

In the recent scramble to celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore, a host of scholars and enthusiasts have tried to recreate his image in terms of their own individual perspectives. In these imaginative reconstructions, Rabindranath has been projected variously as world literature, national icon, local deity, poet, painter, educationist, philosopher, saint, solitary intellectual, engaged social reformer, affectionate family man and tormented lover. He has been celebrated for his rootedness in Indian tradition, and also for his openness to the influence of western 'modernity'. To this odd assortment of re-readings, *Radical Rabindranath* is a welcome addition, for instead of using simplistic labels, co-authors Sanjukta Dasgupta, Sudeshna Chakravarti and Mary Mathew try to examine the radical potential in Rabindranath's writings without ignoring the contradictions and ambivalences that complicate his life and thought.

From the outset, the idea of Tagore's non-conformism is problematized. The Introduction asserts that it is the 'extraordinarily liberated and inclusive spirit of Tagore' that the authors propose to 'recognize, explore and critique, identifying his moments of overt and covert non-conformism, his vacillations,

RADICAL RABINDRANATH: NATION, FAMILY AND GENDER IN TAGORE'S FICTION AND FILMS
By Sanjukta Dasgupta, Sudeshna Chakravarti and Mary Mathew
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his conservative reactions, his subjective conflictual self and his unequivocal overtures'. This awareness of shades of grey is one of the strengths of this book.

The opening chapters introduce us to Tagore's early life, the ethos in which he grew up, and the formative influences that shaped his unconventional outlook and gave wing to his creativity. We also learn about the intellectual hostility he aroused among some of his contemporaries, such as Chandranath Basu, Dhirendralal Roy, Jitendralal Basu, Bipin Chandra Pal and Chittaranjan Das. The biographical angle reappears in the Conclusion, where we learn more about the women in Tagore's life, and his philosophy of education. Framed within this contextual information, are chapters devoted to re-readings of Tagore's fiction. Here, the authors explore the treatment of gender and sexuality, and the handling of political issues in his novels and short stories. The two final chapters deal with Tagore and cinema; his involvement with the medium, and screen adaptations of his texts. An appendix on filmography at the end of the book is especially useful for scholars.

Interwoven Strands: Beyond Linearity

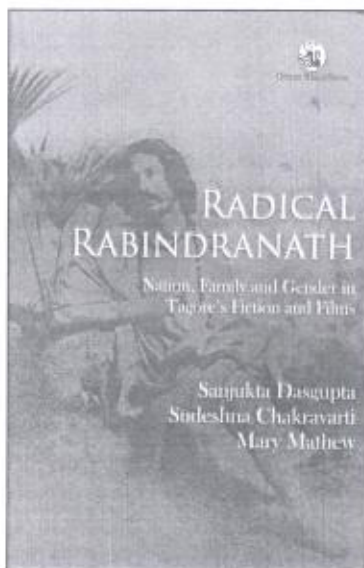
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Of particular interest are the chapters in *Radical Rabindranath* that address Tagore's representations of women. Through a detailed analysis of some well-known novels and stories, the authors argue that Tagore was in many ways ahead of his times in his attitude to women. Rebellious figures like Binodini in *Chokher Bali*, Mrinal in 'Sreer Patra' ('The Wife's Letter') and Giribala in 'Manbhanjan' (translated as 'Giribala') provide examples of Tagore's radical approach to gender issues. The narratives draw attention to the emergence of the New Woman in Bengali literature, caught within the tensions of tradition and modernity. These texts are analysed in relation to contemporary movements for social reform, and the influence of western culture on colonial Bengal, but the authors argue that Tagore, on the whole, drew eclectically from diverse sources to ultimately articulate positions that were essentially his own. They also acknowledge the unresolved contradictions between Tagore's life and his writings, where gender issues are concerned.

Tagore's political concerns, especially the evolution of his complex attitude to the idea of the nation, are examined in relation to some of his novels, such as *Gora*, *Ghare Baire* and *Char Adbhayaj*. The changing dynamics of the family in Bengal under colonial rule also come in for scrutiny, especially in the analysis of *Jogajog*, a novel that captures the dilemma of a woman caught in a family feud in a society in transition.

The chapters on cinema, charting the evolution from early screen versions to contemporary adaptations of Tagore's works, highlight the ways in which these cinematic renderings have kept his legacy alive. Tagore was enthusiastic about the potential of cinema, but also had reservations about the ways in which this medium would be used by a consumerist, profit-oriented society. He was also uncertain about the success of 'inter-semiotic' translations from literature to cinema. Yet, as the present study demonstrates, Tagore's writings continue to inspire filmmakers of today.

Tagore's own ideas on social and literary issues did not remain static; through his long career, his thoughts continued to evolve. 'Age could not make Tagore passive, resigned and mellow. His mind not only retained its creative vitality but became far more assertive, at times exhibiting its power to break free of all essentialist discourse' (p. 287). Above



all, freedom of thought remains of paramount importance to his oeuvre: 'He had the disposition of the artist, for whom fixity of location and fixed ideas could only lead to a feeling of being cabin'd, cribbed and confined' (p. 286).

That *Radical Rabindranath* is not the work of a single scholar becomes apparent in the reading, for the co-authors don't always speak in one voice. The chapters in this book differ not only in style, but also in the authors' critical positions and their use of theoretical and conceptual paradigms. In their separate readings of Tagore's novels, for instance, Mary Mathew uses the theory of Chakras to describe Tagore's spiritualization of the bildungsroman, while Sudeshna Chakravarti discusses the same texts either in relation to nationalism in colonial Bengal, or in terms of their socio-psychological dynamics. These divergent readings add layers to our understanding of Rabindranath's complexity; they also contribute to the impression that the book offers a collection of related essays with interwoven strands, rather than a single, linear argument. Yet, despite their diverse approaches, all the chapters bear out the overarching premise of the entire study: that to read Rabindranath as non-conformist is to approach him as a radically divided self, at odds with himself and often with the world around him.

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