



LANDSCAPE AND HAUNTING IN THE WORKS OF JIM CORBETT

Alok Ranjan Maral

**Research Scholar , Department of English and
Modern European Languages University of Allahabad , Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh , India.**

ABSTRACT :

Jim Corbett a hunter turned conservationist who spent his whole life towards the conservation of flora and fauna of the United Province (now Uttarakhand). Corbett as an educated White man didn't believe in superstition and ghosts in his early years of life, but later on during his shooting trips Corbett came across some haunting and supernatural occurrences, which he was unable to solve logically through his scientific temper. The present paper attempts to discuss these haunting and supernatural incidents in context of the landscape in the works of Jim Corbett.



KEYWORDS : *Ghosts, Haunting, Landscape, Superstition, Supernatural.*

INTRODUCTION

Jim Corbett's works are not imaginary, they count his experiences as a hunter, conservationist, wildlife photographer and most importantly a permanent resident of India based in the erstwhile hill district of Kumaon in Uttar Pradesh, now a part of Uttarakhand. For more than three generations the Corbett family had made Nainital and Kaladhungi their home. Corbett was in the unique position of mixing with the Queen of England, Viceroy, high level district officials as well as the poorest of the poor of India. It is to be noted that he rarely writes about the top level White rulers and civil servants, while most of his works are devoted to the poor villagers of Kumaon and of Mokamahghat in Bihar. Corbett was called a 'White Sadhu' in his own life time as he records in 'Queen of the Village' and was respected by each section of society, especially the poor. His writing shows his deep sympathy for the poor villagers with whom he grew up and spent most of his adult years, saving them not only from the depredations of man-eating tigers, but also from the ravages of disease and poverty. With a reciprocity rare in his day, he absorbed and reflected many of the characteristics of the Indians he lived and worked with. As Kala notes Corbett distributed money equally to Hindu temples, Muslim mosques and the Methodist churches, besides giving money to each of the villages of Kaladhungi in his will. This is all the more remarkable because he died in Africa.

While Corbett's writing can be read through many lenses, one intriguing and riveting aspect of his work is that which deals with faith, superstition and belief. While this can be the subject of an in-depth study, the purpose of the paper is to discuss just three episodes in detail. All the three episodes deal with haunting. The present paper attempts to discuss these hauntings in the context of the landscape where they occur. Haunting and Landscape is a cutting edge in the area of research in literature and Corbett fits into this paradigm. Jim Corbett who developed a passion for wildlife is remembered for his outstanding contribution to the conservation of flora and fauna in the erstwhile Kumaon district of

Uttar Pradesh. Corbett who grew up in Nainital was an uneducated white man who sought a reason for every incident or event, but there were occasions when Corbett himself was not able to explain some particular event, mostly of a supernatural nature or a haunting. It is the purpose of the paper to deal with this unexplained experience which Corbett faced during his shikar days.

The first 'Spooky' experience of haunting is taken from chapter one of *Jungle Lore*, which pertains to Corbett's village in Kaladhungi. The Corbett owned a piece of land in the village of Choti Haldwani in Kaladhungi. This was their winter home and Jim Corbett grew up in these rural surroundings. The first 'haunting' is about an unexplained and weird call which sent the villagers of Kaladhungi hurrying into their houses. It was widely supposed that this unearthly shriek was a cry of a *churail* on a moonlit night. The villagers protected themselves by locking themselves inside their houses as soon as such a cry was heard. However, on this moonlight night when the cry of the *churail* is heard, Corbett steps out of his house with his gun and binoculars through which he locates the cry as emanating from a bird which he fails to recognize. The bird was sitting on a bare branch of a Haldu tree and was uttering a shriek which resembled the cry of a soul in torment. Neither Corbett nor villagers are able to recognize the cry of the bird. After calling about twenty times the bird flew away and vanished in the night.

In this episode Corbett comes out as a typical White man who, armed with superior technology and a scientific enquiring mind, finds that the cry is a nothing more frightening than a bird call. Even this 'explained supernatural' has an element of doubt in it. For Corbett recalls that never before had he seen a bird like this which has such a tormenting call, despite his wide experience as a naturalist. In subsequent years, when he exchanged his gun for a camera, Corbett would visit many schools and give an imitation of the jungle waking up, the various bird songs and animals calls echoing within the jungle with the first glimmering dawn was faithfully evoked by him. Surprisingly in the case of *churail*, Corbett is unable to identify the bird.

It was the month of March. A bumper mustard crop had just been harvested, and the village in the midst of which our cottage is situated was alive with happy sounds. Men and women were singing and children were calling to each other. The moon was a night or two from the full, and visibility was nearly as good as in daylight. Maggie and I were on the point of calling for dinner- the time was close on 8 pm when clear and piercing on the night air came the call of the *churail*, and instantly every sound in the village was hushed. In the right hand corner of the compound, and some fifty yards from our cottage, stands an old haldu tree. Generations of vultures, eagle, hawks, kites, crows, and glossy ibis, have worn the bark off and killed the upper branches of the old tree. Opening our front door, which had been closed against the cold wind blowing down from the north, Maggie and I stepped out on to the veranda, and as we did so, the *churail* called again. The call came from the haldu tree and there, sitting on the topmost branch in brilliant moonlight was the maker of the call, the *churail*. (206).

This particular incident is in the midst of settlement. Corbett records the season, the weather, the time and the circumstances minutely. The village of Choti Haldwani (Haldwani in fact refers to the Haldu trees) is sketched out the way it must have impinged on the daily life of the Corbett's. The bungalow with its verandahs is the most superior dwelling of the village. The 'happy sounds' of the settlement reach Jim Corbett and his sister Maggie only from a distance. They hear rather than see the settlement. The effect of the *churail's* call is also auditory the village abruptly falls silent as the villagers disappear into their homes. This first incident is not scary, and the reader gets the smug impression that such are the superstitious villagers of India. The succeeding incidents are increasingly inexplicable, and away from human habitation.

The second incident of haunting is from the chapter 'The Champawat Tiger' of *Man-eater of Kumaon*. It is during his first visit to Champawat, fifteen miles due East to Pali, where the roads were considered to be dangerous and unsafe due to the killing of many villagers by a tiger in that area. While staying at the Dak bungalow which was far away from human dwelling, Corbett was much surprised by the mysterious behavior of the tahsildar of Champawat who himself had recommended Corbett stay at the Dak Bungalow. The tahsildar of Champawat promised Corbett that he would stay with him at the Dak Bungalow as well. Surprisingly, as soon as it started getting dark, the tahsildar took his leave and

started out with a man following him with a glimmering lantern, on a road that villagers avoided even during the day time. If they had to go to the bazaar or to another village they usually went in groups. Obviously, what the tehsildar was trying to avoid was something that he feared even more than a man-eating tiger.

But all doubts arising in the mind of Corbett as to the tehsildar's puzzling behavior were cleared by his experiences in the haunted bungalow that night. Laconically, Corbett indicates that it was of a ghostly nature, 'beyond the laws of nature'. In all his works there is no further mention of this supernatural experience and we can only wonder at what could have happened. The silence itself is eloquent.

On returning to the bungalow I found the Tahsildar was back, and as we sat on the verandah, I told him of my day's experience. Expressing regret at my having had to go so far on a wild goose chase, he rose, saying that as he had a long way to go he must start at once. This announcement caused me no little surprise, for twice that day he had said he would stay the night with me. It was not the question of his staying the night that concerned me, but the risk he was taking; however, he was deaf to all my arguments and, as he stepped off the verandah into the dark night, with only one man following him carrying a smoke lantern which gave a mere glimmer of light, to do a walk of four miles in a locality in which men only moved in a large parties in day light, I took off my hat to a very brave man. Having watched him out of sight I turned and entered the bungalow. I have a tale to tell of that bungalow but I will not tell it here, for this is a book of jungle stories, and tales beyond the laws of nature do not consort well with such stories. (27)

The dak bungalow was a uniquely British institution, and is still to be found all over North India. The word 'dak' means post and there must be some connection of these buildings with the introduction of the postal system in India. However, the British administration expected its officials to tour the countryside extensively and these dak bungalows catered to officials on tour. Fairly basic in amenities, these dak bungalows normally stand away from the bustle of the bazaar and are therefore isolated. They remain closed and in the care of a 'chowkidar' unless not opened for a government official on tour. This second episode is experienced away from human settlement and Corbett is the sole witness to this haunting.

This third incident of haunting is mentioned in *The Temple Tiger*. This book is deeply concerned with the beliefs and 'superstitions' of the hills which Corbett knew intimately. The first episode details the inexplicable death of Bala Singh. During one of his shooting trips with Robert Bellairs in the interior of Kumaon Corbett camped near the foot of Mount Trisul, in a dense jungle where goats were sacrificed to the demon of Trisul. Bala Singh who was one among the fifteen hillmen who accompanied Corbett and Bellairs during his shooting trip fell ill mysteriously. It happened when all the hillmen were singing part-songs in the night before going to sleep. The next morning Corbett found a marked change in the manner of the fifteen hillmen who had accompanied them on this shikar. On questioning them he was told that the demon of Trisul had entered Bala Singh through his mouth, and though he tried to expel it, he was not successful. This fight and struggle of Bala Singh with the demon was seen by others who tried to help Bala Singh by shouting and beating cans, in order to drive away the demon of Trisul, but all to no avail. The shikar was called off and Corbett took Bala Singh and returned to Naini Tal and got him examined by the civil surgeon of Naini Tal Colonel Cooke, a man of great experience who after examining declared Bala as perfectly fine both physically and mentally. In this episode of demon of Trisul, Corbett as an educated Englishman tried to prove himself that the entering of demon of Trisul in Bala Singh was nothing but superstition and he tried to show this to Bala Singh too getting him examined by various doctors and sending him on an eight-day journey which he completed successfully. But in this frightening and unexplained supernatural event Corbett is unable to save Bala Singh who after returning from eight-day journey declared that demon wanted to get released and this was possible only after his death and the next morning Bala Singh was found dead. Corbett can find no explanation of this entire episode and unable to understand the cause which ultimately led to the death of Bala Singh, who was a healthy man as declared by the Civil Surgeon till the day of his death. He is perplexed how a superstition can have such a strong influence on the mind of the people of Naini Tal

both educated and uneducated, like the Indian doctor who refused to examine Bala Singh after knowing about the entering of demon in his body.

Shortly after the Kaiser's war, Robert Bellaires and I were on a shooting trip in the interiors of Kumaon and we camped one September evening at the foot of Trisul, where we were informed that 800 goats were sacrificed each year to the demon of Trisul. With us we had fifteen of the keenest and the most cheerful Hillman I have ever been associated with on a shikar. One of these men, Bala Singh, a Garhwali, had been with me for years and had accompanied me on many expeditions. It was his pride and pleasure when on shikar to select and carry the heaviest of the loads and, striding at the head of the other men, enliven the march with snatches of song. Around the camp fire at night the men always sang part songs before going to sleep, and during that first night, at the foot of Trisul, the singing lasted longer than usual and was accompanied by clapping of hands, shouting the beating of tin cans. After a lot of hedging and evasive answers I eventually got Mothi Singh's story, which, when it came, was short and direct. 'While we were sitting round the camp fire last night and singing,' Mothi Singh said, the 'demon of Trisul entered Bala Singh's mouth and he swallowed him'. Mothi Singh went on to say that they had shouted and beaten tin cans to try to drive the demon out of Bala Singh, but that they had not succeeded in doing so, and that now nothing could be done about it. (243)

Whether superstition or unexplained truth, the effects of this haunting are tragic. It begins in the wilderness and ends in settlement, from the jungle at the foot of the Trisul, to Nainital and thence to Bala Singh's village and ends in death. If in the first episode Western technology subverts the belief in the banshee, in this one Western medical science and the scientific attitude cannot prevent Bala Singh's death. Corbett presents this event, but does not *comment* on it.

Another unexplained supernatural incident mentioned in chapter *The Temple Tigeris* the one which gives the book its title. The priest of a jungle shrine challenges Corbett to shoot a tiger which lives in the forest surrounding his temple and he claims is protected by the temple deity. How Corbett fails in each attempt and the tiger escapes, sometimes miraculously, is described, but since this incident treads the fine line between faith and superstition and besides is not about haunting, it lies beyond the purview of this paper.

What then is a reader to make of the various such incidents scattered through Corbett's corpus? There are other inexplicable incidents, like the shriek that echoes through a deserted village, which is the exact replica of the one uttered by hapless last victim of the village. Corbett himself seems to have been superstitious about snakes. He was known to make offerings of flowers and Prasad in temples, whenever he was in the vicinity, even though he was a Methodist. And eventually, as he revealed to a Methodist pastor, he gave up shikar because he revolted by the wanton shedding of blood. In *Jungle Lore*, Corbett narrates an episode of the sub-conscious workings of the mind. Totally unconsciously he avoids that part of the road where the tiger he was hunting was hiding. This intuition of Corbett which he acquired through his close association with the jungle and wildlife, which in turn lead to the development of his subconscious mind. This intuitive working of his mind is explained briefly by Leonard Shalin, an Associate Professor of Surgery specializing in vascular surgery. In the preface to the book *The Alphabet Verses the Goddess* Shalin states that he has firsthand experience of the different functions performed by each hemisphere of the brain. He gives a neuro-anatomical hypothesis of what we generally dismissed as irrational, unscientific and superstitious.

'The human brain has two lobes which while appearing symmetrical are functionally different. The right/left brain asymmetry has been much discussed in the popular press. Each hemisphere of the brain controls the muscles of the body's opposite side and both hemispheres work closely with one another. But only recently have scientist discovered the distinctive feature of each lobe. Of the two hemisphere of the brain the right side evolved first. In fact, the right lobe of a human fetus develops much faster before the left side. The right hemisphere is non-verbal. It integrates feeling and recognizes images. Its feeling states are authentic in as much as it nooses something once it has been experienced. Feelings states of the right lobe are experienced all at once, like suddenly comprehending the punch line of a joke. Shalin states that right brain "allows us to have faith in God grasp the essence of a joke, experience patriotic fervor or be repulsed by a painting someone else find beautiful'. He points out that

metaphor is the right brain's unique contribution to language capability. "Metaphors have multiple level of meaning that is perceived simultaneously" and this is the right lobe's great quality.

Much of which is discussed as superstitious might be the right brain's contribution to understanding a situation given the right lobes power to perceive holistically. It helps us arrive at conclusion which may not hold any water logically. In the case of Jim Corbett, it can be suggested that years of fending for himself in the jungle from the age of eight, he had a unique opportunity of developing the non-verbal, intuitive part of the brain. Very often he was in a position to save his life because of the cues provided to him by the right hemisphere of the brain. This also contributed to his unique personality for he was a rare *shikari* whose sympathies also lay with his victim, the man-eating tigers he shot.

To conclude it can be said that Corbett's point of view towards superstition and supernatural occurrences changed after these incidents of haunting. Corbett who previously saw a reason behind every event now started to believe that there were some occurrences in this world which are beyond the capacity of science and human reasoning.

WORKSCITED

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