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Critical Lives: Rabindranath Tagore

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Bashabi Fraser's insightful critical biography of Rabindranath Tagore is focussed on his cosmopolitanism, an aspect often missed out in traditional narratives. The shaping influence of his family, the historical forces of the Bengal renaissance and the capacity to learn from extensive cultural contacts synthesised into the humanistic philosophy by which Tagore is known. Deeply researched and empathetically written, Fraser's book is a valuable assessment of Tagore's life and letters seen through modern sentiments. Hence, there are no hagiography in this narrative and hardly any apocryphal tales; instead one finds a steady gaze at the heart and mind of one of the most influential figures of the last millennium.

A young Rabindranath standing at a balcony in Sudder street, Calcutta notes, "From infancy I had been seeing with my eyes, now I began to see with my whole consciousness" (75). In that perhaps lies the story of his creative range: poetry, drama, short and long fiction, essays, autobiographical pieces, sheaf of letters, teaching notes, lyrics and musical scores. How does a biographer weave in the story of such diverse talent which defies any chronological sequence of development? Fraser's talent is admirable for interlocking Tagore's life experience with creativity, looking more at the nebulous emotions that crystallised into literary masterpieces than at external episodes. One example is the fragile relationship of Rabindranath and his sister-in-law, Kadambari Debi, about which many biographers have speculated. Here, Bashabi approaches the story through a broader theme of forbidden love. In England, Tagore started writing *Bhagna Hriday* (Broken Heart) a cluster of poems on separation, longing, tentative romance, published in 1881. Though Kadambari may

have been the fulcrum of these intense emotions, it is possible, suggests Bashabi Fraser, that the young daughters in the English family where he was residing at the time were the subjects of equally delicate sentiments (65). This provisionality in the biography adds to the mysterious depth of Tagore's persona and that is the charming tone of this book.

Fraser's comments on Tagore being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1913 is another example of her breadth of vision. It wasn't only the English translation of *Gitanjali* with its persuasive Introduction by W.B. Yeats that impressed the jury. Fraser provides information that the "Nobel Library had several other works by Tagore and had a full account of his illustrious family, his multifaceted talents and his pioneering work in education and rural uplift." (7) Such substantive material along with an empathetic understanding of Tagore's bold transitions allows Fraser to underscore the need for reading 'Gurudev' in a global context.

Today as we look towards climate change, food security, women's empowerment and multiculturalism, Tagore seems like a contemporary, not a person who passed away in 1941, saddened by the clouds of an impending world war. His intellectual convictions address a *Vasudev Kutumbakam*, "the world is my family" and he selects a motto for Viswa Bharati, the university he established in Shantiniketan that emblematises "where the world meets in one nest" (146). Tagore places in the curriculum Chinese, Japanese, dance and music, theatre and sculpture taught by renowned teachers from and beyond Bengal, several of whom were from abroad; for the improvement of village economies and income generation among artisans, he builds Sriniketan. His innovative teaching methods lead to classes under brooding trees and music in the Sal forests. As Bashabi Fraser summarises, "For Tagore the object of education is to give man the unity of truth" (161). This grand curve of expansive outreach had a poignant undercurrent. Tagore's sorrow in the passing away of his wife Mrinalini, his daughters Madhurilata and Renuka, and his son, Shamindranath could hardly be masked by the chords of his lyrics. He persevered as he knew best, by heeding the fine-tuned instrument of his inner consciousness, "*moner manush*". With age and maturity Rabindranath Tagore had claimed an assured place among cosmopolitan thinkers in Europe, America and Asia.

Tagore's friendship with M.K. Gandhi is another platform where Fraser's acute comments matter. "Their ideals were imbued with a sense of deep moral ethos and both worked from an inner core of

spirituality. But while Gandhi was against technological advancement and science, Tagore as a modernist, believed that science and the humanities were needed for a holistic education and social advancement.” (169). The conversations between these two extraordinary leaders remain a lesson even today on the art of expressing difference without losing compassion. Today, when the principles of open education are being discussed, we might acknowledge that Tagore and Gandhi offered different models but both were built on the foundations of intercultural understanding.

Tagore’s thoughts on Nationalism, his returning of the Knighthood, his friendship with Albert Einstein, Patrick Geddes, William Rothenstein, C.F. Andrews, Jagadish Chandra Bose and other stalwarts of the time, the late age attachment to Victoria Ocampo and Ranu Mukherjee are aspects of his uncompromising honesty, I would say. Bashabi Fraser’s manner of recounting these has a subtle sophistication. In a brief biography people and events are thoughtfully linked with acute perception, enough to illustrate the core point of Tagore’s expansiveness but not to overwhelm the text with minutiae. Finally, Fraser’s interest is in chalking Tagore’s legacy to us in this strange interregnum in history when globalisation is both a boon and a burden. The overall assessment by Fraser is wise and instructive:

In a world of rising conflict, alarming and widening fissures, Tagore’s syncreticism remains a lasting legacy. He sought a positive outcome of the East-West encounter and exchange, so that the ‘universal man’ could meet and interact through a transnational dialogue...Tagore’s faith in humanity stemmed from his belief in the creative potential of the individual, which needs to be identified, explored, exploited and allowed expression in order to contribute to life and the world. (217)