The unique culture and social pattern attracted and engaged Kipling, but a binary attitude did not give him a reasonable insight in the Indian culture. The later generation of colonial writers like Forster is characterized by a strong sense of uncertainty, doubting the possibility of the empire. Corbett presents a different sensibility towards Indian culture. Born and brought up in India, among the local Hindus, Jim Corbett assimilated an in-depth knowledge of Hinduism and its spirituality. He transcends the image of a colonizer, who gets lost in the colourful ritualistic perspective of native culture. He goes to the core, the spirituality and philosophy of Hindu religion as he describes the philosophy of pilgrimage and suffering in Hindu religion:

Times there will be a many, when, gasping for breath, you toil up the face of steep mountain on feet torn and bleeding when you will question whether the prospective reward you seek is worth the present price you pay in suffering; but being a good Hindu, you will toil on, comforting yourself with the thought that merit is not gained without suffering, and the greater the suffering in this world, the greater the reward in the next. (Corbett, The Jim Corbett Omnibus 431-32)

The eminence that differentiates Jim Corbett from other colonial writers is the cultural individuality he gives to the colonised. The colonial attitude to run down the Indian culture and traditions is absent in his writing, rather he presents Indian culture with the conviction of a native. The observations of the great epics of *Mahabharata*, *Skanda-Purana* are not deliberate brooding of a colonial attraction towards the spiritual Indian culture. He writes about Description of the Nanda-Kot and Pancha-chuli as the five cooking places used by the Pandavas while on their way to Kailash in Tibet has reference to Mahabharata; the great Indian epic. His understanding of Hindu mythology is apparent in the portrayal of the Naini lake as he writes, "Hindu legend, however, give the credit of the lake to three sages, Atri, Pulastya and Pulaha... dug a hole at the foot of the hill and siphoned water into it from Mansorowara, the sacred lake in Tibet. (Corbett, The Second Jim Corbett Omnibus 7). Jim Corbett exhibits his vast knowledge of India in various shades with a sense of familiarity, love and respect. He exclusively comments on the Indian society and the different fractions of class and castes. Untouchability was a curse of Indian society and Jim Corbett could rightly be called the *messiah* of the underprivileged. He considers the farmers, workers and the poor people as the 'real Indians', who represents the rich Indian culture. During his assignment with the railways at Mokameh Ghat and his wandering after the man-eaters, he observed the life situation of the depressed class people and tried his best to help them. A social reformer, he reveals the life and miseries of an untouchable through the stories "Buddhu" and "Chamari". He exhibits in-depth knowledge of various aspects of life in Indian society. Jim Corbett does not comment on the political scenario of the current era. He is silent about the Indian freedom movement and its repercussion on the masses. He marks a point in the Introduction to *My India* that his books are not a record of political India, but deals exclusively with the poor people who forms the real soul of India, with whom he lived and loved.

The term 'Whites' in British colonies had varied connotations. A different scale of class consciousness prevailed among the so-called whites,

with hierarchy depending on the financial and professional status:

... specifically, the British Raj was both a race - and a class-conscious institution and that the continued hegemony of the white elite classes in colonial India was dependent on the suppression of those white people who were lower on the social scale as much as it was dependent on the persistent subjugation of the Indian population. (Hubel 96)

There were the Britishers who worked at the highest position of civil services, and had retained their contact with the native land by regular visits. The colonials, who were born and lived in India were labeled as the 'Domiciled whites' or the 'poor whites' who were prohibited from entering in the class-one civil services. "Current historiography acknowledges the existence of Domiciled Europeans in colonial India, often referring to them as "poor whites" (McMenamin 2) This class called county bottled or the domiciled Britishers were at the lowest end of political power and had a close proximity with the colonized. Jim Corbett belonged to this lower stratum of class-conscious British society in India. Domiciled whites made India their permanent place of residence, as contradictory to the majority of civil servants, entrepreneurs and army officers for whom the nation signified only a transitory destination. As Mizutani concludes, this was not simply a 'politics of racial proximity' but a serious contestation of British imperial privileges built on race and class and enforced through the "ideology of 'domicile'" (Bonea 218). Domiciled Europeans were 'poor whites' who held inferior jobs on the railways and in commercial firms like Jim Corbett, who worked as a transshipment manager in Railways and were not received in the social circle of the elites. He lived among the Indians and years of exposure to local ways of living, culture and society gave him a comprehensive understanding of India, especially the Kumauni region. The man-eater expeditions allow him a detailed observation of the rural life and culture. A humanist by nature, he strived hard to help the colonised and was much pleased to receive the admiration and love of the local villagers.

To conclude, Jim Corbett does not emerge as a conventional colonial writer. He admires everything about India: her culture, customs, people, the forest and wild life too. Most of the colonial discourse was an outcome of a short-termed experience of the Indian impression. However, he was born and brought-up in India and spent seventy years of his life with the common Indians. He belongs to and exhibits respect for India; a rich culture that retained some of its ancient glory. He absorbed the essence of this nation with sensitivity and depth of understanding. Dissimilar to the colonial literature; Jim Corbett's writing is devoid of the indifference for the Indian culture. The attraction for the magnificent and exciting India is not undermined by a sense of racial supremacy. The delineation of Hindu culture is reverent and designates a profound understanding of the life philosophy of the colonised.

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