

**Sanjukta Dasgupta, Sudeshna Chakravarti and Mary Mathew, *Radical Rabindranath: Nation, Family and Gender in Tagore's Fiction and Films*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2013, pp. 343, ₹695.**

DOI: 10.1177/0049085713502609

Tagore has been widely read and discussed as a versatile poet, writer, educationalist, philosopher, painter, scholar and a magnificent visionary leader. The book, *Radical Rabindranath: Nation, Family and Gender in Tagore's Fiction and Films*, offers a distinctive account on Tagore by portraying him as a human and not an exception. The book addresses Tagore's struggle to embrace his humanness as his fundamental identity. This struggle implies constant negotiation with other identities and even marginalisation of those identities. It is this zeal of embracing existential reality as a human being that makes Tagore an extraordinary person who could dare to transcend the identities defined by notions such as nation and gender. The authors emphasise how Tagore's connection to rural undivided Bengal and its folk culture, and his ability to seamlessly fuse this culture with unknown culture of the foreign lands he travelled, allowed him to reject binaries and regimentation of institutions. This ability enabled Tagore, as the authors note, 'to travel like a scholar gypsy, not a bourgeois bohemian'. Thus, Tagore takes up his existential project as a truly global citizen who is equally comfortable in his homeland and lands that are foreign and who is as relevant and progressive in the context of twenty-first century as he was in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The book presents Tagore's humanness, while reminding readers of the struggle behind not-so-easy task of being more human than a man and scholar who also happened to be a colonial subject. Since the question of nation mainly emerges in the context of women's question in colonial India, tension emerging from interaction of these questions remains a crucial theme of Tagore's writings, specially his fiction. The book refers to Tagore's fiction and films based on his fictions to accentuate his discomfort with colonial effort of objectifying women for establishing colonial subjects as barbaric and nationalist response to this effort that portrayed Indian women as extra-human entities who were all set to be modernised while preserving their home and family's traditional culture. But Tagore was able to see the human aspect of colonial women and understand that for the nationalists, as Lata Mani has argued in her article, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India', it was not the women but the culture which was at stake. As a deeply concerned human, Tagore could empathise with these women and take daring steps to recognize them as fellow humans who possessed a body and mind with desires and dreams.

The authors refer to Tagore's famous fictions and films to discuss how female colonial subjects, bewildered by the overwhelming responsibility of responding to juxtaposition of Victorian morality and feudal patriarchal norms, were bound to repress themselves as human. The question of the woman, especially her space in the home and the world, remains an intriguing and haunting concern in Tagore's

writing. The book makes an interesting effort to explore Tagore's truly modern, secular and progressive attitude on the question of women. Tagore's female characters, like Bimala in *Ghare Baire* and Binodini in *Chokher Bali*, represent the first generation of educated modern women. These women's conflict in striking a balance between their responsibilities towards home and the world outside, while embracing their desire and sexuality, represents Tagore's ability to empathise with women colonial subjects. His understanding of nationalism, and also of women's space within the idea of (Indian) nationalism, emerges as a crucial theme of the book. The authors explore how the perception of nationalism for Tagore breeds within the context of Hindu nationalism and with the realisation of communal implication of this model, he gradually starts to problematise his understanding of Indian nationalism, which for him is not only communal but also sexist.

The book, while discussing Tagore's concern over issues of home, family and gender as emerged in his fictions and films it inspired, also portrays Tagore's constant struggle to explore himself. The authors note that 'throughout his life Tagore had paced a track that had been of his own making'. This daring radical thinker was truly egalitarian and inclusive. The authors recognise Tagore's ability to be a human as the most fascinating part of his personality which allowed him to empathise with his fellow human beings with an alarming consciousness of his status as a colonial subject. He seems to be in a constant dialogue with issues and problems around him. Tagore talks about life and death but does not look for escape. Neither does he seek *mukti*. In his poem, 'Panth' (in *Parishesh*), he identifies himself as a poet who lives very close to the earth and insists, 'it is here, where my *mukti* exists'. Many of his stories and novels have ambiguous endings. Sometimes, the leading character 'disappears' when everything has been resolved. By doing so, the book underscores that Tagore is not necessarily trying to manifest the uncertainty of life. Possibly, he is also looking for avenues to express the possibilities of the impossible and wants his characters to wander into the future—the unexplored. And with this, he is also trying to lead his readers into the realm of the unexplored.

In sum, the book, *Radical Rabindranath: Nation, Family and Gender in Tagore's Fiction and Films*, enables the reader to envision Tagore with a new perspective that envisions Tagore and his magnificent persona with a very humanistic approach. It recognises Tagore as a radical thinker because of his ability to be a conscious human who was able to transcend all notional boundaries to embrace his humanness.

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