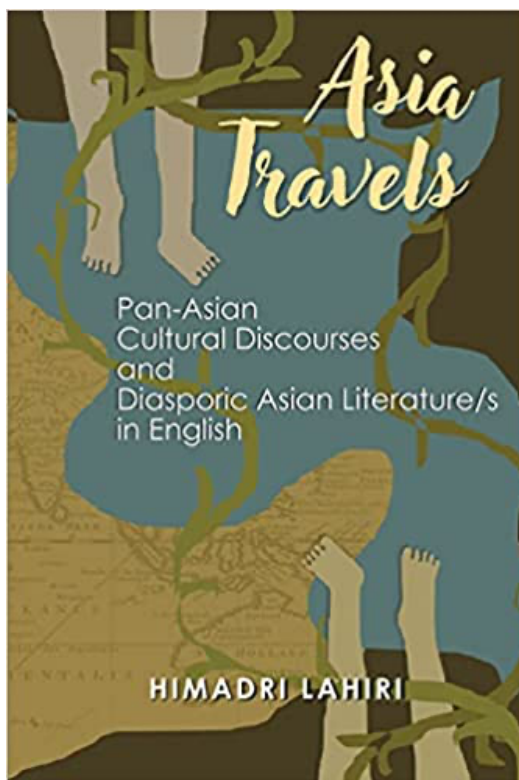


**Himadri Lahiri, *Asia Travels: Pan-Asian Cultural Discourses and Diasporic Asian Literature/s in English*. Bolpur: Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, 2021. i-xxiv+1-272 pp. ISBN: 978-81-953067-8-7.**



Himadri Lahiri's *Asia Travels: Pan-Asian Cultural Discourses and Diasporic Asian Literature/s in English* is an important work on diaspora studies and studies on Pan-Asianism. Till recently, most studies on Pan-Asianism have been undertaken from the social sciences perspective, and thus have tended to foreground historical, political, or sociological modes of inquiry. However, Lahiri's focus is more phenomenological, insofar as he attempts to understand the human condition through their national and transnational transactions. Since diaspora is a dominant theme here, the term "Asia" does not merely signify a delimited cartographical marker; it is a corporeal trope as well – constitutive of identities that are transgressive, liminal, and at times, dislocated. It is, according to Lahiri, a book "about travel, dwelling in travel, and sharing transnational solidarity with

fellow travellers from the same continent – Asia” (vii).

The book comprises three sections and five book reviews in Appendices. It begins with a Foreword by Nilufer E. Bharucha. Section One titled “From Home to the World: Pan-Asianism and Diaspora” comprises four chapters. Chapter One problematises the discourse surrounding Pan-Asianism. The movement had its beginning in Asia in the late nineteenth century. However, Lahiri’s contention is that it was revived in the United States by Asian American diaspora subjectivities to sensitise people to the cultural imperialism of the West. Through the inauguration and consolidation of a “textual coalition” under the rubric of the Asian American literary tradition, Pan-Asianism as a movement gained enough traction to interrogate falsified, constructed binaries of the West. However, Lahiri rightly identifies the lack of such a fraternalising spirit when it comes to establishing a textual coalition in/within Asia proper. Colonial cartographical demarcation drawn for realising Western cultural imperialism (by segregating people into distinct political identities) have become so deeply entrenched in Asian nations that they have not been able to overcome the constructed cartographical imaginary.

Lahiri feels that the only way “to do away with the sense of distance and mutual ‘foreignness’ and establish a Pan-Asian fraternal space” is to use English as the link language. According to him, the inculcation of the spirit of Pan-Asianism can be bolstered by the publication of programmatic anthologies envisaged with the purpose of understanding and fostering regional inter-national fraternity. By citing two short narratives – Tagore’s “Kabuliwala” (1892) and Mahadevi Verma’s “Chini Pheriwala” (1943) – Lahiri affirms that transnational cultural differences can be resolved through socio-cultural dialogues. All it needs is a shift in perspective – eschewing the xenophobic imaginary by adopting a liberal, multicultural ethos. For scholars interested in exploring Pan-Asianism in its myriad contexts, this chapter would be a useful reference point.

Chapter Two briefly examines Rabindranath Tagore’s Asianist discourse, as it emerges in his travelogues and other writings, especially in his brilliant essays on nationalism and internationalism. Lahiri argues that Tagore’s discourse valorised a Pan-Asianist identity, where the East stood for values and ideologies that were fundamentally different from those of the West. Tagore advocated a universalism that was out of transnational intersections. Lahiri opines that Tagore’s universalist assumptions were “focussed sometimes on India and/or Asia as their ideological base” (29). Thus, Tagore’s Asianist discourse transcended narrow parochial considerations – something that was part and parcel of the Western discourse of the nation-state. The chapter also highlights the ambivalent attitude of Chinese intellectuals towards Tagore when he visited China in 1924, some exoticising him as a mystic in line with seers like Mahavira, Shankaracharya, and Kabir, and others castigating him for valorising Oriental civilisation and critiquing the culture of positivism. In retrospect, however, Tagore’s views on

Pan-Asianism seem particularly relevant to our contemporary geopolitical climate.

The chapter “Asian American Literature: Problems and Possibilities” charts out the genealogy, consolidation, and epistemological formation of Asian American Literature after it got legitimised in American universities post-1965 Immigration Acts Reforms. However, Lahiri is concerned about exploring the interethnic dynamic between different Asian nationalities, where another binary operated, which privileged certain Asian nation-states at the cost of others. Such a contestatory position was not desirable to effect a consolidation of Pan-Asianist forces. “Crossing Borders: In Search of Aesthetics” examines the diasporic Asian identity pragmatically, eschewing the over-valourised postcolonial discourse on interstitial subjectivities in which emphasis is given to affect. Terms like unhomely, displacement, dislocation, liminality, and so forth, are deployed to symptomatise the problematics of the diasporic subject. Lahiri, in a particularly nuanced manner, invokes Aijaz Ahmed’s line of argument in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1994) to interrogate the tenability of such overt valorisation of “postmodernist persons having their feet on many soils [thereby] having an ‘excess of belonging’ ... by virtue of belonging properly in none” (130). Thus, this chapter provides a new perspective in situating diasporic subjectivities in post-globalised, consumerist societies. Lahiri comprehensively theorises Pan-Asianism in Section One, underscoring both its dichotomies as well as its subsumptive spirit.

Section Two titled “Shadows in the Nations: Diasporic Perspectives” attempts to engage in readings of East Asian (Japanese), South Asian (Pakistani, Indian, Afghan), and Himalayan diaspora by problematising the discourse of nation. In “‘Pearl Harbour Echoes’: Japanese American Internment Experience in Monica Sone and Hisaye Yamamoto,” Lahiri explores the trauma of the internment of over 110,000 Japanese Americans during the Second World War. He makes a compelling study of Sone’s autobiography *Nisei Daughter* (1953) and Yamamoto’s fictionalised memoir “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara” (1950) to unravel the post-memory of subjectivities traumatised by their internment merely based on their racial identity. The attempt to negotiate the shock of internment by distancing themselves from their roots and concealing the ignominy from the third-generation Japanese diaspora, has been narrativised poignantly in both texts. Lahiri’s reading of these two narratives highlights the crises of identity encountered by the first and the second-generation Japanese diaspora in the United States.

The chapter titled “Insane Characters, Innocent Child Narrators: The Partition in Ranbir Sidhu’s ‘Border Songs’ and Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy Man*,” attempts to uncover the trauma of partition (of the Indian subcontinent) through the perspective of a schizophrenic female character (in Ranbir Sidhu’s “Border Songs”), and an innocent child narrator (in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy Man*). The

trauma of partition, as memorialised by the narrators, gets reflected obliquely, through their subversive little narratives. In “The Nation in Peril: Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*,” Lahiri claims the novel to be the first Anglophone fiction dealing with the political and social upheaval in contemporary Afghanistan. Like Sidhu and Sidhwa, Hosseini as an Asian American is concerned with foregrounding the desperate condition of Afghanistan. Lahiri feels that Hosseini has been successful to a remarkable extent in raising the Afghan issue on the global platform through his evocative fictions. In “Diaspora from the Himalayan Region: Nation and Modernity in Select Literary Works,” Lahiri explores the works of diasporic writers from tiny Himalayan nations like Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet. He observes that the existing corpus of diasporic literary output from the Himalayan belt does not have much visibility.

Section Three titled “Settling Down: Responses of the Authors in Diaspora” comprises three chapters, which explores the fictional landscape of some Asian American women writers. These include Chinese American Amy Tan (1952-) and Maxine Hong Kingston (1940-), and Indian American (of Bengali origin) Bharati Mukherjee (1940-2017) and Jhumpa Lahiri (1967-). Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston’s works have been explored to underscore the mother-daughter dyad in diasporic communities. Lahiri’s chapter on Bharati Mukherjee focusses on the idea of cultural citizenship constituted by indentarian shifts post-immigration to a new land. For instance, in *Jasmine*, the female protagonist happens to be one of the many “boat people” entering the borders of the United States. Lahiri explores the novel by emphasising the trope of mobility characterising the life of immigrants, especially in the United States. Thus, the changes in Jasmine’s first names (Jyoti-Jasmine-Jazy-Jase-Jane) signifies a movement towards an American identity, free from the fixity of past values.

Lahiri’s final chapter “Family as Space in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Short Stories” investigates Jhumpa Lahiri’s two stories from her collection *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond* (1999) from the spatial dimension. However, the notion of space is delimited to the family apparatus. Lahiri explores “A Temporary Matter” and “Interpreter of Maladies” to demonstrate fissures that come about in the space called ‘family.’ In “A Temporary Matter,” the estrangement between the couple comes about due to Shoba’s expectation of her husband Shukumar’s presence during the birth of her (stillborn) child. In “Interpreter of Maladies,” however, the family space, according to Lahiri, is characterised by a lack of communication between the woman on the one hand and her husband and children on the other. The malady that the woman (Ms. Das) suffered from, was associated with an illicit affair she had with another man, which violated the sacrosanct familial space. Thus, by deploying the discourse of family as space, Lahiri projects the predicaments of diaspora subjects caught between the claims of “home” and “beyond.”

This book is a remarkable study on Asia in its multiple trajectories. The discourse on Pan-Asianism has been cogently theorised. It is complemented with nuanced readings of literary texts, autobiographies, and fictional autobiographies. Scholars pursuing research in these fields will find this book extremely useful.

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