

*Critical Lives: Rabindranath Tagore*

Bashabi Fraser

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There is no dearth of books on Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali polymath who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. During his lifetime, Tagore produced a staggering body of works including songs, essays, short stories, plays, novels, and novellas. He also created paintings and drawings, acted and sang, managed estates, founded a university, and experimented with rural development. According to WorldCat, there are over 200 biographies of Rabindranath Tagore published in English, nine in Indian and seven in European languages, and a handful in Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Hebrew, and Indonesian. The expiration of Visva-Bharati University's sole authority over Tagore's works in 2002 has led to what Bashabi Fraser calls new approaches and understandings of his work. Translations and edited collections of his writings accelerated with the Celebration of Tagore's 150<sup>th</sup> birth Anniversary in India and throughout the world.

While some might wonder if we need another biography of Rabindranath Tagore, I would reply that we need Bashabi Fraser's *Critical Lives* biography. Writing about this extraordinary man requires a seasoned scholar who knows his life and *oeuvre* and can contextualize the admiration and criticism he invited in India and abroad during his lifetime. Bashabi Fraser, the co-founder and Director of the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies, Chief Editor of the journal *Gitanjali and Beyond*, and Professor Emerita of English and Creative Writing, is abundantly qualified for the task. This engaging and thorough biography is especially significant in adding Rabindranath Tagore, a man from the Global South, to the *Critical Lives* series of "leading cultural figures of the modern period." Fraser has addressed Rabindranath's life and work in twelve chronological chapters of unequal length, illustrated with both known and rare photographs. The first chapter traces the origins of the Tagores of Jorasanko and the impact of being Pirali Brahmins, that is, from the Brahmin caste but not accepted by orthodox Brahmins. One of the significant themes in this chapter is the interplay between the East and West in the Tagore household. Fraser pays special attention to Tagore's entrepreneurial grandfather "Prince" Dwarkanath and his saintly father "Rishi" Debendranath. Both played key roles in the Bengal Renaissance and the Brahmo Samaj, the reformist religious

organization that the historian David Kopf argues was critical in the development of modern India.

The second chapter introduces us to the child Rabindranath, the fourteenth of Debendranath's fifteen children, who grew up in a large and sometimes chaotic household from which his father frequently escaped for a life of religious contemplation. Fraser draws attention to the tyrannical servants who cared for the children, Tagore's dislike of formal education, his home schooling with tutors, and his early writing. In the third chapter, "English Interlude," Fraser chronicles Tagore's stay in England where he was sent to study for the Bar. He returned home without a law degree but rich in experiences with English society, admiration for the lack of gender segregation, and letters and poems that would later be published.

Tagore's return to India, chronicled in Chapter 4, was marked by personal losses: the deaths of a niece and brother-in-law and the suicide of his favorite sister-in-law. Throughout these family tragedies, Tagore travelled extensively and continued to write. This was when he was married, at age 22, to 10-year old Mrinalini who bore her first child two years later. Then in charge of managing the family's estates, he developed an attachment to rural Bengal and a desire to improve the lives of those who lived there.

Fraser excels in her ability to contextualize Tagore's writing. Suffering from personal losses, he learned about and developed empathy with ordinary people and wrote "some of the best short stories of his time" (95). His female characters have continued to fascinate feminists, and his 1887 speech—against child marriage, unequal marriage, and dowry—was extremely progressive. Nevertheless, Tagore arranged the marriages of his two daughters, with dowries, when they were 12 and 14 years of age. While he may have been yielding to family pressure or financial exigencies, Tagore justified his decisions in conventional terms, arguing that it was more difficult to arrange marriages for older girls and that young girls adjusted more easily to their new homes (98).

Chapter 5 is dedicated to Shantiniketan, the "Abode of Peace," which became Tagore's home in 1901, and the beginning of his educational experiments. Fraser's account underlines the humble beginnings of his school and the constant need for money to support it. The loss of two nephews in 1899 and 1901, and the deaths of Mrinalini in 1902, his daughter Rani in 1903, his father Debendranth in 1905, and his son Sami in 1907, were huge blows to Tagore, who reacted by plunging himself into work. Fraser relates how the imminent partition of Bengal, announced in 1904, spurred Tagore into political action. His lectures, songs, poems, and Rakhi-Bandhan Day put him at the center of activity until the eruption of violence made him withdraw from politics.

In the following chapter, “From Shantiniketan to World Stage,” Fraser begins with Tagore’s withdrawal to his “Abode of Peace” to work on learning materials for his students, plays, novels, short stories, lyrical poems, and satires against orthodoxy. Finding detractors among those who had idealized him, Tagore got his first taste of the capriciousness of adoration, which was a theme throughout his life. Leaving Shantiniketan for England in 1912, he met London’s literati and saw *Gitanjali* published. Having been nominated and selected for the Nobel Prize, Tagore’s life was forever changed when he became an international writer.

In the following three chapters, Fraser explains Rabindranath’s renunciation of his knighthood following the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre, his visit to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where he conceived of establishing his own university, and his extensive tours of Europe and America. This was when he sparred with Gandhi over nationalism, committed to internationalism, and turned to the East. Sometimes wildly popular, there were other places and times—at home and abroad—when Tagore’s messages were not welcomed. During his travels, especially in Italy and Russia, he ignored “signs of political unrest and repression” (182) and received much deserved criticism. But he was redeemed, Fraser points out, when he revised “his opinion as facts were revealed to him and as circumstances around him changed” (183).

The final two chapters sum up the man and his work and evaluate his legacy. Fraser first discusses Tagore’s “Modernity,” pointing out the difficulty of easy categorization in terms of modernity or modernism. Fundamentally a humanist, Rabindranath portrayed people who were oppressed and exploited; he objected to nationalism and deplored the tyranny of the machine. He valued peace, international cooperation, science and technology, and social cohesion. Following his own sense of truth, he argued with Gandhi and other leaders when he thought they were wrong. While some considered his ideas moribund and romantic, others, Fraser notes, “felt he was criticizing and compromising traditional forms” (194). Taking on a topic that has generated a sizable literature, Fraser declares that “he produced his own distinctive brand of modernity relevant to India vis-à-vis the world” (194).

In the end, how does one sum up Rabindranath Tagore? As two men? As many? Concluding this wonderfully compact but comprehensive look at the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, whose ideas have moved people in India and around the world for generations, Fraser concludes that there were many Tagores. Following a summary of his contributions to education, the Bengali language, literature, music, art, and thinking about the modern world, Bashabi Fraser focuses on his relevance in our time. And indeed, she is right. Our world seems torn by hatred and xenophobia, teetering on the

brink of another Cold War. Why should we read Rabindranath today? Because, as Fraser concludes, “[f]reedom, creativity, syncretism, and mutual respect are central to Tagore’s ideas and work” (217).

Bashabi Fraser’s *Rabindranath Tagore* is a delight to read. Comprehensive but never boring, scholarly without being pedantic, sensitive to historical context but not bogged down in detail, and sympathetic yet never fawning, she achieves a valuable balance. I recommend this book to those who have read a great deal of Tagore and about Tagore, as well as to those who have never heard his name, to undergraduate and graduate students, to students of literature and history, and to those who want to understand a cultural figure who helped make the modern period.