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Deconstructing Colonial Taxonomies: Posthumanist Ethics and Environmental Transcendence in Jim Corbett and Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract:

The study proposes a discourse on the representations of the untamed in South Asian jungle narratives revolving around the construction, fortification and insurrection of anthropocentric taxonomies. The paper serves as the vessel displaying texts from varied historical periods and genres and contrasts how they classify animals across their respective ethnic communities. Seen from posthumanist and deconstructive lenses, the study attempts to analyse how Corbett's mid-twentieth-century colonial memoir *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1944) represents the tension between colonial representations and ecological recognition through utilitarian and reductionary terms like "man-eater," "game," "kill," "bait," and "companion". This homocentric taxonomy is then compared with the dialogic folk human-tiger encounter in Amitav Ghosh's postcolonial multimodal verse retelling *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban* (2021). The forest frontiers, the Sundarbans mangroves and the Himalayan foothills transcend the role of silent ambient conditions as they shape the imperial functional categories as well as the folk traditions oscillating between ethics and empathy. From Corbett's coalition of the Champawat Tigress with anthropocentric ambivalence to Ghosh's use of the legend of Ma Bon Bibi, the study proposes a conceptual heuristic of "ecological transcendence", reframing animals as autonomous coexistent beings, exposing the affixed human greed and empathy across indigenous cultures and time.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Posthumanism, Deconstruction, Jim Corbett, Amitav Ghosh.

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Introduction

Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008) uses deconstruction to critique the Western metaphysical binary oppositions that establish hierarchy and disrupt coexistence, here, partitioning humans from animals. He emphasises how the singularity of the monolithic term 'animal' violently converges semantics by propelling ecological diversity into a singular unit. This asymmetrical structure attaches a feudal passivity to the latter group as validated by human definitions of animals lacking reason and rationality. The anthroposphere thus becomes the field of dominance situating humans as controllers rather than as responsible co-participants within a shared ecosystem.

Posthumanist scholars such as Cary Wolfe (*What Is Posthumanism?* 20–25), Rosi Braidotti (*The Posthuman* 23–28), and ecofeminist thinker Val Plumwood (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 41–48; *Environmental Culture* 101–05) question the canonical impression that human beings are naturally superior to other forms of life. Diverging from the Enlightenment model that places humans as autonomous subjects pioneering speciesism as an esoteric form of marginalisation by stripping animals of their intrinsic agency; scholars believe how the anthropocentric biased classifications are inadequate to represent the innate and cultural complexities of the nonhuman.

The historical construction of animal identities can be illustrated in the traditional semiotics of reptilian representation across South Asian and Western literary traditions. Snakes make the most ubiquitous references in literature and anthropology among the other reptilia, associating them with moral catalogues. Famous depictions in Genesis present snakes as arbitrary symbols of deception even though God's creation. Conversely, in the Rig Veda, Nagas are sacred guardians of water and fertility. Vasuki, the Serpent King, coiled around

Shiva's neck, represents devotion and ecological balance. Takshaka acts for ecological reprisal in the Mahabharata when the forest of Khandava is burnt, illustrating vengeance. Goddess Manasa, revered in regions of Bengal and Assam, represents fecundity and protection. Colonial adaptations of Moksha Patam, colonially prolific as Snakes and Ladders, use snakes as indices of failure and vices. This varied characterisation of vertebrates across literature and culture reduces their existence from active ecological agents essential for controlling pests and biodiversity to arbitrary moral symbols, showing how meaning is never fixed. Thus applying the posthumanist deconstruction to these performative identities can dissolve hierarchies and grant animals meaning that come from themselves rather than from human fears and beliefs, promoting coexistence and conservation. This inconsistency in meanings shows how the identities of animals are not determined just biologically but built on human fear, cultural anxieties and utility. Identity distillation through a human prism into flat categories like "monster", "vermin" or "resource" limits their environmental function and encourages hazardous attitudes towards them, accelerating conservation concerns.

This study maps the pivotal role of South Asian jungle narratives in portraying, advancing or demoting these human-centric grouping of animals by understanding how Jim Corbett's mid-twentieth-century colonial hunting memoir *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1944) and Amitav Ghosh's contemporary postcolonial verse adaptation *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban* (2021) complement and contradict each other. Despite the differing topographical conditions of the Himalayan foothills and the Sundarbans mangroves, their parallel reading can be substantiated since both the texts discuss human-tiger encounters and comment on the intersection of the imperial utilitarian groups with indigenous folk metaphysics. Semiotic assignment of wild fauna across five functional categories, "man-eater", "game", "kill", "bait", and "companion" shows how Corbett seesaw between the anthropocentric reduction

and posthumanist empathy, while Ghosh's use of the folk legend of Bon Bibi exposes corporate human greed, secures nonhuman autonomy and proposes a model of "ecological transcendence" that defines animals beyond the human prism of utility and fear.

Literature Review

Vijaya Ramadas Mandala's monograph *Shooting a Tiger: Big-Game Hunting and Conservation in Colonial India* assists this study in locating where Corbett's language in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon,* as a colonial hunting narrative positions living, feeling animals within the spectrum of human-centric categories. British imperialism used the act of shikar as a tool to consolidate their position as the civilised, superior, brave and paternalistic benefactor protecting the indigenous populations with technological prowess by exploiting the colonial constructs of "fear" and "terror" with wild carnivores and deliberately documenting the tiger or leopard predations, asserting the requisite presence of the white hunter sahibs (2–4, 28). Hyper-masculinity and martial chivalry were the aftermath of these big game expeditions and trophy hunting routines since the subaltern hunters were restricted and confined by dint of forest arms legislation (12–13, 34–35). Territorial expansion, the exercise of ideologies and imperial governance reduced animals into strict brackets of "man-eaters", "vermin" or "game" based on the linked glory of commercial and athletic ends (8–9, 28–29). Mandala marks Corbett's paradoxical advocacy for game sanctuaries while serving as a parole to the imperialist structures. Thereby this paper fills this gap between the archival studies of shikar and the posthumanist approaches in literature by comparing Corbett's use of language to shrink animals into functional yet sometimes exceptionally empathetic categories such as "man-eater", "game", "kill", "bait", and "companion".

Alan Johnson's *Out of Bounds: Anglo-Indian Literature and the Geography of Displacement* (2011) presents a postcolonial spatial hermeneutics of forest literature, here through its

analysis of Jim Corbett's "jungle idiom" in Man-Eaters of Kumaon. Johnson highlighted how Corbett's multiethnic Anglo-Indian identity, shaped by his site in a third space between British and Indian cultural worlds, helped him construct an intimate, homely, yet conflicted space in the Himalayan foothills, contrasting with the trophy based Victorian and Edwardian "shikar" memoirs. Also, Corbett demystifies the big cat from the clutches of being a gothic adversary or a diabolical brute, projected as an enemy of the civilised. Rendering the initial steps towards South Asian wildlife conservation, Corbett affirms autonomy to the beasts, which may hunt a human primarily due to debilitated medical circumstances. Since Johnson's paper revolves around the postcolonial formation of space, it leaves the taxonomical reduction unanswered, presenting an available opening for the posthuman critique of the narrow human walls dividing the wild.

Ashwarya Samkaria's paper, "Amitav Ghosh's Storyworlds for Environmental Dwelling: Multimodal Iterations and Performativity in/of Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban" (2025), offers an eco-narratological model for discussing contemporary South Asian jungle narratives and indigenous animal ontologies. Based on Erin James's theory of eco-narratology from *The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives* (23–28), Samkaria records how Ghosh's verse adaptation of Ma Bon Bibi transcends postcolonial logocentrism to cultivate an environmental ethic rooted in relationality and restraint, signifying the conservatory ecosystem and fathomless human greed, respectively. Samkaria highlights *Jungle Nama*'s multimodal aesthetic ranging from the oral cadence of the traditional dwipodi-poyar metre to Salman Toor's visual artwork and Ali Sethi's raag-based soundscape, which immerse readers in a shared ecosystem and destabilise Western hierarchies. A non-Western ecological balance is restored primarily by the inverted gaze of the tiger and Dokhhin Rai's ability to seed thoughts on the human mind rather than relying on human speech. Also, Ma Bon Bibi's function establishes the text as a counter-narrative to the

capitalistic greed in the feudal forest stories personified by Dokhhin Rai and the merchant Dhona. Samkaria's analysis focuses on reader response and affective aesthetics; however, it leaves unexplored the semiotic mechanisms of constructing, classifying and deconstructing the linguistic labels addressed to the animals within the text. Samkaria's study notes how Ma Bon Bibi protects the dwellers and subdues Dokhhin Rai but does not interrogate how terms like "man-eater," "kill," or "bait" continue to function as the underlying langue in the colonial and postcolonial human-animal encounters. This present study addresses this gap by questioning the perpetuated speciesism in the texts of Corbett and Ghosh through a deconstructive and posthumanist lens.

Priyanka Bera's paper, "Unearthing slow violence in the Anthropocene: A study of myth and ethics in Amitav Ghosh's Jungle Nama" (2025), serves as an eco-ethical critique of Ghosh's verse narrative through Rob Nixon's theories in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2–10). Bera's focus marks the latent degradation of the environment and climate colonialism in the Sundarbans in traditional dwipodi-poyar metre and the Bon Bibi legend. Resource extraction driven by the capitalist greed of Dhona, systemic dispossession of resource-lacking Dukhey, and nature's penal violence against human trickery constitute the three registers of slow violence in the text, positioning Ma Bon Bibi as the face of eco-centric ethics curtailing human avarice. However, Bera's study has no explanation for the evolutionary formations of the linguistic brackets categorising animals from the colonial papers on animal encounters to other folk narratives. This study completes these scholarly gaps by identifying the oscillatory anthropocentric taxonomies and an emerging posthumanist awareness through a comparative posthumanist deconstruction of Jim Corbett's *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* and Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*.

Literary Exegesis: Deconstructing Imperial Taxonomy in Jim Corbett's Prose

The varied semiotic construction of wild fauna in Jim Corbett's *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1944) can be explained by verifying historical considerations through a posthumanist lens. Vijay Ramadas Mandala, being the historian of the British imperial hunting culture, states how the colonial administration methodically categorised animals into "game," "vermin," or "man-eaters" to maintain control over the forest areas and to organise trophy hunting. Corbett's anthropocentric taxonomy, however, does not just eliminate animal individuality but places it in a state of ambivalence, fluctuating between an imperial reductionism and an urgent ecological empathy, while classifying them according to their perceived utility like "game," "vermin," or "man-eaters".

Corbett's category of the "man-eaters" delineates such ambivalence most vividly diverging from the consequential branding of the colonial state-sanctioned erasure of the carnivores since the label symbolises threat and Gothic demonisation. Somatic pathology due to human meddling or inherent physical shortcomings is given preference over orthodox villainous imageries of the wild cats, as in "Author's Note," Corbett says, "A man-eating tiger is a tiger that has been compelled, through a stress of circumstances beyond its control, to adopt a diet alien to it. The stress of circumstances is, in nine cases out of ten, wounds, and in the tenth case old age" (Corbett 9). Corbett further elevates the species, adding that "a tiger is a large-hearted gentleman with boundless courage" whose extermination would leave India impoverished (Corbett 15). Deconstruction, this, concludes the semantic class of "man-eaters" to be unstable since it carries the colonial connotations of threat and an eventual trophy. However, it exposes how human encroachment and gunshot wounds modify and shape the predator-prey equation.

Thereafter, a parallel tension is in Corbett's distribution of the terms "kill" and "bait". Corbett uses "Kill" as a terrestrial marker that can be followed to reach the beasts of prey. He writes, "From the fact that the kill was lying out in the open, and the vultures had not descended on it, I concluded that the cow had been killed by a leopard and that the leopard was lying up close to the kill" (Corbett 96) In the jungle tales, the unit "bait" aligns all the animals used by the hunters as a subterfuge to divert bigger animals either for the hunters to predict their behaviour or to ferret them out. Corbett says, "My young buffaloes had been well cared for by the man in whose charge I had left them, and the day after my arrival I started tying them out, though I had little hope of the tigress accepting them as bait" (Corbett 99). This, being a true ordeal, revises the predator-prey grading, controlling the brute action by adding human surveillance.

Corbett's dear spaniel, Pincha, the son of a keen gun-dog is an example congruent to Donna Haraway's *Companion Species* as he names him Robin instead of calling him a "tool" or a "rig" as he says, "we scrapped his kennel name of Pincha and rechristened him Robin in memory of a faithful old collie who had served my younger brother, aged four and myself, aged six, from the attack of an infuriated she-bear" (Corbett 50) He also evidently expressed his resentment against Robin's reduction to an instrument specifically utilised for human return because he asserts Robin to be "the biggest-hearted and the most faithful friend man ever had" (Corbett 61) Unlike animals placed within other customary categories, Corbett's refusal to reduce Robin to an object of utility presents a clear breach of the colonial archetype, illustrating how affective bonding can disrupt sovereign speciesism.

Thus, Corbett's *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* does not solely follow an anthropocentric hierarchy but alternates between imperial functional classifications and an emergent environmental awareness that recognises the innate exigency of nonhuman life.

Literary Exegesis: Non-Western Cosmologies and Posthumanist Ethics in Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*

The challenge to the colonial grouping of nonhuman life from the lenses of contemporary South Asian wildlife literature can be studied through Amitav Ghosh's verse adaptation *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban* (2021), which is a retelling of the nineteenth-century Bengali text Bon Bibi Johuranama, composed by Munshi Mohammad Khatir and Abdur Rahim Sahib, which records the transcultural legend of Ma Bon Bibi, the guardian deity of the Sundarbans mangroves worshipped by the Hindu and Muslim forest dwellers around, alongside his other prolific climate narratives, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016). In the latter, Ghosh mentions the pathetic attempts at concealing the ecological catastrophe and nonhuman agencies by critiquing the modern bourgeois realist novel. Extending this thought, Ghosh turns to oral folk myths and pre-modern poetic traditions to articulate the compulsory orders for humans to follow while using nature with restraint. Ghosh's posthumanist elements lie in his text's formalism since he adapts the legend into the medieval Bengali metre, *dwipodi-poyar*, the two-footed line, consisting of rhyming couplets structured around twenty-four syllables per line, with the emphasis on collective oral recitation and chanting in his Author's Note.

> *Don't panic, don't get your head in a chukker;*
> *there's someone you can turn to when in need of succor.*
> *She's the Lady of the Jungle, Ma Bon Bibi;*
> *she'll protect you, with her brother Shah Jongoli. (23)*

This extract from *Jungle Nama* reveals Bonbibi's pledge to protect the harmonious poise between the two realms of extant beings on each shore of civilisation, not just stressing the science behind coexistence and conservation but also the metaphysical craving and the animal's right to survive. Here Dukhey's mother instructs her son how channelling one's voice in *dwipodi-poyar* gives human speech "wings" to travel across the mangrove maze, metamorphosing language into a performative scale of survival and spiritual appeal. Alongside this verse form are Salman Toor's monochrome ink illustrations. More than vivid aesthetics, Toor's meticulous artwork shows claws, tangled roots, eyes hidden among the leaves, and muddy riverbanks marked with tiger pawprints. These images underscore the vulnerability of humans in the forest beyond the vicinity of their control, reciprocating the gaze from the untamed as an act of counter-surveillance against the human eyes. Dokhin Rai was the myopic tiger spirit prominent in the Sundarbans saga for transfiguration into a Royal Bengal Tiger to petrify villagers, beekeepers and woodcutters. Eventually, Bon Bibi, along with her brother Shah Jongoli, subjugated him and banished him to the deep jungle. However, Dhona, the avaricious ship captain and Dukhey's uncle, sacrificed Dukhey to the tiger spectre for honey and wax. Remembering his mother's advice, Dukhey cried for aid and was ultimately freed on the advent of Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli. Bon Bibi affirmed herself the mother of all beings in the eighteen tide-countries and instructed Rai to remain aloof from anyone who invokes her name in peril. On setting up the covenant, Bon Bibi sent Dukhey home with plentiful honey, wax and riches. The legend ranks respect for the wilderness above materialism, allowing human participation in the woods so long as the intent is altruistic and contented. This covenant refrains from the colonial tendency of reducing animal identities to human functions, as it acknowledges the right of the wild to live unimpeded in their biotic sphere, mirroring Corbett's observation that man-eating is a consequence of anthropocentric disruption.

Ecofeminism, the Divine Feminine, and Ecological Transcendence

Jungle Nama's restoration of nonhuman subjectivity beyond utilitarian categories can be further explained by Luce Irigaray's feminist philosophy as *Sexes and Genealogies* provides a vital conceptual parallel when looked through the lens of ecofeminism. In "Divine Women," Irigaray argues that phallocentrism denies women autonomous subjectivity by defining them relationally as functions of male utility. She notes the dearth of divine gynocentric representations in thick description and considers the consequent disparity to be the fundamental obstacle to women's recognition of their innate divinity. This transcendental perspective of feminine manifestation can personify autonomous women's experiences, allowing them to deny patriarchy and enlighten them about perennial sexism. The divine feminine helps women gain advocacy in the flesh, diverging away from a singular masculine deity. By advancing this model, Irigaray shifts the centre of dominance, restores gender stasis and halts the reduction of women into objects based on masculine desire.

Ecofeminist Val Plumwood establishes in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, that the rationalist "master identity" subjugates women and nonhuman nature through identical dualist logics. Outlining animals solely through human utility reduces autocratic sentient beings to functional brackets like "man-eater", "game", "kill", or "bait". This divine feminine can be mirrored through the figure of Ma Bon Bibi in South Asian folk cosmology, boosting an ecological transcendence that halts the anthropocentric reduction. Ma Bon Bibi eradicates animals from being targets of human consumption by intervening against both human intrusion and carnivorous totalitarianism. The prototype of the construction of animal identities can be drifted far from its perennial entrapment in anthropocentric reduction, where animals are shrunk strictly through fear and commercial interests. The transcendental divine

feminine liberates the nonhuman from labels or speciesism by reframing their autonomous ecological agency.

Conclusion

Jim Corbett's *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* and Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*, when read comparatively through lenses of posthumanist deconstruction, show the failure of human-made semantic labels such as "man-eater", "game", "kill", "bait", and "companion" to comprehend the ethnic and intrinsic attributes of the diverse fauna in this shared ecosystem.

Corbett's colonial memoir uses imperial taxonomies to justify territorial control but his narrative continuously contradicts this linguistic order of grouping through biological explanations of man-eating, recognising the tiger as a "large-hearted gentleman," and his affective bond with Robin. Contrarily, Ghosh's postcolonial verse uses the dwipodi-poyar metre, Salman Toor's graphic, and the revered legend of Ma Bon Bibi to break down the capitalist exploitation of resources and establish a covenant based on interspecies balance.

Jacques Derrida's de-centering of the "human-animal" binary, Luce Irigaray's philosophy of the divine feminine, and Val Plumwood's ecofeminist theory bridge imperial wildlife literature and South Asian folk cosmologies together. Just as Irigaray proposes the divine feminine to liberate female agency from patriarchal submission, Ma Bon Bibi renders an ecological transcendence that restores autonomous animal identities within shared biotic territories.

A parallel reading of a colonial hunting memoir and a verse retelling of the legend of Ma Bon Bibi exposes that the unjust literary representation of animals can only be ceased by questioning the colonial anthropocentrism and acknowledging the requisite measures of respecting the nature, practising restraint and promoting conservation and balance. Future

scholarship can expand this theory to understated species, indigenous shamanism and digital environmental humanities.

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