


THE IMAM
AND
THE INDIAN

Prose Pieces by
AMITAV GHOSH



RAVI DAYAL Publisher

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Delhi

currents to accept that some part of the effort that human culture has so long invested in matters of the spirit will not, somehow, survive.

15 The March of the Novel through History: the Testimony of my Grandfather's Bookcase

AS A child I spent my holidays in my grandfather's house in Calcutta, and it was there that I began to read. My grandfather's house was a chaotic and noisy place, populated by a large number of uncle, aunts, cousins, and dependants, some of them bizarre, some merely eccentric, but almost all excitable in the extreme. Yet I learned much more about reading in this house than I ever did in school.

The walls of my grandfather's house were lined with rows of books, neatly stacked in glass-fronted bookcases. The bookcases were prominently displayed in a large hall that served, among innumerable other functions, also those of playground, sitting room, and hallway. The bookcases towered above us, looking down, eavesdropping on every conversation, keeping track of family gossip, glowering upon quarrelling children. Very rarely were the bookcases stirred out of their silent vigil. I was perhaps the only person in the house who raided them regularly, and I was in Calcutta for no more than a couple of months every year. When the bookcases were disturbed in my absence, it was usually not for their contents but because some special occasion required their cleaning. If the impending event happened to concern a weighty matter like a delicate marital negotiation, the bookcases got a very thorough scrubbing indeed. And well they deserved it, for at such times they were important props in the little plays that were enacted in

their presence. They let the visitor know that this was a house in which books were valued; in other words, that we were cultivated people. This is always important in Calcutta, for Calcutta is an oddly bookish city.

Were we indeed cultivated people? I wonder. On the whole I don't think so. In my memory my grandfather's house is always full — of aunts, uncles, cousins. I am astonished sometimes when I think of how many people it housed, fed, entertained, educated. But my uncles were busy, practical, and, on the whole, successful professionals, with little time to spend on books.

Only one of my uncles was a real reader. He was a shy and rather retiring man, not the kind of person who takes it upon himself to educate his siblings or improve his relatives' taste. The books in the bookcases were almost all his. He was too quiet a man to carry much weight in family matters, and his views never counted for much when the elders sought each other's counsel. Yet despite the fullness of the house and the fierce competition for space, it was taken for granted that his bookcases would occupy the place of honour in the hall. Eventually tiring of his noisy relatives, my book-loving uncle decided to move to a house of his own in a distant and uncharacteristically quiet part of the city. But oddly enough the bookcases stayed; by this time the family was so attached to them that they were less dispensable than my uncle.

In the years that followed, the house passed into the hands of a branch of the family that was definitely very far from bookish. Yet their attachment to the bookcases seemed to increase inversely to their love of reading. I had been engaged in a secret pillaging of the bookcases for a very long time. Under the new regime my depredations came to a sudden halt; at the slightest squeak of a hinge, hordes of cousins would materialize suddenly around my ankles, snapping dire threats.

It served no purpose to tell them that the books were being consumed by maggots and mildew, that books rotted when they were not read. Arguments such as these interested them

not at all: as far as they were concerned the bookcases and their contents were a species of property and were subject to the same laws.

This attitude made me impatient, even contemptuous at the time. Books were meant to be read, I thought, by people who valued and understood them: I felt not the slightest remorse for my long years of thievery. It seemed to me a terrible waste that nonreaders should succeed in appropriating my uncle's library. Today I am not so sure. Perhaps those cousins were teaching me a lesson that was important on its own terms: they were teaching me to value the printed word. Would anyone who had not learned these lessons well be foolhardy enough to imagine that a living could be made from words? I doubt it.

In another way they were also teaching me what a book is, a proper book, that is, not just printed paper gathered between covers. However much I may have chafed against the regime that stood between me and the bookcases, I have not forgotten those lessons. For me, to this day, a book, a proper book, is and always will be the kind of book that was on the bookshelves.

And what exactly was this kind of book?

Although, so far as I know, no one had ever articulated any guidelines about them, there were in fact some fairly strict rules about the books that were allowed on to those shelves. Textbooks and schoolbooks were never allowed; nor were books of a technical or professional nature — nothing to do with engineering, or medicine, or law, or indeed any of the callings that afforded my uncles their livings. In fact, the great majority of the books were of a single kind; they were novels. There were a few works of anthropology and psychology, books that had in some way filtered into the literary consciousness of the time: *The Golden Bough*, for example, as well as the *Collected Works of Sigmund Freud*, Marx and Engels's *Manifesto*, Havelock Ellis and Malinowski on sexual behaviour, and so on.

But without a doubt it was the novel that weighed most

heavily on the floors of my grandfather's house. To this day I am unable to place a textbook or a computer manual upon a bookshelf without a twinge of embarrassment.

This is how Nirad Chaudhuri, that erstwhile Calcuttan, accounts for the position that novels occupy in Bengali cultural life:

It has to be pointed out that in the latter half of the nineteenth century Bengali life and Bengali literature had become very closely connected and literature was bringing into the life of educated Bengalis something which they could not get from any other source. Whether in the cities and towns or in the villages, where the Bengali gentry still had the permanent base of their life, it was the mainstay of their life of feeling, sentiment and passion. Both emotional capacity and idealism were sustained by it. . . . When my sister was married in 1916, a college friend of mine presented her with fifteen of the latest novels by the foremost writers and my sister certainly did not prize them less than her far more costly clothes and jewellery. In fact, sales of fiction and poetry as wedding presents were a sure standby of their publishers. (155)

About a quarter of the novels in my uncle's bookcases were in Bengali — a representative selection of the mainstream tradition of Bengali fiction in the twentieth century. Prominent among these were the works of Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra, Tagore, Bibhuti Bhushan, and so on. The rest were in English. But of these only a small proportion consisted of books that had been originally written in English. The others were translations from a number of other languages, most of them European: Russian had pride of place, followed by French, Italian, German, and Danish. The great masterpieces of the nineteenth century were dutifully represented: the novels of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Turgenev, of Victor Hugo, Flaubert, Stendhal, Maupassant, and others. But these were the dustiest books of all, placed on shelves that were lofty but remote.

The books that were prominently displayed were an oddly disparate lot — or so they seem today. Some of those titles

can still be seen on bookshelves everywhere: Joyce, Faulkner, and so on. But many others have long since been forgotten: Marie Corelli and Grazia Deledda, for instance, names that are so little known today, even in Italy, that they have become a kind of secret incantation for me, a password that allows entry into the brotherhood of remembered bookcases. Knut Hamsun, too, was once a part of this incantation, but unlike the others his reputation has since had an immense revival — and with good reason.

Other names from those shelves have become, in this age of resurgent capitalism, symbols of a certain kind of embarrassment or unease — the social realists, for example. But on my uncle's shelves they stood tall and proud, Russians and Americans alike: Maxim Gorky, Mikhail Sholokhov, John Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair. There were many others, too, whose places next to each other seem hard to account for at first glance: Sienkiewicz (of *Quo Vadis?*), Maurice Maeterlinck, Bergson. Recently, looking through the mildewed remnants of those shelves, I came upon what must have been the last addition to that collection. It was Ivo Andrić's *Bridge on the Drina*, published in the sixties.

For a long time I was at a loss to account for my uncle's odd assortment of books. I knew their eclecticism couldn't really be ascribed to personal idiosyncrasies of taste. My uncle was a keen reader, but he was not, I suspect, the kind of person who allows his own taste to steer him through libraries and bookshops. On the contrary, he was a reader of the kind whose taste is guided largely by prevalent opinion. This uncle, I might add, was a writer himself, in a modest way. He wrote plays in an epic vein with characters borrowed from the Sanskrit classics. He never left India and, indeed, rarely ventured out of his home state of West Bengal.

The principles that guided my uncle's taste would have been much clearer to me had I ever had an interest in trivia. To the quiz-show adept, the link between Grazia Deledda, Gorky, Hamsun, Sholokhov, Sienkiewicz, and Andrić will be clear at once: it is the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Writing about the Calcutta of the twenties and thirties, Nirad Chaudhuri says:

To be up to date about literary fashions was a greater craze among us than to be up to date in clothes is with society women, and this desire became keener with the introduction of the Nobel Prize for literature. Not to be able to show at least one book of a Nobel Laureate was regarded almost as being illiterate. (156)

But of course the Nobel Prize was itself both symptom and catalyst of a wider condition: the emergence of a notion of a universal 'literature', a form of artistic expression that embodies differences in place and culture, emotion and aspiration, but in such a way as to render them communicable. This idea may well have had its birth in Europe, but I suspect it met with a much more enthusiastic reception outside. I spent a couple of years studying in England in the late seventies and early eighties. I don't remember ever having come across a bookshelf like my uncle's: one that had been largely formed by this vision of literature, by a deliberate search for books from a wide array of other countries.

I have, however, come across many such elsewhere, most memorably in Burma in the house of the late Mya Than Tint, one of the most important Burmese writers of the twentieth century.

Mya Than Tint was an amazing man. He spent more than a decade as a political prisoner. For part of that time he was incarcerated in the British-founded penal colony of Cocos Island, an infamous outcrop of rock where prisoners had to forage to survive. On his release he began to publish sketches and stories that won him a wide readership and great popular esteem in Burma. These wonderfully warm and vivid pieces have recently been translated and published under the title *Tales of Everyday People*.

I met Mya Than Tint in 1995, at his home in Rangoon. The first thing he said to me was, 'I've seen your name somewhere.' I was taken aback. Such is the ferocity of Burma's censorship regime that it seemed hardly possible that he could

have come across my books or articles in Rangoon. 'Wait a minute', Mya Than Tint said. He went to his study, fetched a tattered old copy of *Granta*, and pointed to my name on the contents page.

'Where did you get it?' I asked, open-mouthed. He explained, smiling, that he had kept his library going by befriending the ragpickers and papertraders who picked through the rubbish discarded by diplomats.

Looking through Mya Than Tint's bookshelves, I soon discovered that this determined refusal to be beaten into parochialism had its genesis in a bookcase that was startlingly similar to my uncle's. Knut Hamsun, Maxim Gorky, Sholokhov, all those once familiar names came echoing back to me, from Calcutta, as we sat talking in that bright, cool room in Rangoon.

I also once had occasion to meet the Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer, another writer of astonishing fortitude and courage. Of the same generation as Mya Than Tint, Pramoedya has lived through similar experiences of imprisonment and persecution. Unlike Mya Than Tint, Pramoedya works in a language that has only recently become a vehicle of literary expression, Bahasa Indonesia. Pramoedya is thus widely thought of as the founding figure in a national literary tradition.

At some point I asked what his principal literary influences were. I do not know what I had expected to hear, but it was not the answer I got. I should not have been surprised, however; the names were familiar ones — Maxim Gorky and John Steinbeck.

Over the last few years, unbeknown to itself, the world has caught up with Mya Than Tint and Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Today the habits of reading that they and others like them pioneered are mandatory among readers everywhere. Wherever I go today, the names that I see on serious bookshelves are always the same, no matter the script in which they are spelled: Garcia Marquez, Vargas Llosa, Nadine Gordimer, Michael Ondaatje, Marguerite Yourcenar, Günter

Grass, Salman Rushdie. That this is ever more true is self-evident: literary currents are now instantly transmitted around the world and instantly absorbed, like everything else. To mention this is to cite a jaded commonplace.

But the truth is that fiction had been thoroughly international for more than a century. In India, Burma, Egypt, Indonesia, and elsewhere this has long been self-evident. Yet curiously this truth has nowhere been more stoutly denied than in those places where the novel has its deepest roots; indeed it could be said that this denial is the condition that made the novel possible.

The novel as a form had been vigorously international from the start; we know that Spanish, English, French, and Russian novelists have read each other's work avidly since the eighteenth century. And yet, the paradox of the novel as a form is that it is founded upon a myth of parochiality, in the exact sense of a parish — a place named and charted, a definite location. A novel, in other words, must always be set somewhere: it must have its setting, and within the evolution of the narrative this setting must, classically, play a part almost as important as those of the characters themselves. Location is thus intrinsic to a novel: we are at a loss to imagine its absence no matter whether that place be Mrs Gaskell's Cranford or Joyce's Dublin. A poem can create its setting and atmosphere out of verbal texture alone; not so a novel.

We carry these assumptions with us much the same that we assume the presence of actors and lights in a play. They are both so commonplace and so deeply rooted that they preempt us from reflecting on how very strange they actually are. Consider that the conceptions of location that made the novel possible came into being at exactly the time when the world was beginning to experience the greatest dislocation it has ever known. When we read *Middlemarch* or *Madame Bovary* we have not the faintest inkling that the lives depicted in them are made possible by global empires (consider the contrast with that seminal work of Portuguese literature, De Camoens' *Lusiads*. Consider that when we read Hawthorne we have to

look very carefully between the lines to see that the New England ports he writes about are sustained by a far-flung network of trade. Consider that nowhere are the literary conventions of location more powerful than in the literature of the United States, itself the product of several epic dislocations.

How sharply this contrasts with traditions of fiction that predate the novel! It is true, for example, that the city of Baghdad provides a notional location for the *One Thousand and One Nights*. But the Baghdad of Scheherazade is more a talisman, an incantation, than a setting. The stories could happen anywhere so long as our minds have room for an enchanted city.

Or think of that amazing collection of stories known as the *Panchatantra* or *Five Chapters*. These stories too have no settings to speak of, except the notion of a forest. Yet the *Panchatantra* is reckoned by some to be second only to the Bible in the extent of its global diffusion. Compiled in India early in the first millennium, the *Panchatantra* passed into Arabic through a sixth-century Persian translation, engendering some of the best known of Middle Eastern fables, including parts of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. The stories were handed on to the Slavic languages through Greek, then from Hebrew to Latin, a version in the latter appearing in 1270. Through Latin they passed into German and Italian. From the Italian version came the famous Elizabethan rendition of Sir Henry North, *The Morall Philosophy of Doni* (1570). These stories left their mark on collections as different as those of La Fontaine and the Grimm brothers, and today they are inseparably part of a global heritage.*

Equally, the stories called the *Jatakas*, originally compiled in India, came to be diffused throughout southern and eastern Asia and even further with the spread of Buddhism. The story, both in its epic form as well as its shorter version, was vital in the creation of the remarkable cultural authority that India enjoyed in the Asia of the Middle Ages; not until the

* C.E. Dimock, in *The Literature of India, an Introduction*, Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974.

advent of Hollywood was narrative again to play so important a part in the diffusion of a civilization.

Everywhere these stories went they were freely and fluently adapted to local circumstances. Indeed, in a sense the whole point of the stories was their translatability — the dispensable and inessential nature of their locations. What held them together and gave them their appeal was not where they happened but how — the narrative, in other words. Or, to take another example, consider that European narrative tradition that was perhaps the immediate precursor of the novel: the story of Tristan and Isolde. By the late Middle Ages this Celtic narrative, which appears to have had its origins in Cornwall and Brittany, had been translated and adapted into several major European languages. Everywhere it went the story of Tristan and Isolde was immediately adapted to new locations and new settings. The questions of its origins and its original locations are at best matters of pedantic interest.

In these ways of storytelling, it is the story that gives places their meaning. That is why Homer leaps at us from signs on the New York turnpike, from exits marked Ithaca and Troy, that is why the Ayodhya of the Ramayana lends its name equally to a street in Banaras and a town in Thailand.

This style of fictional narrative is not extinct: far from it. It lives very vividly in the spirit that animates popular cinema in India and many other places. In a Hindi film, as in a kung fu movie, the details that constitute the setting are profoundly unimportant, incidental almost. In Hindi films, the setting of a single song can take us through a number of changes of costume, each in a different location. These films, I need hardly point out, command huge audiences on several continents and may well be the most widely circulated cultural artefacts the world has ever known. When Indonesian streets and villages suddenly empty at four in the afternoon, it is not because of Maxim Gorky or John Steinbeck: it is because of the timing of a daily broadcast of a Hindi film.

Such is the continued vitality of this style of narrative that it eventually succeeded in weaning my uncle from his book-

cases. Toward the end of his life my book-loving uncle abandoned all of his old friends, Gorky and Sholokhov and Ham-sun, and became a complete devotee of Bombay films. He would see dozens of Hindi films; sometimes we went together, on lazy afternoons. On the way home he would stop to buy fan magazines. Through much of his life he'd been a forbidding, distant man, an intellectual in the classic, Western sense; in his last years he was utterly transformed, warm, loving, thoughtful. His brothers and sisters scarcely recognized him.

Once, when we were watching a film together, he whispered in my ear that the star, then Bombay's reigning female deity, had recently contracted a severe infestation of lice.

'How do you know?' I asked.

'I read an interview with her hairdresser', he said. 'In *Stardust*.'

This was the man who'd handed me a copy of *And Quiet Flows the Don* when I was not quite twelve.

My uncle's journey is evidence that matters are not yet decided among different ways of telling stories: that if Literature, led by a flagship called the Novel, has declared victory, the other side, if there is one, has not necessarily conceded defeat. But what exactly is at stake here? What is being contested? Or to narrow the question: what is the difference between the ways in which place and location are thought of by novelists, and storytellers of other kinds?

The contrast is best seen, I think, where it is most apparent: that is in situations outside Europe and the Americas, where the novel is a relatively recent import. As an example, I would like to examine for a moment a novel from my own part of the world — Bengal. This novel is called *Rajmohun's Wife*, written in the early 1860s by the writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was a man of many parts. He was a civil servant, a scholar, a novelist, and a talented polemicist. He was also very widely read, in English as well as

Bengali and Sanskrit. In a sense his was the bookcase that was the ancestor of my uncle's.

Bankim played no small part in the extraordinary efflorescence of Bengali literature in the second half of the nineteenth century. He wrote several major novels in Bengali, all of which were quickly translated into other Indian languages. He was perhaps the first truly 'Indian' writer of modern times in the sense that his literary influence extended throughout the subcontinent. Nirad Chaudhuri describes him as 'the creator of Bengali fiction and . . . the greatest novelist in the Bengali language'. Bankim is also widely regarded as one of the intellectual progenitors of Indian nationalism.

Bankim Chandra was nothing if not a pioneer, and he self-consciously set himself the task of bringing the Bengali novel into being by attacking what he called 'the Sanskrit School'. It is hard today, looking back from a point of time when the novel sails as Literature's flagship, to imagine what it meant to champion such a form in nineteenth-century India. The traditions of fiction that Bankim was seeking to displace were powerful enough to awe its critics into silence. They still are: what modern writer, for example, could ever hope to achieve the success of the *Panchatantra*? It required true courage to seek to replace this style of narrative with a form so artificial and arbitrary as the novel; the endeavour must have seemed hopeless at the time. Nor did the so-called Sanskrit School lack for defendants. Bankim, and many others who took on the task of domesticating the novel, were immediately derided as monkey-like imitators of the West.

Bankim responded by calling for a full-scale insurrection. Imitation, he wrote, was the law of progress; no civilization was self-contained or self-generated, none could advance without borrowing. He wrote:

Those who are familiar with the present writers in Bengali, will readily admit that they all, good and bad alike, may be classed under two heads, the Sanskrit and the English schools. The former represents Sanskrit scholarship and the ancient literature of the country; the latter is the fruit of Western

knowledge and ideas. By far the greater number of Bengali writers belong to the Sanskrit school; but by far the greater number of good writers belong to the other. . . . It may be said that there is not at the present day anything like an indigenous school of writers, owing nothing either to Sanskrit writers or to those of Europe.

How poignantly ironic this passage seems a hundred years later, after generations of expatriate Indians, working mainly in England, have striven so hard to unlearn the lessons taught by Bankim and his successors in India. So successfully were novelistic conventions domesticated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that many Indian readers now think of them as somehow local, homegrown, comforting in their naturalistic simplicity, while the work of such writers as G.V. Desani, Zulfikar Ghose, Salman Rushdie, Adam Zameenzad, Shashi Tharoor, and others appears, by the same token, stylized and experimental.

Yet Bankim's opinions about the distinctiveness of Indian literature were much more extreme than those of his apocryphal Sanskrit School. In 1882 Bankim found himself embroiled in a very interesting controversy with a Protestant missionary, W. Hastie. The exchange began after Hastie had published a couple of letters in a Calcutta newspaper, *The Statesman*. I cannot resist quoting from one of these:

Notwithstanding all that has been written about the myriothestic idolatry of India, no pen has yet adequately depicted the hideousness and grossness of the monstrous system. It has been well described by one who knew it as 'Satan's masterpiece . . . the most stupendous fortress and citadel of ancient error and idolatry now in the world. . . .' With much that was noble and healthy in its early stages, the Sanskrit literature became infected by a moral leprosy which gradually spread like a corrupting disease through almost all its fibres and organs. The great Sanskrit scholars of Bengal know too well what I mean. . . . Only to think that this has been the principal pabulum of the spiritual life of the Hindus for about a thousand years, and the loudly boasted lore of their semi-deified priests! Need we seek elsewhere for the foul disease that has been

preying upon the vitals of the national life, and reducing the people to what they are? 'Shew me your gods,' cried an ancient Greek apologist, 'and I will show you your men.' The Hindu is just what his idol gods have made him. His own idolatry, and not foreign conquerors has been the curse of his history. No people was ever degraded except by itself, and this is most literally so with the Hindus. (192-3)

Bankim responded by advising Mr. Hastie to 'obtain some knowledge of Sanskrit scriptures in the *original*'

. . . [for] no translation from the Sanskrit into a European language can truly or even approximately represent the original. . . The English or the German language can possess no words or expressions to denote ideas or conceptions which have never entered into a Teutonic brain. . . A people so thoroughly unconnected with England or Germany as the old Sanskrit-speaking people of India, and developing a civilization and a literature peculiarly their own, had necessarily a vast store of ideas and conceptions utterly foreign to the Englishman or the German, just as the Englishman or the German boasts a still vaster number of ideas utterly foreign to the Hindu. . . [Mr Hastie's position] is the logical outcome of that monstrous claim to omniscience, which certain Europeans . . . put forward for themselves. . . Yet nothing is a more common subject of merriment among the natives of India than the Europeans' ignorance of all that relates to India. . . A navy who had strayed into the country . . . asked for some food from a native. . . The native gave him a cocoanut. The hungry sailor . . . bit the husk, chewed it . . . and flung the fruit at the head of the unhappy donor. . . The sailor carried away with him an opinion of Indian fruits parallel to that of Mr Hastie and others, who merely bite at the husk of Sanskrit learning, but do not know their way to the kernel within. . .

He added: 'I cheerfully admit the intellectual superiority of Europe. I deny, however . . . that intellectual superiority can enable the blind to see or the deaf to hear.' (192-3)

By the time he wrote the passages quoted above Bankim was already an acclaimed novelist and a major figure in the Bengali

literary world. But Bankim's experiments with the novel had begun some twenty years before, and his earliest efforts at novel writing were conducted in English. *Rajmohun's Wife* is the first known fictional work written by Bankim, and it was written in the early 1860s.

It will be evident from the above passages, abbreviated though they are, that Bankim wrote excellent English; his essays and letters are written in a style that is supple, light-handed, and effective. The style of *Rajmohun's Wife*, on the other hand, is deliberate, uncertain, and often ponderous. What intrigues me most about this book, however, are the long passages of description that preface several of the chapters, bookending, as it were, some extremely melodramatic scenes.

Here are some examples:

The house of Mathur Ghose was a genuine specimen of mofussil magnificence united with a mofussil want of cleanliness.

From the far-off paddy fields you could descry through the intervening foliage, its high palisades and blackened walls. On a nearer view might be seen pieces of plaster of a venerable antiquity prepared to bid farewell to their old and weather-beaten tenement. . .

A mazy suite of dark and damp apartments led from a corner of this part of the building to the inner *mahal*, another quadrangle, on all four sides of which towered double-storeyed verandahs, as before. . . The walls of all the chambers above and below were well striped with numerous streaks of red, white, black, green, all colours of the rainbow, caused by the spittles of such as had found their mouths too much encumbered with paan, or by some improvident woman servant who had broken the *gola-handi* while it was full of its muddy contents. . . Numerous sketches in charcoal, which showed, we fear, nothing of the conception of (Michael) Angelo or the tinting of Guido (Reni), attested the art or idleness of the wicked boys and ingenious girls who had contrived to while away hungry hours by essays in the arts of designing and of defacing wall. . .

A thick and massive door led to the 'godown' as the *mahal* was called by the males directly from outside. . . (*Rajmohun's Wife* 52-3)

A kitchen scene:

Madhav therefore immediately hurried into the inner apartments where he found it no very easy task to make himself heard in that busy hour of zenana life. There was a servant woman, black, rotund, and eloquent, demanding the transmission to her hand of sundry articles of domestic use, without however making it at all intelligible to whom her demands were addressed. There was another who boasted similar blessed corporal dimensions, but who thought it beneath her dignity to shelter them from view; and was busily employed broomstick in hand, in demolishing the little mountains of the skins and stems of sundry culinary vegetables which decorated the floors, and against which the half-naked dame never aimed a blow but coupled it with a curse on those whose duty it had been to prepare the said vegetables for dressing. (17)

The questions that strike me when I read these lengthy and laboured descriptions is: What are they for? For whom are they intended? Why did he bother to write them? Bankim must have known that this book was very unlikely to be read by anyone who did not know what the average Bengali landowner's house looked like — since by far the largest part of the literate population of Calcutta at that time consisted of landowners and their families. Similarly, anyone who had visited the Bengal of his time, for no matter how brief a period, would almost inevitably have been familiar with the other sights he describes: fishermen at work, cranes fishing, and so on.

Why then did Bankim go to the trouble of writing these passages? Did he think his book might be read by someone who was entirely unfamiliar with Bengal? The question is a natural and inevitable one, but I do not think it leads anywhere. For the fact of the matter is that I don't think Bankim was writing for anyone but himself. I suspect that Bankim never really intended to publish *Rajmohun's Wife*: the novel has the most cursory of endings as though he'd written it as an exercise and then thrown it aside once it had served its purpose. The book was not actually published until a decade

or so after he'd stopped working on it. For Bankim, *Rajmohun's Wife* was clearly a rehearsal, a preparation for something else.

It is here, I think, that the answers lie. The passages of description in the book are not, in fact, intended to describe. Their only function is that they are there at all: they are Bankim's attempt to lay claim to the rhetoric of location, of place — to mount a springboard that would allow him to vault the gap between two entirely different conventions of narrative.

It is for a related reason, I think, that Bankim conducted his rehearsal in English rather than Bengali. To write about one's surroundings is anything but natural: to even perceive one's immediate environment one must somehow distance oneself from it; to describe it one must assume a certain posture, a form of address. In other words, to locate oneself through prose, one must begin with an act of dislocation. It was this perhaps that English provided for Bankim: a kind of disconnected soapbox on which he could test a certain form of address before trying it out in Bengali.

This still leaves a question. Every form of address assumes a listener, a silent participant. Who was the listener in Bankim's mind when he was working on *Rajmohun's Wife*? The answer, I think, is the bookcase. It is the very vastness and cosmopolitanism of the fictional bookcase that requires novelists to locate themselves in relation to it; that demands of their work that it carry marks to establish their location.

This then is the peculiar paradox of the novel: those of us who love novels often read them because of the eloquence with which they communicate a 'sense of place'. Yet the truth is that it is the very loss of a lived sense of place that makes their fictional representation possible.

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16 *The Greatest Sorrow: Times of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness*

... *Nessun maggior dolore
che ricordarsi tempo felice
ne la miseria . . .*'

... 'There is no greater sorrow
than to recall our times of joy
in wretchedness . . .'¹

ON 27 JULY this year, landing in Colombo's Katunayake airport, I saw at first hand how fragile a machine an aircraft is. My plane landed on a runway that was flanked with wreckage on either side. Through the scarred glass of my window, I spotted a blackened pile of debris that ended in the intact tail section of a plane. The shape of the vanished fuselage was etched into the tarmac like the outline of a cigar that has burnt itself slowly to extinction, leaving its ring standing in its ashes. Then there was another and still another, the charred remains lying scattered around the apron like a boxful of half-smoked Havanas arranged around the edges of an ebony table.

It was just four days since a small suicide squad of Tamil Tiger guerrillas had succeeded in entering Colombo's carefully guarded Katunayake airport. The strike was executed with meticulous precision and the guerrillas had destroyed some fourteen aircraft, virtually disabling Sri Lanka's civilian