

PARADISE LOST AND REGAINED IN THE NOVELS OF BALCHANDRA RAJAN

George Woodcock

IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN MY VIEW that the best writing in English to come out of India has originated in the Dravidian South, where the Brahmins since Sankara have also maintained what is arguably the highest Hindu culture in the country. Raja Rao was born in Mysore, and R. K. Narayan has written his splendid Malgudi novels there, though he was born in Madras, the early East India Company stronghold from which emerged other notable writers in English. Balchandra Rajan is one of them, for though he was born in Burma, he was brought up in Madras.

I have never come to a satisfactory explanation for this phenomenon, since some of the parts of the South where the teaching and writing of English most flourished, were native realms like Mysore and the Malabar states of Cochin and Travancore, ruled by enlightened Hindu princes, and their people had relatively little direct contact with the British. Indians in the South spoke their own Dravidian languages, such as Tamil and Malayalam. They had accepted Sanskrit as the senior language of traditional and religious learning, and in the same way they came to accept English as the senior language of liberal and secular learning. Indeed, when the central government in the 1960s attempted from Delhi to impose the northern language of Hindi on the whole country, the people of the Southern cities and towns came out on to the streets in protest. I well remember seeing walls in Trivandrum and Madurai covered with immense graffiti reading "English — YES. Hindi — NO." And though the ageing cliché of a love-hate relationship between Indians and the British Raj may be partially true of the North, it is not so of the South, where the educated classes have remained enamoured of English and consider the speaking and writing of it a desirable cultural accomplishment and not merely a political and commercial convenience as it is in the North.

This matter of the attraction of English culture — especially the language and the literature — finds a special example in Balchandra Rajan whose two novels

I am discussing in this essay. *The Dark Dancer* (1958) and *Too Long in the West* (1961) — though they also have larger schemes — are the stories of two young Indians, a man and then a woman, who spend years at foreign universities (Cambridge and Columbia) and return home to find themselves involved in traditional arranged marriages. How they overcome the problems the situations involve — tragic in one case and comic in the other — and retain or perhaps even recover their integrity is in each case the denouement of the book. Neither, we are led to assume, has been too long in the west, for somehow their life abroad had made them more fit to survive in the new independent India with its ancient poverty, its ancient ignorance and its deep divisions of community and caste.

Such situations are close to Rajan's own life. When I met him first he was living in England and editing an occasional magazine of English criticism and poetry called *Focus*. In Cambridge in the mid-1940s I used to visit him in his rooms at Trinity, where he became a Fellow and the Director of Studies. I did not think of him then as a potential novelist but rather as an excellent critic of modern English poetry. One of the issues of *Focus* was devoted entirely to T. S. Eliot. In the 1960s he published an excellent study of Yeats — *W. B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction*, that went into several editions. But his main study was always of John Milton, and in the end he became one of the world's leading Miltonists. The seventeenth century poet not only interested but also influenced him, and very often in the more ruminative passages of his novels about India one finds oneself moving in a strange interface between the *Upanishads* and *Paradise Lost*, while at times the very prose takes on a Miltonic sonorousness.

When I next encountered Rajan it was in Delhi in 1962. I had gone with Mulk Raj Anand to a celebration in honour of that venerable windbag, Rabindranath Tagore, and Rajan was there. He had left Cambridge for India in 1948, the year after independence took place, and almost immediately he entered the Indian Foreign Service. In 1950 he was back in the west, this time, like his character Nalini in *Too Long in the West*, in New York, where he served until 1957 on the Indian Delegation to the United States and later, until 1959, as Indian representative on the International Atomic Energy Commission. At the beginning of the 1960s he was again back from the west, as Professor of English, and later Dean of Arts at the University of Delhi. When I saw him yet again, early in 1964, he was already chafing at the problems which a serious scholar of English literature encountered in India, and plotting a return to a land of full libraries and scholarly connections. He was thinking of Canada, and I tried to get him an appointment at UBC, where I was then teaching. My efforts failed, and later in 1964 he went off to be a visiting professor at the University of Wisconsin. In 1966 he had found his Canadian perch, but at Western Ontario rather than UBC. In London, Ontario, he has remained, writing and talking of Milton. Long in the West indeed!

IT WAS DURING HIS SECOND PERIOD abroad that Rajan wrote his two novels, first publishing *The Dark Dancer* in New York in 1958 and *Too Long in the West* in London in 1961. *The Dark Dancer* appeared subsequently in London in 1959 and *Too Long in the West* in New York in 1962. The sequence has some significance, since *The Dark Dancer* was a strongly dramatic novel centring on one of the great crises of the period — the communal massacres in India at the time of partition. Thus it was on one level the kind of issue-oriented novel that appeals strongly to American readers, and it became a Book Society choice and was translated into several European languages. *Too Long in the West*, on the other hand, was the sort of comic novel (comic in the double sense of being happily resolved and being mockingly humorous) that appealed to British nostalgia about the Raj. Though it was not a book that ignored the issues of the time, it handled them with sympathy rather than tragic portentousness. Moreover, the satiric view of American life which it presented in various ways appealed to the British at a time when they were seeking any consolation for the diminution of their stature in the world.

On first reading, Rajan's two novels, despite their similarities of plot, seem strikingly unlike, not merely because one is a tragedy and the other a comedy, but also in mood — the one dark and ruminative, the other light and ironic to the edge of absurdity — and in didactic direction, for while *The Dark Dancer* seems to be telling us how simplistic Gandhi's teaching may have been in the light of Indian traditions and temperaments, *Too Long in the West* seems to be asserting that the wise woman will fulfil her talents and her nature in the most unfavourable circumstances, and so, by implication, can India, which in one of her aspects Nalini represents.

The Dark Dancer opens with Krishnan returning from an unusually long period in the west; he has stayed on in England because of the difficulties and dangers of getting home to India in wartime. He arrives during the tense months before the liberation of India, but his first preoccupation is not political, for his parents are arranging his belated marriage. And it is here that we are introduced to the satiric elements which make this more than an individual tragedy by emphasizing the characteristics of an ancient but damaged society that provides the tragedy's setting. For Krishnan's is a Madras Brahmin family, and despite their compromises with the Raj — Government Service is considered the best of careers even under the British — they observe their ceremonial life with great punctiliousness; they belong to the Saivite wing of their caste, and Siva, the god they especially worship, becomes in his manifestation as Nataraja the Dark Dancer of the novel, who presides over the orgy of death and destruction through which Krishnan will pass.

Krishnan has to choose his wife, and he picks Kamala, a girl of rather improbably self-contained and self-composed virtue, despite the opposition of his uncle, a fanatic for strict observance who declares that her horoscope promises misfortune. The uncle, a recurrently present and always pompous figure, is called Kruger, the result of a discreet act of defiance on the part of his parents when he was born during the South African War, and this name of a fundamentalist Christian Boer farmer-turned-rebel-leader seems a pungent comment on Kruger's orthodox Hindu excesses. The background cast is completed by Krishnan's father, whose parsimoniousness is always clashing with his piety, and his prospective father-in-law, one of those highly educated Madrasis for whom style has become an end in itself and who speaks, whatever the depths of emotion involved, always in perfect and silver-toned Augustan phrases.

Krishnan sticks fast by Kamala, and the wedding goes ahead, with its sacred fire and its ancient Sanskrit invocations and its four days of feasting (illegal under wartime regulations) attended by cadgers and beggars of all kinds and relatives by the score, from Government Service uncles (of whom much is expected) to seventh aunts and even remoter cousins. Immediately afterwards an incident happens that dramatically prefigures the tragic climax of the novel. Krishnan and Kamala and their friend the radical Vijayaraghavan attend a Congress demonstration on the beach at Madras. The British are still in power, and a peaceful march is planned which will of course provoke the violence of the police, and by the demonstrators' wounds will reveal the superiority of non-violence. But Vijayaraghavan taunts the police and is brutally beaten, and Krishnan, infuriated, violently attacks one of the police officers. He in turn is beaten unconscious and then spirited away to a private hospital, his deed so well concealed that he finds his way into the Government service as planned and reaches Delhi in time for the partition of India in an atmosphere of growing hatred and violence as Hindus and Sikhs and Moslems are murdered in their homes and massacred on the trains which they hope will be taking them to safety in their own communities.

But for the time being Krishnan is not involved in this pattern, and as *The Dark Dancer* is a novel that moves with a slow and Miltonic dignity, we have a long journey through ruminative narrative as Krishnan ponders over his own fate and that of his country under the shadow of the Dark Dancer, Siva, who is also Lord of Destruction. Rajan has not in this novel mastered fully the skills of conveying personal crises and development through incident and dialogue, and so the story is largely internalized in long passages of mulling reflection.

The Dark Dancer continues like a kind of quest story in which the hero faces a number of tests which are also combats, and seems to fail in most of them. Arrived in Delhi, his days in the West are poignantly recalled by the presence of an English girl who was his friend when they were both students in Cambridge; she has turned into the kind of English beauty over whom Indian civil servants drool, but has also

developed a sharp and independent mind. Kamala goes away because her mother is ill, and Cynthia and Krishnan become lovers. When Kamala returns, that model of Indian wives (just a little too good, as Cynthia is a little too beautiful for belief in her to be easy) quietly accepts the situation and departs, leaving no clues of her whereabouts. Krishnan is thrown into a crisis of indecision, like Buridan's ass, and Cynthia contemptuously throws him out of her life. He has failed his tests twice again, as Hindu husband and as romantic European-style lover.

Now he learns that Kamala has gone off to dedicate herself to people suffering in the strife-ridden areas, and so he sets off for a refugee settlement ironically called Shantihpur (City of Peace) in the Punjab. On his way he is caught up in communal warfare when the train is stopped and all the Moslems on board are massacred by Sikhs and Hindus. As in other incidents of the book, Krishnan is removed from the greater scenes of horrors, where the Dark Dancer tramps in his orgy of death. He is shut in a lavatory with a panic-stricken Moslem disguised as a Brahmin, who slashes Krishna with a knife and threatens to kill him while the blood flows under the door from the massacre outside. Finally, a Sikh breaks down the door, slaughters the Moslem, and saves Krishnan from gangrene by soaking his wound in gin. (The Moslem is the only person we actually see dying in this novel, whose necessary violence is handled with classic indirection.) This test, during which he conducts himself with exemplary pacifism, Krishnan may be thought to have passed, for the Sikh takes him to the hospital where Kamala is working and they are somewhat pathetically reunited as Krishnan enters the realm of the M.O., perhaps the most fully though the most satirically realized character in the novel.

The M.O. (who is always unnamed) is a man filled with bitterness against the British yet intent on resembling the best of them in all that he does. He has taken up their code of self-discipline and "backbone"; he has assumed, though he mocks the very idea, "the white man's burden," showing his own superiority over his fellow Indians by dedication and decisiveness. He risks his own life and that of his bearer by bringing into the hospital Moslems who are also cholera victims, and when the crowd comes to murder these patients there is a scene that might have taken place in a film or novel about the Raj when, with Krishnan beside him and each armed with revolvers, the M.O. stands on the verandah of the hospital facing the oncoming mob, and, with luck more than marksmanship, wings the mob's leader and forces it to retreat.

The novel reaches its climax when Kamala, moved by some destructive influence (perhaps the Dark Dancer) insists on going out to walk in the streets of Shantihpur at night. She and Krishnan try to intercept a couple of Hindu thugs who are pursuing a Moslem prostitute. Krishnan is beaten unconscious, but as he goes down for the count he sees Kamala being stabbed to death. So, with the best of will, he has failed again. A Hindu might say that Kamala's karma has defeated him.

There follows a passage of dark satire, as the people of Shantihpur decide that Kamala was an incarnation of the goddess Parvati and try to profit by it, and Krishnan insists on taking the ashes to Benares, providing a rich opportunity for Kruger, in that place of fraud and exaltation, to show off not only his Brahmin learning but also the extremities of his fanatic folly.

But the novel does not end on the downbeat of tragedy; appropriately for a Miltonic author, it has a stark but positive conclusion. Krishnan has become free. He is liberated from the karma that drew him to Kamala. And refusing to marry again, he is freed from the circle of obligations that Hindu life imposes. The words of the *Gita* illuminate his mind:

He who seeks freedom
Thrusts fear aside,
Thrusts aside anger,
And puts off desire;
Truly that man
Is made free for ever.

He is like the survivors from the deadly battle of Kurukshetra setting off in the *Mahabharata* on their pilgrimage to Mount Kailas.

He looked at the sun going down, crimsoning the river. In minutes the orange light would fade and the velvety oblivion flow in over the emptiness. The shadows were stretching, reaching out towards him. There was nothing behind him, and ahead of him only himself.

He walked back to the strength of his beginning.

And now, at the end, we are reminded of yet another walking figure, Adam, who also had gained freedom through his failures, and goes with Eve into the exile that is also liberation.

The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide.
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow
Through Eden took their solitary way.

In *The Dark Dancer* it is the man alone who takes his solitary way. But in *Too Long in the West* it is a woman who makes her own terms with tradition, and we shall perhaps not be unjustified in seeing Nalini as a solitary Eve in a jungle Eden: Indian woman learning to command her world, and moving by acceptance and adaptation rather than rejection into a new freedom.

IF *The Dark Dancer* has overtones of the Miltonic epic, *Too Long in the West* reminds one of another seventeenth century form, the comedy of manners. For it is indeed a novel of manners, mocking the ways and attitudes of

both North American and Indian societies with a satire light-hearted enough to move at times over the edge of comedy into farce. And its form and style, which differ greatly from those of *The Dark Dancer*, are essentially those of the drama, with its five chapters moving in orderly procession like five acts, and its reliance on episode and dialogue. Gone are the long passages of rumination. People reveal themselves in how and what they speak rather than in what they do, though what they can do can have dramatic consequences, for the characters here too have to undergo tests, though their results are likely to be absurd rather than violent. Everyone in the novel wins in the end, and perhaps all win what they really want.

Too Long in the West is set partly in New York, but mostly in a little South Indian village, Mudalur, lost in jungles and rainy mountains, and it is to Sambasivan, the self-created "squire" of Mudalur, that we are introduced as the book opens. The villagers are assembled, a double line of eccentrics and derelicts, awaiting him as his bullock cart makes its slow ascent from the nearest railway station. Already we are in what I suppose one may call Narayanland, that comic provincial India immortalized especially by R. K. Narayan, where an Indian society corrupted by inheritances from the Raj is shown going its absurd and pretentious way. The main difference is that Narayan's unforgettable Malgudi is a town evolving over a whole series of novels, while Rajan's Mudalur is a remote village seen briefly and perhaps therefore all the more vividly. But its corruption by alien values, largely personified by the returning Sambasivan, has gone just as far as that of Malgudi.

The villagers are in fact expecting not only their benefactor but also the main source of their cash income. Sambasivan, a pretentious, benevolent fool accompanied by a wife whose tongue the years have given the sharpness of the hottest Madras curry, is a former lecturer whose life was changed by winning a famous crossword puzzle twice in succession and becoming both rich and briefly famous. Instead of settling down in Madras or Madurai to enjoy his wealth and live in society, as his wife Lakshmi would have wished, he decides to spend every good season in the isolation of Mudalur, with its marvelous mangoes, and has been going there regularly after the monsoons for thirty-two years. He has built a circular house of sandalwood, and periodically he adds another circle of rooms, so that the house lies like a great and growing helix spread over the hillside. It is with these intermittent constructions, and with the making of unnecessary furniture to fill new rooms, and with the digging of wells and ponds and refilling them, and sundry unsuccessful plantation schemes (the coffee production of Mudalur is used up in a single party), that he occupies himself and spends his money and gives a kind of living for a few months to the 299 wretched inhabitants of the village.

This time his return is exceptional, for it will be followed shortly by the arrival of his daughter Nalini, coming home from her three years at Columbia. Her parents have decided that it is time for her marriage to be arranged, and Sambasivan —

much against the will of Lakshmi who would like the whole thing done in Madras — has advertized for prospective candidates to come to Mudalur and in their turn be inspected.

The second chapter opens with Nalini herself arriving at the little station down in the valley and immediately goes into a long flashback of her voyage to the west and her experience of the wonders of American life. Devoting a great deal of time to mockery of American manners and particularly of the excesses of advertising techniques, Rajan is most heavily satirical in this part of the book, yet he also shows how largely Nalini is changed if not reshaped by the experience, learning the importance of personal freedom and the need for a kind of behaviour that acknowledges equality of genders and persons alike. Yet she does so without shedding her indulgent respect for her parents or her deep love for the landscape of Mudalur where she has mostly grown up.

She wrote to her parents regularly and fondly and when she took up her pen she was not often aware of the distance as an emptiness. Yet they belonged to a different life. And she was coming back to it a different person. She had to be ready for the shock of strangeness and not give herself up because the young always gave way; or rebel so violently that she trod on others' dreams. Yet she had been trained well and she would have to walk the tight rope.

Three suitors arrive. One is on the train with Nalini, not knowing that she is the prize of the contest, and he boastingly reveals that he is not really interested in getting married but in gathering material for a treatise on the arranged marriage. Of the two who arrive independently at the house, one is a man of pathetic desperation an orphan who, since he does not know his birth date, has no horoscope — an indispensable document in an Indian arranged marriage. The third is a maniac writer who desperately needs a good dowry so that he can buy himself a linotype machine to print all the imitations of classical poems he is writing to make the world familiar with at last the echo of the masters.

Two other figures appear independently and add themselves to the confusion at Mudalur. One is a cosmetician named Kubera, as oily as his preparations, who has heard of the famous mangoes that grow on a tree on the barren peak of Mahavir mountain, and wishes to use them for a new skin cream. And the other, making a dramatic entrance with a jeep that sends rattling down into the abyss behind it the only bridge uniting the village with the outside world, is the American doctor Ernest, whom Nalini knew at Columbia, and who now adds himself to the suitors, a force pulling her back towards the West. Ernest — who is running a malaria control operation — becomes the chief figure of the central chapter, "Seventy-five Per cent Wettable," a parody of western chivalry, with a film camera for a sword and his jeep for a steed as he rescues Nalini from a wild elephant in the jungle; he also ruins her reputation in the village since the jeep breaks down and they are lost in the woods for three hours.

Kubera meanwhile has organized an expedition to gather the mangoes on Mahavir mountain, but it ends with Guruswami, the village headman, breaking his leg, and this plays into the hands of Raman, the village barber, a political radical who has recently arrived in Mudalur. Raman persuades the villagers that they have become too dependent on strangers. An assault is mounted on the hillside house. The people only withdraw when Nalini agrees to make her choice the next day so that the village will be free of all these outsiders. Nalini, meanwhile, has handled the suitors with a flirtatious aplomb and a great deal of impish wit, rather like an Indian Millamant. But she reserves her real *coup de théâtre* for the day of choice — when she picks the barber Raman.

The fifth chapter is a kind of epilogue written around the report of a government servant who is about to defect to Mudalur. There has been a comic ending in every respect, in that everyone seems to have gained what he really wants. The poet has his linotype machine, and is flooding the world with plagiarisms. The scholar has his Institute of Social Involvement in which he gives courses on the Arranged Marriage and a redeemed forger teaches about Deficit Financing. Kubera is busily making his Attar of Darkness, and the man without parents is following the only respectable occupation open in India for a person without antecedents; he has become a holy man and runs his Institute of Social Renunciation. Raman is renowned throughout India as the most gentle of all piercers of noses and ears and takes the opportunity to whisper his subversive incitements to jewelled women of all classes. The people of Mudalur are their old eccentric selves, and have kept the bridge that links them to the outer world in a state of imminent collapse as they sustain themselves on the world's finest mangoes. It is said that "those who remained in Mudalur for five days stayed on for ever, to nod their heads inanely at visitors who asked questions."

And there, presiding over the place, is Nalini with her compelling eyes. It seems on one level a Circe's Island where men are enslaved and stupefied. Yet the last word of the novel is "Paradise," and perhaps we are not making too much of Rajan's Miltonism when we think of the novel as a mundane *Paradise Regained* in which the secret of innocence is rediscovered in the shape of a magic fruit. The mango returns to us what the apple lost us.

NOTE

This essay is not a continuation of or related in any way except its subject matter to a piece I wrote on Rajan's novels and published in a fairly long past issue of *World Literature Written in English*. I believe that critical insights depend on seeing anew, so I did not refer to that earlier piece and shall reread it, doubtless, with surprise. All resemblances between the two pieces are, as the libel paragraphs in novels say, accidental.