

Revisiting Corbett's India: A Postcolonial Reading of Jim Corbett's *My India*

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ABSTRACT

Re-reading and re-writing are two important methods of postcolonial studies. Postcolonial writers try to examine the latent colonial discourse within an apparently simple colonial text. This paper is an attempt to study Jim Corbett's My India (1952) from a postcolonial perspective to find out the validity of the claims, which Jim Corbett made in the preface section of this book. In the preface section of My India, Corbett claimed that India was actually Jim Corbett's homeland and the "poor of India" were actually his fellow countrymen. But the reality appears to be different, as Corbett at the very dawn of Indian Independence left India to settle in Kenya. Thus the paper will try to find out answers to the questions like, does India in My India suggests author's own motherland or Corbett's India was actually a British colonial master's India. Again, Corbett's high extolling of poor folks of Kumaon and Garhwal, and the coolies of Mokameh Ghat did actually reflects his empathy for the natives or it was tinged with sense of White man's superiority.

Keywords:

Jim Corbett is one of the famous Anglo Indian writers of hunting and jungle stories. He wrote books like *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1944), *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* (1948) and *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1952). In the nineteenth century the term Anglo Indian denoted English people living in India. Till early twentieth century, the genre Anglo Indian literature comprised works of both British and Indian writers writing on India, where the medium of expression was English. Corbett's fame rests not only being a hunter and a writer of *shikar* stories but also as the lover of Indian jungles and its people. Jim Corbett in his book *My India* (1952) provides a lively picture of the British India. The title *My India* is very significant as it contains possibilities of multiple interpretations. In the dedicatory section of the book, Jim Corbett made it clear what his reader should expect from the book. To explain what his India actually means, he writes:

If you are looking for a history of India, or for an account of the rise and fall of the British raj, or for the reason for the cleaving of the subcontinent into two mutually antagonistic parts and the effect this mutilation will have on the respective sections, and ultimately on Asia, you will not find it in these pages. . . . In my India, the India I know, there are four hundred million people, ninety percent of whom are simple, honest, brave, loyal, hard- working souls . . . [i]t 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 shall endeavour to tell in the pages of this book, which I humbly dedicate to my friends, the poor of India. (3)

From the "Dedication" it is clear that in *My India*, the India we have is the India of British Raj and the stories of the book have depicted the picture of the colonised India.

In *My India* Corbett addresses ' the poor of India' as his 'men' and 'friend' but Aimé Césaire in his essay "Discourse on Colonisation" (originally published in 1950) comments that in a colonised nation no 'human relationship' except relation of domination and submission is possible between the coloniser and colonized. (177) Then the question arises how far was it possible for Corbett to record an impartial account of the lives of the Indian people? What was his main intention behind the omission of the political and social issues of the British Raj? The independence of colonised India and its partition changed the socio-political histories of the two new-born nations, India and Pakistan. It is obvious that those events were the byproducts of British colonialism and influenced the lives of the people of the both nations; irrespective of class, caste and creed. Then on which ground Corbett decided not to focus on them. Was it actually a part of his narrative strategy or Corbett was aware of the fact that discussion of these issues will actually put his concept of India into question.

The arrival of the British on the Indian shore and their nearly three hundred years regime left a tremendous impact upon different aspects of both nations' histories. India was not a mere colonized land for its British ruler; it was the 'jewel in the crown', the symbol of their pride and the glory of the British

Empire. James Morris (known as Jan Morris after the sex reassignment surgery in 1972) in his book *Pax Britannica: The Climax of an Empire* (originally published in 1968) aptly comments:

India was different in kind from the rest of the Empire — British for so long that it had become part of the national consciousness, so immense that it really formed, with Britain itself, the second focus of a dual power. . . . India was the brightest gem, the Raj . . . India appealed to the British love of pageantry and fairy-tale, and to most people the destinies of the two countries seemed not merely intertwined, but indissoluble. (29)

This dialogue between two cultures affected the destiny of both of the nations. This happy encounter on the part of the British master was recorded in the shape of written documents - from memoirs, letters, diaries, autobiographies, travelogue to purely fictional works. In most cases these written *pieces* were attempt to introduce the 'real India' to their own people and the world, who never stepped their feet upon Indian shore. Thus, this gave birth to a vast corpus of British writings.

Where non-fictional works like memoirs, letters, diaries, travelogue recorded different real life experiences and historical events; fictional works too, in their own way depicted diverse historical, social, cultural aspects of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, between the Englishmen and native Indians. Kipling's *Kim* (1901) and his other stories and poems and E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) are but a few remarkable examples of those attempts to show "the real India", not the superficial India. This trend continued even after the independence of India as the writers like John Masters (*Night Runners of Bengal* [1951] and *Bhowani Junction*[1954]), J.G. Farrell (*The Empire Trilogy : Troubles* [1970], *The Siege of Krishnapur*[1973], and *The Singapore Grip* [1978]), Valerie Fitzgerald (*Zemindar* [1981]), M.M. Kaye (*The Far Pavilions* and *Shadow of the Moon* [1980]) and others recorded in their books different events and incidents of the British Raj.

It is true that these foreign masters of India tried to record the events of the time of Raj and they also made their best effort to present the "real India". In spite of these considerations, we cannot ignore the fact that all these narratives were tinged with a sense of white man's racial superiority, where the Indians were always viewed as the 'other'. These books always contained information of culture, custom and history of the Colonial India that could be said in West, whether it was the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 or the Suttee or the caste system of India. The concept of representation of 'real India' is itself problematic as postcolonial critics like Edward Said believes that representation can never be realistic. Thus, the picture of India that we have here is incomplete as the larger portion of Indian society and its people are missing from there. Another problem is that all these stories were narrated from the point of view of a white man who was a ruler, a colonial master. As a corollary to Spivak's "Can the subaltern speak?", can white privileged speeches in a post-colonial critique exist without some recalibrations? Thus these narratives can never provide impartial recording of the real events. Sara Suleri in her essay "The Rhetoric of English India" writes:

From the vast body of eighteenth-century historical documentation of British rule in India to the proliferation of Anglo-Indian fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the narratives of English India are fraught with the idiom of dubiety, or a mode of cultural tale-telling. . . . (111)

Unlike his contemporary writers, Jim Corbett employed a different mode of tale-telling. He tried to avoid writing about different historical and socio-political events of the British India. Rather, in his stories he accompanies his reader on a tour of the world of Himalayan forests and wilderness, of the beautiful valley of Kumaon and on the ferries in between Gangetic plains of Mokameh Ghat and Samaria Ghat. It is not the description of hunting expeditions and Himalayan wilderness that made his books worth noticeable: rather it is his exceptional narrative ease with which he minutely described the lives and the daily world of the rustic Indians. His sympathies were so quintessentially with the Indian landscape, its flora and fauna, its inhabitants, while his linguistic skills were derived from the best tradition of British folklore and storytelling for pleasure. (Rangarajan 398)

Corbett wrote *My India* in the year 1952, when he was in Kenya. After Indian independence, like many other British people, Jim Corbett also preferred to leave India. His books are reminiscences of those days which he spent here, among Indian men. In *My India*, Jim Corbett recounts some memorable moments of his life: his first encounter with the Indian Jungle, his experiences as Fuel Inspector, Trans-shipment inspector of Indian Railways, as land-owner, as an army officer of the First World War, and most remarkably as a hunter and lover of Indian Jungle. *My India* comprises total twelve stories. Most of the stories are named after people and incidents that left a permanent mark on Corbett's life. The most striking feature of these stories is that apart from narrating the tales of an individual's life, they highlight the problems and different

dominant issues of the time. Thus, the characters in this book like pilgrims in Chaucer's Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* are at the same time individuals and representative of their class and society.

Corbett engages himself in portraying his version of "real India" in *My India*. Jim Corbett like Kipling's *Kim* lived and grew among Indians. He had great knowledge of Indian languages, customs and culture. His books are products of his life time experiences. The stories like "Chamri", "Life at Mokameh Ghat", "Budhu", "Moti", are replete with incidents that narrate troubles and sufferings of the people of oppressed classes. These stories also touch upon the issues like caste system, untouchability, superstition among the people of India, the condition of women and so on. In the story "Life at Mokameh Ghat" Corbett talks about the problems he faced at the time of starting a school for the children of coolies:

One of my first undertakings...was to start a school for the sons of my workmen, and for the sons of the lower paid railway staff...Caste prejudices were the first snag we ran up against, but our master soon circumnavigated it by removing the sides of the hut. For whereas high- and low-caste boys could not sit together in cold brittle air the same hut, there was no objection to their sitting in the same shed. (184-85)

In the story "Sultana: India's Robin Hood" Corbett criticizes the severity of the laws and rules of colonial India. In this story Jim Corbett shows the dreadful condition of the criminal tribes of India, where for no reason children from their birth are branded as criminal and thus have no other fate than becoming a criminal. Again the plight and oppressed situation of Indian coolies and labourers find its expression in the stories like "Loyalty", "Budhu", "Chamari" and "The Law of the Jungles". The story "Budhu" contains a heart-wrenching picture of the sufferings of the coolies, who had to work for more than sixteen hours a day, under scorching sun and biting cold:

The first day's work leaves the hands red and sore and the back with an ache that is a torment. On the second day blisters form on the hands, and the ache in the back becomes an even greater torment. On the third day the blisters break and become septic, and the back can with difficulty be straightened. Thereafter for a week or ten days only guts, and plenty of them, can keep the sufferer at work. (162)

Jim Corbett never deviates from what he claims in the dedicatory section. All the stories tell the tales of 'India's starving millions'. But it will be complete injustice to label *My India* as a chronicle of cholera, cast prejudice, criminals and tribes. Rather this book provides a clear view of the unseen and neglected truths about the Indian rustic and tribal people and their lives. Here one can also find the glimpses of changing India. The stories like "Queen of Villages" and "Pre- Red- Tape Days" exhibit the independent state of women of Himalayan Terai. In the story "Pre Red-Tape-Days" Corbett exalts the courage of tribal women by saying, "This aboriginal tribe, living in the unhealthy Terai, is renowned for two sterling qualities – cleanliness, and the independence of the women". (68)

The story "Life at Mokameh Ghat" shows how labourers from different classes, casts and religion worked together with equal zeal and happiness. In the story "Chamari", Chamari became the head man of two hundred workers among whom many were Brahmins, Chattris and Thakurs.

It is Jim Corbett's experience among poor people of India that enabled him to record the events realistically. The picture of India, we have here is actually the India of the British Raj. Here, the places like Nainital and Mokameh Ghat become the emblem of India. Again the author's unwillingness to deal with historical events is also a part of narrative strategy. The world this book explores belong to those classes of people whose condition always remain the same in all phases of history – the untouchables, tribes, coolies, workers, peasants. Again, *My India* depicts a subjective view of India - Corbett's India. In this book Corbett was solely concerned about sharing his own reminiscences. He was neither critical of Indian customs and culture or of British imperialism. Allen J. Greenberger in the book *The British Image of India* (1969) identifies three eras of Anglo-Indian novel – The Era of Confidence (1880-1910): it celebrates the very concept of Empire; The Era of Doubt (1910- 1935) questions the Empire; and The Era of Melancholy (1935-1960) is full of nostalgic memories of the Empire. Corbett's *My India* belongs to the final era where the author becomes nostalgic about the old days of empire and it is known that reminiscence has always lenient and compassionate tone.

Now, this is the time to answer the most important question, whether Jim Corbett's narrative was impartial or like any other British man his narrative was biased and celebrates the white man myth. In this book, Corbett, could never move beyond the skin of a white man. He was always aware of his superior position and cultural supremacy. In "Life at Mokameh Ghat" Corbett shows how in Mokameh Ghat they observed no Hindu or Mohammedan Holidays. There was, however, one day in the year that all of them looked forward to with anticipation and great pleasure, and that day was Christmas (198). It is evident that

Christmas was celebrated there as it was the festival of masters. In the very same story, Corbett became surprised when he learned that the Mohammedan tobacco merchant could speak English fluently. He was simply unable to digest the fact that a simple Indian could master the language of Masters. In the colonial or postcolonial context the matter of representation is very crucial and the knowledge of language, culture and custom provides a man that power. The knowledge of Indian culture and custom enabled Corbett to introduce India before Crosthwaite. It is very same knowledge of the master's language that enabled the Mohammedan merchant to reject and resist the colonial master's narration and interpretation. In the story "Chamari", Chamari rose above his status of untouchable and became Headman of workers but he always preferred to sit on a mattress before Corbett. Corbett never questioned this gesture and happily took it as the show of respect. The stories of *My India* are fraught with narrator's sympathy for the workers, labourers and coolies of India. Surprisingly, in Mokameh Ghat, under his supervision people worked for sixteen hours a day from four in the morning to eight at night. In return, they just received ten *annas* for the unloading of each wagons. Strikingly, all these stories depict similar events where Corbett helped some dying, helpless, wretched Indian from their plight and in return how those Indians and their family members showed their respect and reverence to Corbett and his family. The story "Kunwar Singh" depicts Kunwar Singh's respect and loyalty towards Corbett and his brother Tom. In the story "Budhu", when Corbett saves Budhu from the clutches of evil Baniya by paying his debt, Budhu shows his gratefulness by saying "I am now your slave" (166). There is not a single account where Corbett is shown to be helped by any Indian. All the stories reflected that his position among Indian was not of a friend rather he was a "white Sadhu" a master, a demigod, the saviour of "poor of India". Corbett's generosity, love, sympathy was actually a part of 'white man's burden'.

Thus, beneath its humanist approach, *My India* carries the seed of "imperialist ideology, colonial dominance and continuing Western hegemony" (Nayar 164-65). It can be said that despite his efforts Corbett failed to develop a 'true human relation' with Indians. The binaries like coloniser/colonised, Anglo Indian/ native Indian, master/ subject, which hindered this process. The India, we have here is actually the India of a legitimised colonial master. In *My India* like any other White author, Corbett weaves his narrative around the 'master- myth' that proclaims a static line of demarcation between imperial power and disempowered culture, between colonizer and colonized' (Suleri 112).

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