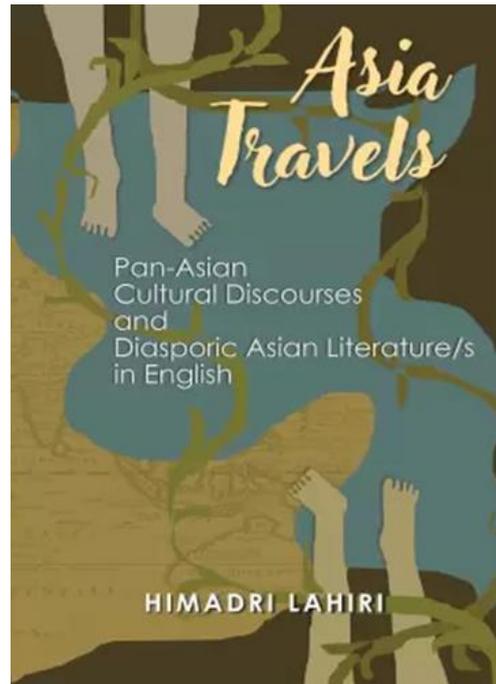


***Asia Travels: Pan Asian Cultural Discourses and Diasporic Asian Literature/s in English* by Himadri Lahiri. Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, Bolpur, September 2021. ISBN: 9788195306787, Rs. 600, pp 271.**

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There appears to be a dearth of critical texts on Trans-Asian Diasporic literature. Himadri Lahiri's *Asia Travels: Pan-Asian Cultural Discourses and Diasporic Asian Literature/s in English* might well be considered as an interesting arrival that addresses issues of pan-Asian and Asian Diasporic movements. Travel in pre- and post-colonial period-within Asia and Asian diasporic movement to West, examined from cultural perspective, is central to Lahiri's basic proposition in the book. He invites the readers to train lenses on how travel refuses to be mere physical form of movement as it initiates effective cultural dialogue between races, colours, groups and nations. *Asia Travels* contributes



significantly to the domain of cultural studies by drawing critical attention to Pan-Asianism as a form of travel and by investigating into how Asian diasporic people can have multiple cultural locations, their cultural identities in new lands being constantly shaped by issues of race, gender, class, ethnicities, different levels of hierarchies and various types of resistance. Lahiri's book is one of those rare ones that widens our perspective by extending our knowledge in a lucid, relaxed manner.

In the foreword Nilufer E. Bharucha reminds us of the economic, cultural and religious influences of India in pre-colonial period on Asian spaces particularly South Asia and South-East Asia. Bharucha points towards 'multivalent' nature of South Asian diaspora that encompasses various ethnicities, cultures, religions and languages. In the context of Indian and South Asian diaspora, Bharucha mentions regional, political and economic associations and discusses why such groupings necessarily include Asian diaspora. Such associations on the one hand speak of Asian solidarity but on the other hand readers are invited to think of the roles

played by such forces like politics and economics that thwart any attempt to disregard bordered identities. South Asian diasporic literature gestures towards irrelevance of borders and fluid cultural identities of the diasporas because of their having an "excess of belonging".

The book is primarily about travel: "...about travel, dwelling in travel, and sharing transnational solidarity with fellow travellers from the same continent- Asia" (vii). What the author proposes to do in this book and why he brings the two strands –Pan-Asian cultural discourse and diasporic Asian literature in one book– are made clear in 'Introduction' that brings to the readers the impression that the book is about travel, metaphorical and actual. Most appropriately Lahiri begins the first part by tracing the connection between travel and theory and afterwards moves ahead to define Pan-Asianism. The author's efforts to map the evolution of Pan-Asianism as a theory is really commendable. Beginning from the early propagators of Pan-Asianism (at times aggressive nationalism was advocated in its name), the author focuses on Sun-Yat Sen's idea of multiculturalism of Asia. Besides, Okakura Tenshin, Rabindranath Tagore and Sister Nivedita's ideologies, are also brought within the canvas. The other distinctive strand of the book being Asian diasporic literature, the author tracks down the changing nature of diasporic movement in the pre- and post-colonial period leading to the emergence of 'pluralistic model of multi culturalism' and concept of 'cultural nationalism' that can be traced in Pan-Asian diasporic literature. The extremely organised, tightly woven introduction ends with the author's discussion of the structure of the book – the purpose and content of each of the three sections and the Appendices. Thus, the introduction sets the tone of the book most suitably and against the strong theoretical premise the readers are prepared to delve deep into Pan-Asian diasporic literature through cultural lens.

It seems to be indeed challenging to Lahiri to structure the book, maintaining the internal unity all along, particularly when most of the chapters are previously published articles. Following the introduction, as the author proceeds towards discussing other trajectories of Pan-Asianism and Asian diaspora, the unity of the theme is maintained strongly, the connecting thread being the awareness that our cultural identity is fluid. The three sections of the book \_ each section contains three/four chapters \_ are brilliantly planned. In the first section the focus is on Pan-Asianism, its prospects, pan Asianist discourse, border crossing and its variant perspectives, multivalent attitudes to the concept of diaspora and diasporic subjects. The ideological construction of 'Asia' by the West, the identification of the causes why the configuration of 'Asia' revolved around India for a long period of time, are some of the extremely relevant issues

discussed in the first chapter of the section. Here the author argues that the concept of 'Asia' results from Orientalist paradigms. Viewing the heterogeneity of Asian nations the objective of the chapter seems also to explore from cultural aspects the issue of to what extent pan-Asian fraternity is practicable. Mentioning the anthologies, the author tries to understand how from literal cultural aspects anthologies may contribute to the consolidation of pan-Asian forces/unity. The role of collaborative theatre like collaborative anthology and other levels of cultural contacts and cultural exchange programmes to build pan-Asian solidarity are examined. Bringing to light the pan-Asianist orientations of the two writers Tagore and Mahadevi Verma through the textual analysis of "Kabuliwala" and "Chini Pheriwala," the author shows that by relying on the humanitarian aspect in relationships, the concept of 'foreigners' created due to lack of understanding between peoples of different nations can be transcended. In the second chapter of the first section, the conceptual framework of Tagore's Asianism, his concept of Asian identity, are attempted to be captured in the contexts of his visit of China and Java as cultural ambassador. While from cultural aspect Java appears to be only an extension of India and many parallels are found between the two cultures, in China it seems to be that with his ideology Tagore receives a serious jolt and the author tries to critically analyse all the probable reasons behind the uproar against Tagore in China. In the third chapter the author discusses Asian American literature and its possibilities, beginning from its definition and background. Lahiri further discusses here how Asian American literature subsumes diasporic or migratory exilic elements. The chapter, because of its rich critical content and comprehensive nature, is of much help and interest to the students and scholars associated with the study of Asian American literature. In the fourth chapter the identity politics of a diasporic community, the volatile nature of a diasporic condition, the aspect of belongingness are discussed theoretically, a perfect setting for the author's discussion of pan-Asian diasporic texts, in the second section, to take off.

The first chapter of the second section is very interesting as here a reader gets a comparative analysis of the two texts - Monica Sone's autobiography *Nisei Daughter* (1953) and Hisaye Yamamoto's "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" (1951) - both dealing in internment experience of Japanese diaspora in America. Here the author highlights on the two writers' approaches to the internment issue- the harrowing experience of the diasporic Japanese in the pre- and post-internment period, the strong sense of discrimination and racism experienced by Japanese in America - from two different ideological positions. The critical essay necessarily brings into light "the complexity of the social and ideological dynamics working within the American-

born second-generation Japanese Americans” (p.80) and thus the readers come to be aware of the factor of ‘difference’ in attitudes towards a specific social and historical event that works not only along generations but within the same ‘nisei’ generation and that an individual’s response is highly determined by his or her “vulnerability or resistance to the powerful hegemonic discourses”(p.80). Thus, the chapter contributes significantly in understanding the different challenges involved in the complicated process of settling in a new land. In the sixth chapter Lahiri wisely incorporates the discussion on two partition narratives "Border Songs" by Ranbir Sidhu and Ice Candy Man by Bapsi Sidhwa through the lens of the use of insane and innocent characters. On the one hand, the inter-personal, inter communal, national experience involving the divisive politics of partition that imposes borders, unleashes violence and initiates one of the most significant history of displacement in Asian subcontinent is highlighted and on the other the attempt to transcend the artificiality of border in an 'overwhelming' situation of fear and violence is traced. The critical discussion helps us notably to understand the advantages of exploring the history of partition, the madness of the period, from the perspective of innocent and insane narrators. The logic of inclusion of this chapter is evident in the fact that the dream of pan-Asian solidarity is shattered by partition. The other probable logic seems to be, though cultural differences between homeland and host land were not very significant in case of partition refugees, the challenges to the communities, displaced because of this historical compulsion namely partition, were no less in comparison to other diasporic communities of present concern. The Afghan diasporic text Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* finds its place in the next chapter of the book. The critical analysis of the novel shows how the personal history and national history are intertwined through a story telling style in which both east and west are interweaved. The author brings out Hosseini's objective behind portraying the lives of common people of Afghanistan, the chaotic condition of the country, the lives of Afghans as exiles. This makes it easier for the readers to understand the culture of an Asian country where the ethnic differences and the rifts between different groups and people are generally high and have existed for a long time. The analysis of the Nepalese and Tibetan diasporic texts in the eighth chapter, precisely brings out the attitudinal differences between Nepalese and Tibetan diasporic subjects towards their homeland and host land. The issues of nation and nationalism, sense of loss, nostalgia, identity crisis, Asian attitude to the West, the uncertainty that marks diasporic situation, the re-orientation of self and the promises of new beginnings - all the relevant aspects of diasporic existence are adeptly touched upon in the textual analysis of the Diaspora of Himalayan region. This is worth mentioning that this chapter

on Himalayan diaspora is Lahiri's one of the most significant contributions in academics since Himalayan diaspora has ever remained under-represented in academic discussions.

In the third section the focus of the articles is the process of settling down in the diasporic space. The ninth chapter in its exposition of mother-daughter relationship in diaspora in the context of two Chinese diasporic novels, Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* (1989) and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), is highly interesting, mothers being representative of home culture and daughters of the new cultural patterns of host country, both experiencing friction and challenges in the question of selfhood and identity in a faraway land. In the next essay on Bharati Mukherjee we meet characters in an intermediate space attempting cultural integration with a new nation. The author shows how in Bharati Mukherjee's writings are underscored all these emotions that are thought to be impediments so far as proper integration to the new nation is concerned. Ghetto mentality, insularity of a particular community, rejection of 'hyphenization' of identity, the question of belongingness and non-belongingness to a nation, the aspect of citizenship and cultural citizenship, the promise of 'American Dream' are examined critically in the context of Bharati Mukherjee's novels. In the last chapter of the third section the author examines the role of family, or in other words how family participates in the process of settling down in a new land, in the context of Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories.

In the conclusion the author skilfully sums up the chief concerns of the preceding articles. By enlisting the textual activism in the post 1960s by Asians in America, Lahiri establishes it that Pan-Asianism has lost its momentum. A look at the Asian anthologies helps us to map the rise and fall of Asian activism in the post 1960s period. The author appropriately points out that like Asian activism, South Asian textual activism seems to reach its height in 1990s and declines afterwards. The author tries to understand the reasons of slowing down in the publication of anthologies and finally concludes with this observation that Pan-Asianism can perhaps only be perceived historically as it fails to develop into a solid movement (it seems to be promising in colonial period in East Asian, South Asian and South East Asian countries) and is evidentially on its wane; in contrary to it, as Lahiri observes, discourses of Asian diaspora has proliferated. It is part of Lahiri's scholastic brilliance that towards the end of the book he includes five book reviews (thematically interconnected) that throw more light on Pan-Asianism and Asian diaspora.

Thus, the review of Sengupta's *Mapping South Asia through Contemporary Theatre*, gives more force to Lahiri's conviction that theatre as performing art can be one probable mode of

unification among the nations of Asia. The reviews enlighten the readers further and this is how the review of *The Politics of Language Contact in the Himalaya*, makes the readers aware of the complex phenomenon such as linguistic contact zones in Himalayan region. Doshi's *The Adulterous Citizen* contributes to a better understanding of Bharati Mukherjee's delineation of the issues of citizenship and identity. Thus, Lahiri's *Asia Travels*, a well-researched book on travel, adds an important dimension to culture studies, the author's purpose being understanding travel from different perspectives-first, whether Pan-Asianism can be seen as a form of cultural travel and whether diaspora as a form of cultural travel can be integrated with the concept of Pan-Asianism as well. The artistry of the cover design makes an immediate impact on the readers' minds. Moreover, the book is remarkably free from verbal jugglery and the notes at the end of each chapter, do not leave any scope of confusion for the readers. Rather the elaborations are extremely helpful to researchers and general readers. To conclude, it can be said that the wise selection of the most relevant book-reviews not only adds extra dimension to the author's perspective and to the major issues covered in the book, they invest the book with a sense of completeness and bring to the readers' minds, a feeling of satiety.