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EXPLOITATION OF THE NATURE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WILD IN STEPHEN ALTER'S *IN THE JUNGLES OF THE NIGHT*

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Abstract

The inclination towards human flesh as part of a daily diet is an 'unnatural' phenomenon for a predatory animal like tiger and leopard. But during the British Raj, the number of man-eaters was drastically increasing in the Kumaon and Garhwal regions of India. Strikingly, this was also the time when the rampant extraction of timber in the Terai forests saw the height of colonial exploitation. It is in this context that Stephen Alter has set his novel, In the Jungles of the Night (2016), which is included in this paper as the case-study. Alter's novel is a fictional recounting of Jim Corbett, who is depicted here as a hunter with the impulse of a naturalist and conservationist. Taking Corbett's experience in the account, as narrated by Alter in his novel, this paper would explore how man-eaters are not a natural selection, but a production of human experimentation and interference in the ecological system. How exploitation of the natural resources and encroachment in the vicinity of tigers and leopards threaten ecological balance, would also be the points of discussion for this paper. The paper would consider the colonial policies towards he wild life and investigate its role in the negative transformation of the ecosphere. Finally, the paper would draw its conclusion by reflecting upon the eco-literary consciousness in Alter's novel, suggesting how human beings can still avert ecological crisis by preserving what is left in the bio-diversity.

Keywords: Man-eater, extraction/ exploitation, encroachment, ecological crisis

In 1907 a man-eater commonly known as the Champawat tigress was shot dead by Jim Corbett. It was his first proclaimed hunting of a man-eater that had been terrorising the

villagers at the foothills of Himalaya region for over a couple of years. According to Corbett, this tigress "had arrived Kumaon as a full fledged man-eater, from Nepal…after she had killed two hundred human beings, and during the four years she had been operating in the Kumaon had added two hundred and thirty-four to this number" (Corbett, 1). The figure seems quite astounding even if one excludes all the numbers of death occurred afterwards because of the wounds during the attack of the tigress. For over a couple of decades Corbett performed a significant role in hunting down a number of leopards and tigers in the Kumaon and Garhwal regions, most of which happened to be the man-eaters. If a tiger's being a man-eater gives sufficient rationale to kill one of the endangered species on Earth, it certainly implies an ecological crisis that demands proper investigation. This paper aims to probe deep in the man/ animal spatial crisis to explore further human responsibility in unbalancing ecological sustainability. Taking Stephen Alter's novel *In the Jungles of the Night* (2016) as the case-study, the paper would explore how man-eaters are not the natural selections, but the productions of human experimentation and interference in the ecological system.

Alter's novel is a fictional recounting of Jim Corbett, who is depicted here as a hunter with the impulse of a naturalist and conservationist. Taking Corbett's experience in the account, as narrated by Alter in his novel, this paper aims to explore how exploitation of natural resources and encroachment in the vicinity of tigers and leopards threaten ecological balance. The paper would consider the colonial policies towards the wild life and investigate its role in the negative transformation of the ecosphere. Finally, the paper would draw its conclusion by reflecting upon the eco-literary consciousness in Alter's novel, suggesting how human beings can still avert ecological crisis possibilities by preserving what is left in the bio-diversity.

In 1864 the Imperial Forest Department was established in colonised India, not to sustain bio-diversity but to extract resources from the forest in a more 'systematic' way. In the 'Introduction' of *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-Colonial Era*, William Adams and Martin Mulligan have pointed out that "both the exploitation of nature in the colonies and the impetus to conserve nature for longer-term human use were a product of the colonial mindset" (Adams and Mulligan, 5). The fact that the idea of forest conservation was a production of colonial mindset, is not only ironic, but also paradoxical and to a great extent problematic. With the absence of proper ecological consciousness and understanding in the colonial idea of conservation, the policy of 'scientific forestry', as proposed by the Forest Department of British India, became a methodical and 'scientific' venture for efficient timber extraction. Timber was clearly a profitable resource for the British that would be used during the industrial productions. Forests were mostly seen by the colonial administration as the abundant sources of timber and other natural resources. But extracting timber more than the regenerative capacities of the forests, resulted in

deforestation in all over India. Therefore, a new forest policy was adapted for the 'rational' use of natural resources and continuous extraction/ exploitation of timber. It is a view that defines Nature as an abundant reservoir of 'resources' which could be extracted and exploited as the raw materials in the industrial productions.

Behind such colonial understanding of Nature, there might be "the European Enlightenment's predatory hubris in relation to earth and its resources", as argued by Amitav Ghosh in his non-fiction, *The Great Derangement* (Ghosh, 75). The colonialist-capitalist outlook compels the European colonial powers to find Nature as a space of 'wilderness' that should be conquered and 'tamed'. With human settlements, growing and encroaching in the non-human territories, the view of Nature as a 'wild' space with inexhaustible resources gave rise to rampant exploitation of the forest resources. With what Ghosh has considered as the 'hubris' of human kind, the colonisers might have found themselves as the harbingers of civilisation. There is a strong connection between the European colonial idea of 'civilisation' and the destruction of ecosphere in the colonies. 'Civilisation' has largely been considered as an antithesis to the 'wild Nature'. According to this view, civilisation represents human rationality which Nature lacks in its wilderness. The colonial aggression towards Nature might also be seen as a process whereby ecological exploitation is rationalised by the economic necessities. According to Raymond Murphy there are four dimensions of rationality in a colonial state. The first one is related to scientific development— "the calculated, systematic expansion of the means to understand and manipulate nature", with which the colonial powers aimed to achieve "mastery of nature and of humans through increased scientific and technical knowledge" (Murphy, 28). This is how the British in India seemed to initiate a wide scale exploitation of natural resources with a 'rational' explanation for their actions as 'systematic' endeavours. The second dimension of colonial rationality, as Murphy has exposed, would deal with rationalisation of economic development in a capitalist society. The idea of economic growth with the help of capital might be found as early as the advent of agriculture in the history of human kind. The popular belief that the agricultural development ensured the rise of civilisation, could also be found in the colonial policy to control the wilderness of Nature. In India the British tried to achieve this end by gradually increasing the agricultural land and encroaching into the non-human space. With this, they would not only 'tame' Nature, but also get revenue from the settler-villagers.

But the expansion of agricultural fields and the encroachment in the forests would mean a gradual deforestation. For the colonisers it seemed to be a threat as it would cease their continuous timber extraction. Thus, the colonial conservation policy was widely accepted in the colonial territories as a way of perpetual income from the natural resources without damaging the source of capital. It was no less than an experimentation with Nature to find out how far natural resources could be exploited in a 'scientific' manner. Its impact over

the ecological relations was quite obvious, as could be seen in the case of the Terai forest at the foothills of Himalaya.

The Terai was rich with the Himalayan subtropical forest. The British started rampant extraction of timber from the Terai forest mostly to support the development of railways in India. In the second half of the 19th century the British were aiming to the extend the railway network all over the Indian subcontinent[1]. The expansion of the railways would mean a continuous supply of timber for the production of the wagons and carriages and for the sleepers on the track. Even wood was used as an alternative fuel for the steam locomotives. "Within the country there were 1,349 km of tracks in 1860, which increased to 7,678 in 1870, 25,495 in 1890, 56,980 in 1920-21" (Dangwal, 120). The demand for timber was also increased from "1.78 million cft in 1887-88 to 5.1 million cft in 1911-12 and 8.7 million cft in 1912-13" (Dangwal, 114). In accordance with the rising demand of timber for the railway sleepers, the submontane forests with the Himalayan *deodar*, *sal*, and *sissoo* trees began to disappear drastically. The over exploitation of the Terai forest implied not only a continuous deforestation and narrowing the 'wild space', but also the increase of human population consistently with highly concentrated settlements of workers in the forest surroundings[2].

At this point, the attack of the man-eaters increased in the locality of Kumaon and Garhwal, which was neither a coincidence, nor a 'natural' phenomenon. Many may agree with Corbett in this regard that "[h]uman beings are not the natural prey of tigers" (Corbett, x). In other words, a tiger's being a man-eater is not a natural selection, but a compulsion "of circumstances beyond its control" (Corbett, x). Such circumstances might be created when predatory animals like tigers and leopards become wounded and are forced to opt for an easier prey on human beings. The wounds might be the result of an accident for a predatory animal at the time of "killing a porcupine", affecting its natural practice of preying (Corbett, x). But it might also be possible that "a particular tiger to take to man-eating might be the result of a carelessly fired shot and failure" in killing the animal (Corbett, x). On the other hand, high population would mean an increasing number of deaths, which near the vicinity of predatory animals is alarming. The growing population in the Terai region was mostly comprised of the underpaid labourers in the woodcutters' camps. Because of their poverty and low life-style they would live in a slum-like condition. The unhygienic ways of living would often result in the outbreak of epidemic diseases. Many would die as a consequence and in most of the cases, the corpses were disposed without making proper funeral. In many cases the remains of deceased human bodies were exposed to the predatory animals that compelled them to be accustomed with the taste of human flesh. At least two instances are brought to light by Jim Corbett that might illustrate the connection between the rising number of human death and the turning of the predatory animals into the man-eaters. He specifies

> …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'. (Corbett, xvi)

Thus, human responsibility in turning the predatory animals into the man-eaters remains unavoidable. To ignore ecological relations in the extraction/ exploitation policies was to allow a negative transformation to happen in the environment and in the ecosphere. It is clear that the transformation of the predatory animals into the man-eaters is part of the same ecological conversion because of which the subtropical forests in the Terai region was changing their characteristics by turning into the deciduous ones. Evidently, as far as the man-eaters are concerned, when a tiger or a leopard inclines "to adopt a diet alien to it", it shows human interference in the ecosphere, transforming the 'natural' into the 'unnatural' (Corbett, x).

Stephen Alter's novel opens in 1888 with a thirteen years old Jim Corbett trying to unravel the mysterious and unnatural death of a local resident named Cynthia Bertram. The character of Jim in Alter's narrative is based on the real-life persona of Jim Corbett, the India-born British naturalist of the early twentieth century. Roughly at the same time when the British had initiated a large-scale timber extraction from the Terai forest, Jim is found in the novel gathering ferns for his botany collection, suggesting his preoccupation with preservation. His ecological consciousness would lead him to be an investigator of human savagery over the non-human entities. At the Nainital cemetery, where Jim has been looking for the ferns, he discovers that the grave of Cynthia Lily Bertram has been mutilated roughly and the remains of her body have been dragged aside. It has been the rumour that she was killed by a man-eater leopard almost ten years before Jim would find her mutilated grave. So, the local people assume that it is a man-eater leopard again that has exploited her grave. But behind her unnatural death, Jim finds out that "there were some who believed she was murdered and it was made to look like a leopard's kill" (Alter, 8). His elder brother Tom informs him that he had shot a leopard in the suspicion of its being the man-eater after two weeks of Cynthia Bertram's death. But the leopard he had shot was not a man-eater, as it "was in her prime, a healthy young female…carrying two cubs in her womb" (Alter, 26). Jim keeps, almost preserves, these two cubs in a bottle of formaldehyde just at the side of a matchbox wherein he keeps a tooth of Cynthia Bertram he found near her grave. The one would confirm that the leopard was not an 'unnatural' being, or the man-eater—she was a victim of mere human suspicion. The other would remind him that the mysteries of Cynthia's unnatural death and her exploited grave are still unresolved.

There is another strange connection between the dead cubs of the leopard and the tooth of Cynthia. Both are suggestive of human savagery. As far as Cynthia is concerned, it is

revealed that she was murdered by a person named Edgar Tunbridge. After killing her he mutilated her body with an intention to make it look like a doing of a man-eater. Alter, in his novel, differentiates between murder as a conscious act of greed and evil, and the preying of a predatory animal as a natural instinct. Jim reflects that "if a leopard kills someone it is a predatory instinct not a sin. There's nothing cruel or immoral about it" (Alter, 54). Tunbridge murdered Cynthia possibly because he wanted to dissolve all the evidence of his relationship with her. The connection between the dead leopard and Cynthia is strengthened as it is unfolded that when Tunbridge killed her, she "was carrying his child" (Alter, 60). It is also found that her grave has been exploited only to steal her wedding ring, implying how human greed ultimately leads to human savagery. From this point, the killing of the leopard, only suspecting it to be a man-eater, seems to be an act of unnecessary bloodshed. But it has been done to serve human needs—to suppress crimes, to inflict human savageries over an animal, to presume murder as the preying of an animal, and to 'create' a man-eater to save a murderer.

Human injustice towards the animal world in the first part of the novel has a resemblance with the colonial exploitation of Nature during the British Raj. To consider the railways in the colonised India only as a 'development' scheme, would be to ignore its role in the environmental degradation. For the British, the railway system was a "lifeline of the country upon which the colonial economy flourished" (Alter, 78). And to sustain the railway system timber exploitation seemed unavoidable. But this sort of colonial argument fails to cover up human responsibility in environmental degradation. Environmental degradation and ecological unsustainability seem to be the opposite sides of a same coin. It implies that with exploiting Nature and endangering the ecological balance, human beings are experimenting with the 'natural systems' of the planet. The deforestation and encroachment in the 'wild space' seem to be one of such experiments that results in a human/ animal spatial overlapping. In the context of the Terai forest, this kind of spatial overlapping brought an adverse condition for the tigers and leopards—the predatory animals who were compelled to live along with the human beings. The inevitable consequence was the transformation of these animals into the man-eaters.

The second part of the novel is set in 1926 with Jim at Mayaghat and Sarda Valley forests to kill a man-eater tigress there. The second part begins with the man-eater preying upon human beings in the settlement of woodcutters. The tigress has been described as having permanent injuries "with her broken canines and the relentless pain in her leg", and yet "she is capable of killing to keep herself alive" (Alter, 71). The wound was a result of failed attempt to kill her. It is described in the novel that the tigress "has only started killing people in the past six months, since the labourers arrived…The DFO tried to shoot her and his bullet grazed her shoulder…The tigress escaped though she was wounded" (Alter, 95). It

seems that human encroachment in the forest leads to turn the tigress into a man-eater. It is evident in the way the man-eater keeps searching for human preys until she finds a place where "the forest opens into a wide clearing where hundreds of trees have been felled and the sour-sweet odour of sawdust taints the air" (Alter, 71). The deforested land occupied by the human beings seems helping the tigress to locate the human presence. The wide exposed land which has been part of the forest shows a transformed eco-geographical space. The presence of the man-eater seems to be a production of the environmental conversion.

The highly concentrated population near the vicinity of the tigress seems to create a conflict in the man/ animal spatial intersection. The human settlement near the forest is a result of colonial exploitation of timber, as most of the settlers are the workers in the woodcutters' camps. Alter has mentioned in the novel that for almost

> …the past fifty years, the forests of the bhabar and terai, at the foot of the Himalayas, had produced millions of tonnes of billets to fuel locomotives…As routes expanded and new tracks were laid…millions more trees had to be felled, provided hardwood sleepers…*Shorea robusta*, commonly known as sal, was the perfect tree to provide a solid foundation of railroad sleepers…As virgin jungles bordering the Himalayas were gradually depleted of sal…The forest department was ordered to supervise extraction of this timber. (Alter 77)

In the forest where colonial economic aggression has been taking place by timber extraction, the predatory animal starts transforming into a man-eater. It seems the man/animal spatial conflict is a result of experimentation with 'methodical' and 'scientific' encroachment in the wild-space.

The forest-policy of the British colonisers has not only created a man/ animal conflict, but also restricted the tribal inhabitants and villagers from entering the forest. The conserved forest is considered to be a source of capital wherein the tribal inhabitants and villagers are seen as the intruders. The colonial attitude remains same for both the poor inhabitants and the wild animals surrounding the forest. The authority at once tries to get rid of them to continue timber extraction in an uninterrupted way. The conflict has been depicted in the novel with the reference to the inhabitants of a tribal community near the Mayaghat forest, known as the Banrajis. The British tries to, as it is evident in the novel, colonise both the forest and the local people near the place. The forest conservation policies of the British leads to "a fierce oppression of indigenous peoples" to ensure "highly convenient form of social control" (Grove, 12)[4]. In the novel, Andrew Kincaid is a character who embodies colonial aggression towards Nature and the commoners. He is the DFO who has tried and failed in killing the tigress, causing a severe injury to her that would turn her into a man-eater. He has threatened the Banrajis from entering the forest. He has warned Kaiyu, a woman living in the forest all by herself, that if she does not leave the forest "he would burn down" her hut, as "all this land

belongs to the British sarkar" (Alter, 96). His character seems to be a juxtaposition of several contradictions. He condemns the British subjugation over Scotland, his country, but he does the same in India. He appreciates the fact that "Scotland has beautiful forests", but concerning the jungles of India he thinks that he would be happy if he "never saw another tree" in his life again— "[c]ut 'em all down, as far as I'm concerned", he reflects before Jim (Alter, 125). But contradiction seems to be a quality in the character of Jim as well. Jim, the naturalist is also the renowned hunter. He is obsessed with the beauty of tiger and leopard, confirming in the novel as he says that if he would be given a chance to take a reincarnation, he would prefer it to be a leopard[5]. But he also tries to "protect those who are too terrified to step outside" because there is a presence of a man-eater (Alter, 53). He knows it very well that "the most dangerous creature on earth is man", but still he wants to hunt down the man-eaters (Alter, 34). The chain of contradiction goes on as far as the characters are concerned in this novel. The most probable explanation behind the contradictory elements in the novel is perhaps to expose the paradox in the colonial policies of forest conservation whereby the British tries to protect the forest land only to ensure efficient timber extraction. It also shows the paradoxical idea behind the anthropocentric attitude of human beings whereby they would create human/ non-human binary. They try to exploit the non-human entities for their economic profit, disregarding its impact over the environment and the ecosphere which also includes them as a species. Human beings may nourish their pride for having a rivalling power to Nature, but they seem oblivious to the fact that that experimentation with the 'Natural' systems might create an 'unthinkable' crisis.

But Alter's novel ends with a hope for the human kind in restoring the ecological balance. Jim is found in the novel speaking for the conservation of forests and its inhabitants at the foothills of Himalaya to maintain stability in the ecosphere. Jim is of the opinion that the "few valleys in Kumaon that remained uninhabited…should be protected as a sanctuary for generations to come" (Alter, 78). The conservation is needed to create a non-human space that would help preserving what is left in the biodiversity. Human exploitation of Nature along with interference and experimentation with the ecosystem might result in the transformed ecological relations. Because of the intrusion of the human beings in the forests and their unbridled exploitation of timber, the forest is changing its characteristics, the predatory animals are transforming into the man-eaters, and the naturalists like Jim in Alter's novel, are forced to become hunters to shot down the man-eaters even though it would damage the bio-diversity. Alter has commented in this regard, reflecting "[o]ver centuries, man has become a hunter by nature and we have developed into one of the most successful killers on earth" (Alter, 165). Even in certain cases human interference with the ecosystem has helped to grow a 'killing instinct' among other species by turning them into the man-eaters. The evidence of human crime of interfering in the ecological systems is hard to wipe

out, as the footprints near the grave of Cynthia remains to suggest that it has been a human being, not a leopard, that has killed her and mutilated her coffin.

In sustaining ecological balance, conservation has a significant role to perform. Alter speaks about the emergence of ecological consciousness behind the idea of conservation. In his novel, the transformative evolution of Jim's character from a hunter-naturalist to a conservationist shows a gradual growth of ecological consciousness. Jim has been shown in this novel as a person who is 'compelled' to shoot the man-eaters with his riffle, but who prefers to 'shoot' the tigers with his camera: "A well-placed bullet goes straight to the heart or brain, while a photograph takes in the whole creature as well as its surroundings" (Alter, 178). The choice between 'shooting' a tiger with a rifle and shooting it by a camera makes a substantial difference. It is a choice for the human beings to decide over, which way to proceed further from the crossroad of human greed and the need of conservation. Alter and his fictional character Jim have both proposed in the novel that human beings need to conserve the wildlife in order to sustain what is left and to restore what is about to be lost in the biodiversity of Earth—our only planetary home.

Notes

1. The introduction of railway transportation in the British occupied Indian subcontinent was pondered over since 1830s by the East India Company. It took almost twenty years to turn into reality and in 1853 the British authority established the first railway connection in India, between Bombay and Thana, comprising of 21 miles (34 kms). Please see *India's Railway History: A Research Handbook* (2012) by John Hurd and Ian J. Kerr.
2. Apart from the settlements of workers, human population was continuously increasing near the Terai forest with the fast urbanization of the hill stations and cantonments. The forest was already under a crisis to keep supplying timber for the railway development. The growing human settlements put an additional pressure over it. From the 1920s as the infrastructure development of railways was slowed down, the demand of timber for this cause was also decreasing. But it was also the time when new industries were built around the country. The demand of timber was once again increasing for the industries. Please see "Commercialisation of Forests, Timber Extraction and Deforestation in Uttaranchal, 1815-1947" (2005) by Dhirendra Datt Dangwal.
3. The conflict between the colonial administration and the tribal inhabitants over the question of forest conservation instigated several anti-colonial movements in the latter half of the 19th century. Please see *Green Imperialism* (1995) by Richard Grove.
4. In his book *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, Corbett has reflected that as tigers would be "exterminated…India will be the poorer by having lost the finest of her fauna" (xv).

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