

Title of the Book: 'Kobi' & 'Rani': *Memoirs and Correspondences of Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis & Rabindranath Tagore.*

Editor and Translator: Somdatta Mandal, Publisher: Bolpur Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, 2020, ISBN: 978-81-944352-8-0, Price: Rs 900/-

Malashri Lal

We have, so far, revelled in Rabindranath's compassionate understanding of women and cited *Ghare Bairey*, *Chokher Bali* and other favourite texts in support. Now we have the female gaze trained upon 'Kobi' Rabindranath. Unflinching, mischievous and honest from the pen of 'Rani' (the nickname of Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis), what a delight these reminiscences are of the travels to Europe, South India and Ceylon when the Kobi was aged and insistent on having each detail recorded. Comprising of two travelogues *Kobir Shonge Europey* [*With Poet in Europe*] and *Kobir Shonge Dakshinattey* [*With Poet in the South*], along with ancillary texts, this massive volume has been expertly translated and edited by Somdatta Mandal. It is a treasure house of memorabilia yielding charming anecdotes about Tagore with Rani's 'womanist' commentary on the side. Rani was the daughter of Heramachandra Maitra, a social reformer of the Brahma Samaj and an educationist. She married Prasantachandra Mahalanobis, a mathematician who became the founder of The Indian Statistical Institute. Rabindranath, in his later years, grew increasingly dependent on the couple for managing his affairs at Visva Bharati and his travels abroad.

How does the dual perspective of 'I' and the 'other' come about in Rani's words? *Kobir Shonge Europey* is based on a sojourn of seven months in Europe in 1926 when Tagore was accompanied by a large retinue. Prasantachandra and Rathindranath (Rabindranath's son) were tasked with collecting news reports about Tagore every single day, translating and sending them to Visva Bharati for inclusion in the weekly *Bulletin*. Rani's job was to write diary-like notes for later use. One can picture the overworked team, Rani admitting that she was drooping with fatigue at the end of daylong public functions and late dinners but still felt obligated to compose her notes and 'letters home'. In a strange twist of fate, the transcribed news reports of 1926 disappeared in Shantiniketan and surfaced much later in 1941, to be misplaced again, finally to resurface in 1969. Rani's notes, and letters that she wrote regularly to relatives and friends in Calcutta, helped reconstruct the journey but her own deteriorating health and other impediments came in the way of publishing till 1969. In essence, Rani's account moves in multiple time frames and not in strict chronology, making it a fascinating collage of experience and commentary. Alice Walker, the progenitor of the term 'womanism' says, 'Part of what existence means to me is knowing the distance between what I am now and what I was then' (*In Search of our Mother's Gardens*). Such a complex vision marks Rani's narrative.

Much has been speculated about Rabindranath's visit to Italy as the 'guest' of Mussolini. Rani's first-hand report gives the authentic story of the poet's innocence in being manipulated by agents of the State; those who kept a strict surveillance on visitors and translated his English speeches into Italian in a way that projected his support of the fascist regime. The busy schedule of Rabindranath and his unsuspecting faith in his local hosts kept the dangerous disinformation away from the poet's knowledge, and it was only later, through Romain Rolland, that Tagore realised how he had been 'used' by the propagandists.

Rani's saree clad silhouette, confidence and charm attracted hordes of admirers but one episode is worth repeating. At a formal dinner in Zurich, she notices the seven wine glasses at the table setting. Two men challenge Rani to drink wine and jest with her when she demurs. Rising to the challenge she declares that although she has never tasted wine before, she will drink each of the seven kinds of wine being served! Rabindranath, sitting across from her, is aghast and after she merrily downs four glasses, asks her in Bengali if she means to bring disgrace upon herself and him. She claims to be fine, and continues. When all the invitees stand to offer the toast, Rabindranath skilfully comes to Rani's side and supports her by his elbow. She is managing rather well, he realises, nevertheless, in a firm voice he declares that Mrs Mahalanobis and he would retire to the hotel while the party continued. His protective demeanour, and her spirited socialising show up in other instances too, including in Paris when Rani is not allowed by the Kobi to partake of the in/famous night life!

Somdatta's fluid translation takes us through the conversations, the sights, and the literary references without a hitch. Some of these are multi-lingual situations. As recorded by Rani, Tagore's first meeting with Einstein happened in Berlin in September 1926, of which Rani's memory is of "an excellent person, quite handsome and with interesting looks. The best parts are his eyes, which can be called dreamy." Einstein spoke no English; his wife fortunately did, and acted as the interpreter. We hear nothing about the content of the conversation but the atmosphere is brilliantly captured. (The famous dialogue between the physicist and philosopher was to come much later, in 1930). Throughout the journey, Rani wrote letters to her father-in-law Prabodhchandra Mahalanobis, aunt-in-law Manika Mahalanobis, mother Kusumkumari Maitra, to friend Amalchandra Home and several others. Spilling over with details, she writes frankly of the adulation accorded to the poet in eastern Europe, the frantic pace of lecture assignments, her share of womanly care-giving to Rabindranath along with Pratima Debi, and her cultural negotiations with food, language and clothing. The correspondence reveals the high level of education among women of the upper, somewhat Anglicised families, and the role of the Brahma Samaj in opening the road to women's emancipation. In the unfamiliar realms of European cities, Rani held her own, ensuring that her devotion to the 'Kobi' remained balanced with an interpretive rendering of his predilections. No wonder that Rabindranath paid her the supreme compliment, "You are my last friend. I know even if others go away, you will not."

The second travelogue, *Kobir Shonge Dakshinattey* [*With Poet in the South*] presents alluring personal notes by Rani about famous men and their foibles. The journey was made in 1928, by car, train and boat, each mode requiring its own kind of preparation. We hear how particular the Poet was regarding his writing box and his 'bedding' and the near debacle in Coonoor when Rani was not allowed by the tour organisers to send large, elaborate baggage. The group ran short of blankets and C. F. Andrews kept showing up at night trying to ration out what was available. Rani's pen-portrait of 'Deenabandhu' Andrews is utterly charming: "People know only about the seriousness and gravity of Andrews Sahib...But many people were not aware of the crazy child that was hidden within him" (334). The female gaze follows the Sahib through his quirky habit of loosing things and finding strange solutions, leading to episodes that create a lot of mirth. Rani's husband, Prashantachandra, though teased for being an over-serious scientist also provides much humour.

The meeting in Pondicherry with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is an important record of how Rabindranath was touched by the spiritual aura. However, Rani's womanly gaze notes the Mother's blue Benarasi saree and kohl-lined eyes as a contrast to the stark white attire of the ashram inhabitants.

Tagore's influence in Sri Lanka, erstwhile Ceylon, is a subject calling out for research. He made three visits there, during the last of which, in 1934, the dance drama *Sapmochon* was staged in Colombo. The national anthem of Sri Lanka is said to be inspired by Tagore. But these are later developments. Rani's account is of the visit in 1928 when she was captivated by the glory of Anuradhapura, Kandy, Sigiriya and Dambulla. Due to poor health, Rabindranath stayed back in his residence much of the time.

Throughout these reminiscences, Rani faithfully records what the poet was writing, and occasionally reading out to his friends. The electric joy of hearing a fresh composition from Rabindranath sparks her enthusiasm. The southern sojourn ends rather appropriately in Bangalore where Acharya Brajendranath Seal was the host. *Jogajog* and *Sesher Kobita* were written during much of the journey, Rani often wondering how such different narratives could flood the writer's imagination at the same time. In acute detail she describes the completion of *Sesher Kobita* with the resonant poem "Farewell, my friend." It seems the poet, though unwell, felt the surge of creativity so strongly that he wrote through the night till 4 am. Rani, while concerned about his health, did not disturb him but silently read the poem over his shoulder, mesmerized by the sonorous verses.

Somdatta Mandal's pioneering volume makes the relationship of Kobi and Rani accessible to non-Bengali readers and researchers. Such wealth of material, carefully introduced, footnoted and explained is rare, especially in such an attractive format. Somdatta has offered important ancillary material to the travelogues. *Pathe o Pather Prante* (On the Road and Beyond It) is a compilation and translation of sixty letters that Rabindranath wrote to Rani which he

selected and published in 1938. At this time Rabindranath was under the impression that the tales of his European journey were lost. Expressing his affection and gratitude towards Rani, these letters capture the experience from his viewpoint but touch on several other aspects of life and philosophy, especially on the theme of suffering. Rani, though a vivacious companion and writer, was afflicted with periodic fevers and was advised to rest in the hills. Rabindranath wrote over five hundred letters to her, perhaps to cheer her up or to speak out his troubles. In the selected letters the Poet deleted most of the personal references so this section contains rather staccato accounts.

Somdatta, as though to establish Rani's holistic personality, also publishes three essays by her - two on the Sanskrit *shlokas* used by the Brahma Samaj (*Om Pita Nohosi* and *Tamaso Ma Jyotirgamaya*), and one on 'Anandamela', a fair held in Shantiniketan. Rani's erudition is impressive, as also her empathy with the unwell Poet who found in her a soul-mate and trusted companion. In 1941, Rani's final tribute to the beloved Poet came in his own words, "You are greater than your deeds..." (519).

This book is to be lauded on several counts. The warm affection between Tagore and the young Rani Mahalanobis needed its demonstration through primary texts. Letters and diaries bear the integrity of an unselfconscious revelation but when the subject is an important public figure, how does the woman write of this relationship? Somdatta has chosen well to foreground the travelogues and attach supportive material from other sources. The intertextuality creates a fascinating matrix; as Somdatta says in her Introduction: "This sort of a-chronological narration makes the memoirs unique." Dipesh Chakrabarty's insightful Foreword opens out to larger issues of Tagore's relevance today: "He remains a nostalgic undertow to the currents of hyper-nationalism that circulate among the postcolonial nations in the sub-continent today." Surely, with such framing, the legendary link between the Kobi and Rani deserves its story to be told in cherished detail.

Malashri Lal, Professor in the Department of English (retd.), University of Delhi, has authored and edited sixteen books including *Tagore and the Feminine: A Journey in Translation* (Sage 2015) and the most recent, co-authored with Namita Gokhale, *Betrayed by Hope: A Play on the Life of Michael Madhusudan Dutt* (Harper Collins, 2020). She continues to serve on juries for book awards. Malashri Lal is currently Member, English Advisory Board of the Sahitya Akademi.