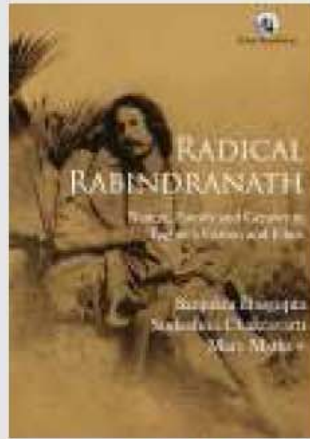


Radical and split



Radical Rabindranath

Nation, Family and Gender in Tagore's Fiction and Films: Sanjukta Dasgupta, Sudeshna Chakravarti, Mary Mathew; Orient Blackswan, 1/24 Asaf Ali Road, New Delhi-110002. Rs. 695.

Raj Kumar

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a multi-faceted personality. Primarily known as a poet, he was also a novelist, playwright, essayist, short story writer, educationist, reformer, painter and a philosopher. A rare genius of his time, he probed his ideas through art and produced some well known fictional works in this effort. As a sensitive artist, his ideas were never limited to the confines of geographical boundaries. He talked about freedom of Man in universal terms putting an emphasis on international brotherhood at a time when India was trying to get independence from British rule.

As a far-sighted visionary, Tagore made concerted efforts to propagate the idea of an inclusive human civilisation devoid of any caste, class or racial prejudice. He focused upon the ideas of rationality as the founding principles of every human society. Over the years generations of scholars and researchers have studied the relevance of Tagore in their own respective contexts.

This book is a valuable addition to the existing corpus of critical literature

available on Tagore. Coming as it does on the 150th birth anniversary of Tagore, the book is a postcolonial critique of Tagore as a writer. The focus is quite significant because the authors have selected Tagore's fiction and films to see how radical he was in dealing with the idea of nation, family and gender.

After an in-depth analysis on the subject the authors arrive at the understanding that Tagore had a split personality. While he was fearless, egalitarian and inclusive in his intellectual and creative discourse, he was also quite ambivalent and uncertain on key issues in his personal life. The authors address these dichotomies by reading Tagore as a 'man' and Tagore as a 'text'.

Early life

The end of the book is almost like a revelation because it says: Tagore was radical because he "could understand that national politics, gender discrimination, religious bias, institutionalised education and the politics of caste, class, race and location have all in their own ways restricted the flowering of universal humanism as a way forward for both the local and global social and

cultural environments." For Tagore the process of radicalisation started very early in life. Several members of the Tagore family were leaders and public intellectuals during the so-called Bengal Renaissance period. Much before Rabindranath came on the scene, Dwarkanath and Debendranath were household names in Bengal.

The Tagore family took advantage of several measures introduced by the British government. They encouraged all their family members, including women to avail modern education and appreciate art. Tagore inherited this liberal family tradition and became a lifelong lover of art.

His education in England for few years gave him an opportunity to interact with modern value systems which enriched his life. He lived as an unconventional person throughout his life. While he always looked forward to embrace new ideas, he also rejected many traditional beliefs and practices. As he grew older, he became increasingly non-conformist and more assertive in his ideology.

As a moulder of people's opinions he initiated debates and discussions on

several issues, the most important being gender equality. Accordingly he advocated gender justice in almost all his fictional works. His nine major novels are important documents in this regard where he has essayed female characters who contemplate freedom to combat social slavery and yearn for female empowerment. In several of his short stories he has portrayed women as evolving personas who struggle to assert their individual identities by challenging the patriarchal social order. With the portrayal of strong women characters in Tagore's fiction we come to hear about the emergence of the New Woman in colonial Bengal.

Interestingly Tagore's idea of the New Woman evoked public debate. Many of his contemporaries such as Chandranath Basu, Dijendralal Roy, Jitendralal Basu, Bipin Chandra Pal, Chittaranjan Das among others took exception to his portrayal of women and characterised his writings as 'pseudo-Western dramatization'. Tagore defended his position with grace and magnanimity.

The last two chapters are about adaptation of Tagore's fictional narratives into films. The authors believe

that Tagore's texts have contemporary relevance and therefore many film directors, including Satyajit Ray have been successful in adapting them as visual narratives because they correctly interpreted the texts. Interestingly Tagore himself adapted some of his fictional narratives to make films where he also essayed a few roles. But he was never successful. The authors attribute Tagore's inability to comprehend the relationship between the politics of market forces and cinema.

It is quite evident that the book has been meticulously researched. But while reading the book one feels that except for Introduction the rest of the chapters have been written individually by the authors without due consultation with each other. Due to this the internal coherence which should bind all the individual chapters together is missing. There are also a few typographical errors. But as a whole the book is an important contribution on Tagore. It is a source material for those who are interested in working in the areas of fiction, films, nation, gender and the social history of Bengal.

(Raj Kumar teaches English literature in the University of Delhi)