Jim Corbett After All These Years

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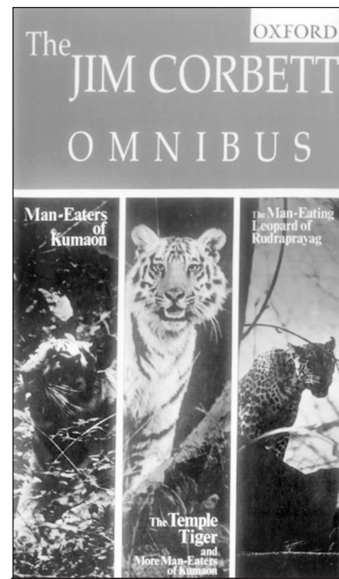

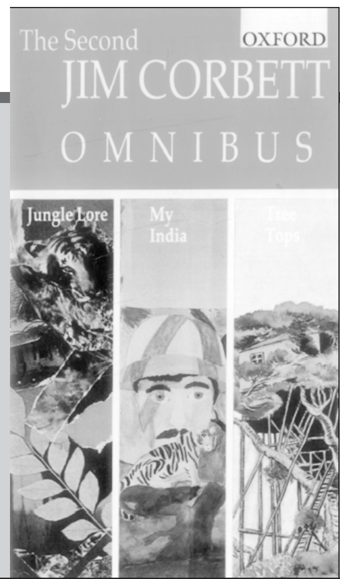

THE first thing I ever shot was a white egret wading in a shallow pool of water off the Chittagong-Cox's Bazar road. It was early 1964. My father had taken his shotgun on the family road trip, and rum shot that he proved to be, missed every snipe, egret, duck and stork he aimed at. Then the driver had stopped on seeing the egret, and had said 'why not let choto babu shoot this one?' Without speaking my father had handed the gun to me.

I was about ten years old and it felt huge in my hands. I had never fired it before. I got out of the jeep, then carefully climbed down the side of the road onto the slate-gray muddy ground, instantly sinking a few inches into it. The egret looked beautiful, slender and white in the late afternoon light. Keeping my eyes on it I advanced and clambered onto a flat rock, lay down, rested the gun on it, sighted the small bead on the motionless target and fired. My whole body jerked backward and the egret fell down. Behind me the driver gave a shout and raced down to retrieve the bird. We took it home and cooked it-- stringy meat on tiny bones.

I had forgotten all about it until I picked up The Jim Corbett Omnibus Volumes I and II (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, India, 1991) and started reading. Then it all came back, and I could again see the tiny pitted marks on the shotgun barrels, the tiny plume of smoke rise from the breech when the cartridge was ejected, smell the cordite, hear the driver's yell, feel my blood pounding as I slipped off the safety catch.

Though I did go on a few little hunts here and there--duck and geese, all of which were eaten, none shot for the pure sport of it--nothing ever felt quite like that first time.

A couple of years later in Karachi, browsing through some books left by my uncle, I came upon a red hardcover edition of *The Man-Eaters of Kumaon*. Perhaps stirred by some atavistic memory of an egret shoot I began to read it. Once started, it was impossible to put down. The stories were, as the author himself might have put it, ripping good shikar yarns. And what shikars they were, hunting down man-eating tigers and leopards in the Kumaon region at the foothills of the Himalayas (in present-day Indian state of Uttaranchal) from 1910 till about 1930s! Take, for example, the case of The Champawat man-eater, a tigress which had killed two hundred villagers in Nepal, then was driven out by the Nepalese to neighbouring Kumaon in India, where over four years she killed two hundred and thirty-four more. It was at this point that Jim arrived, and while the tigress kept on killing (an old woman, a girl, all pounced on while cutting grass) he stalked her, from machans in trees and over scrub jungle, over 4000-foot hills and dense undergrowth, down gorges and up ridges, by moonlight and dark, till he finally caught up with her by a stream in a ravine, and despite the fact that "the .500 modified cordite rifle, sighted at sea level, shot high at this altitude", dispatched her to the happy hunting grounds. As a writer he was first-rate: taut, not a word wasted, taking the reader with him every step of the twisting way, making him/her see every leaf bent on the trail, hear every alarm call of the *kakar* (hill deer) and the *langur* monkey, feel with a hand every still-warm shaded patch of oat grass from where the tiger had risen a mere minute ago. It was doubly mesmerizing for me since in Karachi we lived at Garden Road, opposite the Gandhi Gardens, the zoo, which at that time had some magnificent specimens of the Royal Bengal Tiger. Massive beasts. Langourous five-minute yawns where fangs the size of a man's thumb would be exposed. Even as I read the book that night, like almost every other night, I heard them roar, just like they were doing fifteen yards away from Jim Corbett in the book I held in my hands, and it seemed inconceivable to me that somebody could be hunting these things in the wild, in the pitch dark, all alone.

That year, though I searched high and low, I could only find one other book of his, *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*, which I consumed just as avidly.

And though later I would occasionally run into him, brief mentions in newspapers and other books, twice or thrice on the Discovery and National Geographic channels, I never read him again. Till now, when, thirty plus years after that first time in Karachi, I came across the Omnibus. The first volume details all the major man-eater hunting stories, while the second consist of his 'India' books, his boyhood at Nainital and later working life at Mokameh Ghat, the people and places, the jungle lore. The second book I suspect goes largely unread, since everybody reads the man-eater-hunting stories and then wanders off. More's the pity, for to miss it is to miss the man, to miss all those years he spent learning his fantastic tradecraft!

Jim Corbett (1875-1955) is now a tourist industry, an institution unto himself. There is the Corbett National Park in Nainital, Corbett *safari* tours, lodges, hotels, travel agencies, wildlife organizations, naturalist societies, statues, a steady reprint of his books, translations into nearly all Indian languages, et cetera, in the fog of which it is sometimes impossible to recognize the shikari, the Englishman (a particular type that only the British Raj was capable of producing), the writer, naturalist and conservationist. Yet he started out normally enough, as a boy in a large family brought up during the summer months at the Himalayan hill station of Nainital, and in the winter on the small property held by his family at Kaladunghi in the foothills below it. After he left school he joined the Railway Department, at first in small jobs, and then in charge of the transport ferry at Mokameh Ghat, "where the Ganges created a gap between two railway systems." It was from 1907 to 1911 that he shot his first man-eaters. But work at the ghat was incessant, the First World War intervened, and it was only after his retirement, in his fifties and sixties, that he hunted down and shot the man-eating tigers that are at the core of his legend. The descriptions of his early hunts, the early writing, tend to focus on the shoot, the trail, the stalk, the gun, and are spare, tightly woven narratives while the latter stories are far more expansive, fuller, more ready to take a fishing or birdwatching detour, a progression that seems to mirror Corbett's own evolution from big-game shikari to conservationist, when his instincts were turning towards preservation, and he began to realize the need to stop the wholesale slaughter of tigers and other game that the British with their fox-hunts and high-powered rifles had introduced in their Indian empire. Corbett left India in 1947 for Nyeri in Kenya, where by the time he died in 1955, he had already passed into myth.

So how did Corbett acquire this art, this writing in the finest tradition of Indian storytelling? One biographer, D. C. Kala in his *Jim Corbett of Kumaon* (1979) says that Corbett owes a debt to American fiction writers such as James Fenimore Cooper, author of *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Pathfinders*, and that Jack London and Mark Twain may have influenced him too. He seems to have read fiction set in frontier territory, novels of exploration and adventure. These were important for Corbett's sense of narrative tension and structure as he expanded the Indian frontiers of both English narrative and knowledge of its wildlife.

But that is to discount the man and his times, the singular confluence of a mordant English temperament and Indian environment, a fusion of two separate hunting, and martial, and here it has to be admitted, pre-eminently male cultures. One paragraph in his story of the man-eater named The Bachelor Of Powalgarh seems to epitomize this, a paragraph that could not have been written anywhere except in the British India. Not in British Singapore, not in British Tanganyika, but only in British India. Listen to its wryly confident cadences: "The Bachelor was far afield that morning, for his home was in a ravine six miles away. Living in an area in which the majority of tigers are bagged with the aid of elephants, he had chosen his home wisely. The ravine, running into the foothills, was half a mile long, with steep hills on either side rising to a height of a thousand feet. At the upper end of the ravine there was a waterfall some twenty feet high, and at the lower end, where the water had cut through red clay, it narrowed to four feet. Any sportsman, therefore, who wished to try conclusions with the Bachelor, while he was at home, would of a necessity have to do so on foot. It was this secure retreat, and the Government rules prohibiting night shooting, that enabled the Bachelor to retain possession of his much sought-after skin."

No amount of Fenimore or Twain can teach anyone that!

Added to the above is the English language of that era, where a litter of pups "decanted" from a basket, where a boy "glissaded" down a cliff bank, where the "vesper songs" of birds would die down at sunset, where the sambhar (which Hobson-Jobson informs me is the largest of the Indian stags) "belled", and where the tigers left "pug-marks" on soft ground, all Anglo-Indianisms which has to be appreciated in order to fully enter Corbett's world.

And yet after Corbett finished writing his first book in 1944 (in hope of getting money for a school for Indian soldiers blinded in the Second World War) he approached "the only one friend who had ever published a book…for advice. After skimming through the pages of my manuscript, his verdict was that he did not think any publishing house would look at it unless I was prepared to indemnify against all loss resulting from the publication. With visions of spending my days indemnifying publishers for vast losses, I thanked my friend for the advice and brought the manuscript home." Luckily for us, the publishers had a different view. *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* sold over six lakh copies internationally in its first year. As Rukun Advani puts it "*Man-eaters of Kumaon* looks to me like India's third greatest storybook, after the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Indian publishers reckon that the Corbett corpus has outsold every other Indian writer by the margin that separates Bradman from every other batsman."

It is a cliché that books enjoyed as a boy, reread when one is much older give pleasure of a different order. But it is true. And so reading Jim Corbett now was a different experience. While then it had all been the thrill of the stalk and the chase, its ups and downs and then the final showdown, now the land and its people swam into view, a new planet. To anybody interested in the nuts and bolts of the British Raj--to us, a generation who admittedly live in neocolonial times but who have never seen a white district commissioner, or a white indigo planter, or bowed when a white governor-general's carriage went by and to whom all this can seem a little fantastic--the books are a revelation. What, or who, held that vast empire together? How did it run on a day-to-day basis? The answer--and the very ordinariness of it is staggering--seems to be on an intricate system of petty officialdom, an empire-wide hierarchical network of posts, rewards, responsibilities, offices, all manned by locals. As one goes around with Corbett, one meets them, in roads and in bungalows, in villages and towns and hill stations, in ports, ghats and telegraph offices, in railway depots and district offices: peshkaris, tahsildars, village headmen, road overseers, district policemen, patwaris, forest guards, dak runners, civil pioneer guards, even darwans and chowkidars, all of whose traditional group and clan loyalties-- a tiered system from the jamadar to the rajah-- were now directed towards this new political organization, over which was this thin layer of white imperialdom. With its guns and its glitter, with its cannon salutes and its Sanskrit scholars, with its obsession for order, for in that order lay the grubby secret of the empire: the extraction of wealth. And from this perspective, Jim Corbett was nothing if not emblematic of the white man's order, the white sahib-god with the magic rifle who appeared when there was great discord in the land (and in the larger scheme of things it did not matter whether it was due to a voracious man-eater or dacoits, or any other agent of tumult, when the heavens were angry and all puja, pilgrimage and prayers failed) who restored the peace, the peace in which systematic extraction of the invaluable *sal* trees of Kumaon could again take place, where roads and railways could be built, where coolie-workers could again work without fear, where military barracks could be put down, where the traveling white magistrate could again peacefully dispense justice, all of which represented the inward expansion of the empire, the true consolidation of its authority. An authority of which the supreme white shikari was an indispensable part.

While all this is all well and good as theoretical knowledge, it is fascinating to see how the above machinery actually operated in that far-off time, in that remote place. In other words, the abstract view from above is nothing like the tinglingly different sensation at ground level, where headmen dispatched village trackers, patwaris investigated man-eater sightings and wrote reports, chowkidars pointed up at hillsides, tahsildars rounded up men for a 'beat', district offices held meetings and gave Corbett maps, Ibbotson his friend and district commissioner stalked the big cats with him; and underpinning all this was an unofficial network where women pointed out waterholes, 'packmen' sold him goats to use as bait, a girl overheard her father talking and gave him a valuable lead, priests gave him shelter, village men built him machans in trees, dak runners ran with 'kill' information to Jim Corbett (called 'Carpet Sahib' by all and sundry) having his meal outdoors, fishing for *mahseer* in the rivers, or sitting down to 'high tea' on a small verandah; and in fact, throughout the books, in every tale there are copious amounts of tea, very sweet hill tea made with milk, tea everywhere, "dishes" of it, and at times one gets the distinct impression that nothing has changed since those days, that just as today the Bangladesh state would collapse without cups of tea, without the clink-clink of teacups fueling the activities in the Secretariat building and all the ministries and political party offices all over Dhaka, all those innumerable daily tasks, so too the Empire, that whole kedgeree pot with its khansamas and Khyber pass and killa-kotes, would have come unglued without tea.

Before, after, and ever in-between.

Just as the fabled natural world of Kumaon, and Nainital, is now largely gone, with extensive environmental degradation having taken place, so too that India has vanished, with its completely different code of life, an utterly different way of seeing and doing things. And so for a week, which is how long it took me to read both the volumes, as I walked with Corbett checking on isolated villages and hamlets, along jungle paths and twisted ravines, crept down river banks and watched the sun rise on the hills from a treetop I visited that India.

And every evening for that same week as I would put the book down to sip some tea--from leaves packaged as Darjeeling Tea--and crows flapped homeward over Dhaka rooftops in the lowering light, I heard those tigers at Karachi zoo roar. And saw an egret drop like a stone.

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THE FAT PAYCLERK

Despite all the times spent alone on the trail of the man-eater, by himself in *nullahs*, ravines and gorges, Corbett's books teem with people, hill people and the people at Mokameh Ghat. Of all the people in these pages, my favourite is the following character who showed up after Corbett had threatened work stoppage because the Railway, due to a contractor changeover, had failed to pay Corbett and his ferry workgangs their salaries for three long, arduous, hungry months, when at the end, Jim Corbett himself had been reduced to one chapati and a little plate of dal a day. This short, swift portrait was drawn with a chuckle and an indulgent eye, in high spirits, and one can't help but like the man who drew it.

"The pay clerk who presented himself at my office next day, accompanied by some of my men carrying a cash chest slung on a bamboo pole and guarded by two policemen, was a jovial Hindu who was as broad as he was long and who exuded good humour and sweat in equal proportions. I never saw him without a pair of spectacles tied across his forehead with red tape. Having settled himself on the floor of my office he drew on a cord tied round his neck and from somewhere deep down in his person pulled up a key. He opened the cash chest, and lifted out twelve string-bags each containing one thousand freshly minted silver rupees. He licked a stamp, and stuck it to the receipt I had signed. Then, delving into a pocket that would comfortably have housed two rabbits, he produced an envelope containing bank notes to the value of four hundred and fifty rupees, my arrears of pay for three months. I do not think anyone has ever had as great pleasure in paying out money as I had when I placed a bag containing a thousand rupees into the hands of each of the twelve headmen, nor do I think men have ever received money with greater pleasure than they did…"

THE BEAR'S NEST

In Corbett the naturalist was never far from the hunter, and his descriptions of Kumaon while he was on his forays constitute the beginning of India's naturalist writings. In his books are found black-throated jays, chukor (hill partridge), honey buzzards, sparrow hawks, ospreys, tawny eagles, red-and-gold minivets, golden orioles, rose-headed parakeets, wire-crested drongos, white-capped laughing thrushes, red-whiskered bulbuls, blue Himalayan magpies, ground owls. In them are the *ghooral, markor* (all varieties of mountain goats), ibex, hamadryads and cobras, peafowl and jungle fowl. All amid poplars, oak, pine, almond and *sal* trees where flowered violets, buttercups, and rhododendrons, which later in the summer would give way to primulas, larkspurs and Himalayan white butterfly orchids.

"These orchids hang down in showers and veil the branch or the trunk of the tree to which their roots are attached. One of the most artistic nests I have ever seen was that of a Himalayan black bear, made in a tree on which orchids were growing. A big oak tree had snapped off, either by weight of snow or in a storm, some forty feet above ground. Where the break had taken place a ring of branches, the thickness of a man's arm, had sprouted out at right angles to the trunk. Here moss had grown and in the moss butterfly orchids had found root-hold. It was here among these orchids that a bear had made its nest by bending over and pressing down the branches on to the broken-off tree trunk. The trees selected by bears in which to make their nests are of the variety whose branches will bend without snapping…"

Booknotes

Uzma Aslam Khan: It's a fine thread that takes a writer from rotting grapes to silkworms

Tariq Ali had described Uzam Aslam Khan as a member of 'a new generation of Pakistani novelists unencumbered by the icons or the ideology of a wretched state.'

Uzma is 33 and was born in Karachi. There she was awarded scholarships to study in the US where she gained a Bachelor's degree in English Literature and a Master's in Crative Writing. After that she remained stateside to teach English language and literature before doing the same in Morocco and then in Lahore where she now lives with her husband.

Her first novel *The Story of Noble Rot*, was published in India in 2001 to great acclaim, but it wasn't easy to write. 'I wrote it over a period of four years,' she say. 'Unlike many writers, I don't carve out a plot before beginning to write -- I know where my story is going only when I am writing it. This is why the process is very slow. But it's also full of surprises which helps retain my interest.' She finds it boring to tread a straight line, preferring instead to look into the hidden folds rather than the glaring daylight. To her, writing is about exploring unmapped territory.

Whereas that first novel used the mould that grows on grapes as its metaphor, *Trespassing*, her second novels and the first to be published in the West, takes its imagery from the world of silk production. Dia, whose mother is a successful Pakistani silk farmer, belongs to a new breed of strong, resourceful women and enjoys the freedom it provides. Meanwhile, Danish has come back to Karachi for his father's funeralhe has been living in America, the land of the free but bound by its own rules. When the two meet, they chafe against all the formalities. The simple act of slipping a handful of silkworms fattened on mulberry leaves inside a friend's dupatta ruptures the fragile peace of both their houses while around them new ways drive out old as fresh hatreds are created and old ones revived.

Tariq Ali writes: 'Cocoons are not the only things that explode in this novel. The silken prose emphasizes the conflict between the tender subject and a world where violence of every sort has become institutionalized.'

But this is not a violent book. It is both as strong and as delicate as silk thread and the prose is as lustrous as an ornate dupatta.

Extract
Trespassing

Arrival May 1992

Her fair skin set off a head of dark, curly hair. She held him close, thanking Allah for bringing him home safely. Had the scene occurred under a street light in his college town, passers-by would be faintly embarrassed, if not repulsed. He thought if she said, 'Thank you Jesus for returning him to me,' instead of 'Thank you *Allah* . . .' people would smile or snicker but not think her a fanatic.

He set his eyes. Never before had he stood in this house plagued by how others might see him. He tried to clear his head, to instead enjoy Anu's welcoming arms, flabbier now than when he last embraced them, three years ago.

Khurram and his family waved goodbye. The handsome driver's eyes pierced his own, turning a hint green. 'You are my friend now,' Khurram called out. 'Anything more I can do for you, I'm just down the street.'

'Such a nice boy,' said Anu as the car drove away.

Lurking behind her, Daanish now saw, was the shadow of his father's eight sisters. It grew closer, a single mass with sixteen tentacles, pawing and probing like Siamese-octopi. He was being welcomed, just like Khurram had been at the airport, but he did not desire it.

One arm caught his throat. 'You poor, poor child! How your father loved you!'

Another tugged at his hair, fighting with the first, 'How exhausted you must be! Come into the kitchen with me . . .'

A third whipped his cheek and cried, 'You look sicker than our own! Were you in Amreeka or Afreeka?'

A fourth spun him from the waist, 'You're just like *he* was at your age!

A fifth yanked his shirt-tail, 'Who did you miss the most?'

A sixth, 'Me!'

Seven, 'His father, ehmak!'

And eight, 'Look how his jealous mother keeps him all to herself!'

It was true. While they jerked and pinched her only child and hurled insults her way, Anu still held him, and now they were all entangled, resulting in a chorus of loud protests from the small bodies in the arms of each aunt, small bodies with wails and suckers of their own. He fell headfirst into their lair.

'Ay haay,' shoved Anu. 'Let the boy sit down at least.'

She gripped what little she could find of Daanish's arm, disentangled it from the others, and with determined possessiveness, led him into the kitchen. The others followed like a school of squid. 'Sit down, bete.'

Scowling at his aunts in black and the babies in their arms, Daanish pulled up a chair next to Anu. She emptied several plastic food containers into metal pots then lit the burners on the stove. His aunts continued making observations, their children still shrieked, but at least no one touched him.

'I'm not really hungry Anu, just tired,' he protested weakly.

'You haven't even told me how you are.' She never shared. Just fussed.

'What is there to tell? Allah has returned my son to me safely, even if he chose to take my husband.'

Her back was to him but he knew she was crying. Softly tears never interfered with her work but steadily.

How differently his father would have received him. In place of his mother's flurry, a thick veil of smoke would infuse the air as he sucked one Dunhill after another. He'd ask what it was like in there. Daanish would only select details that would tickle him: the ghostly reflection of an opossum on clear summer nights: pink-haired waitresses with pierced noses (the doctor would guffaw at this perversion of his most favoured female accessory, the nose-pin); having a wisdom tooth extracted to lite music: 'Every time you go away, you take a piece of me with you'; children delightfully camouflaged for Halloween. Anu never absorbed such curiosities.