

Book Reviews

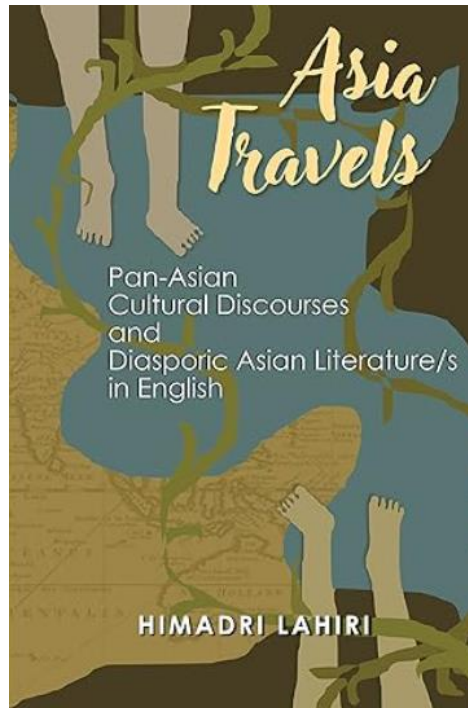


CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Volume 6: 1

(ISSN 2454 -9495)

July 2024



***Asia Travels: Pan-Asian Cultural Discourses and Diasporic Asian Literature/s in English* by Himadri Lahiri. Birutjatjo Sahitya Sammiloni, Bolpur. 2021. i-xxiii+ 1-269. Rs. 600/-. Reviewed by Tathagata Sagar Pal.**

Himadri Lahiri's *Asia Travels: Pan-Asian Cultural discourses and Diasporic Asian Literature/s in English* traces the development of the pan-Asian discourse through 'travels' which has been explored in real as well as metaphorical senses. The text considers the travels of the Asian intellectuals during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and also the

contemporary migration to the West. Through ‘travels’, Lahiri attempts to expand the concept of Asia from a topographical space to include the formation and evolution of migrant identities, and the literary as well as political activism by the Asians.

The foreword by Nilufer E. Bharucha makes the readers aware of India’s importance in the economic, cultural and religious sphere of South Asia and South-East Asia during pre-colonial times. The ‘multivalent’ nature of South Asian diaspora, drawn from different postcolonial national spaces, is brought up by him. In the “Introduction” of his book, Lahiri explains the rationale of writing the book. He refers to some Asian intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore, Okakura Tenshin, Sun Yat-sen and others, who attempted to define the idea of “Pan-Asianism” in diverse political, metaphysical and spiritual connotations. Their beliefs, in some cases, seemed to champion the idea of “multicultural Asia” (x). The narrow political aspirations were also hidden in the doctrine of “superiority of Japan” (xi). Asia-centricity then runs the risk of being another face of Euro-centricity.

The three sections of the book have been meticulously structured. The first section titled, “From Home to the World: Pan-Asianism and Diaspora,” explores the critical frameworks of “Pan-Asianism.” The first chapter of the section sets the tone by discussing about the ideological construction of Asia. While the intra-nation and inter-nation conflicts have stood in the way of achieving Pan-Asianic spirit, Lahiri talks about the cultural avenues like collaborative anthologies, theatre groups (e.g., Ajoka), that provide platforms to solidify pan-Asian fraternity. Rabindranath Tagore’s “Kabuliwala” and Mahadevi Verma’s “Chini Pheriwala” are examined to show that the physiological and cultural differences become irrelevant in the face of humanitarian, empathetic understanding that acts as an antidote against the uncritical assumption of ‘foreignness.’ The pan-Asianist orientation of Tagore is also brought out in the second chapter which talks about the poet’s journeys to Java and China. Through his reading of *Java Jatrir Patra (Letters from Java: Rabindranath Tagore’s Tour of*

South-East Asia) and several accounts of Tagore's visit to China, Lahiri discusses how two opposite responses were generated in two different socio-cultural spaces. As Tagore's Asianism was shaped by his opposition to mindless spirit of modernity, Lahiri explains the hostile responses to his visit in China by referring to the extreme polarization of tradition/modernity, conservative values/iconoclast values in the contemporary Chinese society that was in the midst of radical socio-political and intellectual changes. The third chapter looks at the origin of pan-Asian literary-cultural platforms in America in the context of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. While acknowledging the homogeneity of the term 'Asian American,' Lahiri also highlights how it was "a historical and ideological necessity" (49) for raising voices against "the hegemony of the white culture" (49). The fourth chapter explores the idea of a diasporic person as "an 'ever-floating' individual" (59). True to the spirit of the book, Lahiri brings up the sense of optimism about forming an alliance of marginals in the diaspora, as expressed in Amitabh Kumar's *Passport Photos* (2000).

Lahiri's theoretical probing of Pan-Asianism in the first section enables the readers to easily relate to the textual discussion. The second section, titled "Shadows in the Nations: Diasporic Perspectives," looks at the fragility of "Pan-Asianism." By analysing Monica Sone's autobiography, *Nisei Daughter* (1953), and Hisaye Yamamoto's short fiction, "The Legend of Mrs. Sasagawara" (1951), Lahiri explores the ideological position of Japanese-American writers regarding the community's incarceration during the Second World War. As the readers are made aware of the trans-generational as well as inter-generational 'difference' in attitudes towards a social and historical crisis, the author draws the conclusion that an individual's response is shaped by his/her "vulnerability or resistance to the powerful hegemonic discourses" (80). The ideological framework of "Pan-Asianism" is further put under scrutiny as Lahiri takes up Ranbir Sidhu's "Border Songs" and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* (1991), both dealing with the partition of India through the imaginative lens of "the insane and the

innocent” (98). The chapter traces the strains in inter-personal as well as inter-communal experience in course of the divisive politics of partition. The effort to transcend the artificiality of border amidst such a violent and fearful situation has also been underlined. The critical analysis of Khaled Hosseini’s novel, *The Kite Runner* (2003), highlights how the personal history and national history are merged to present a holistic view of complex human relationships and a sense of the scarred nation. As the novel portrays the lives of common Afghan citizens and the lives of exiled Afghans, what becomes clear is the division in the country, augmented due to outside imperialist interventions as well as the ethnic segments from inside. Lahiri’s effort to study the Himalayan diasporic literature is admirable. The chapter critically goes through Nepalese author Manjushree Thapa’s *Seasons of Flight* (2012), narrated against the background of the Civil War of Nepal, and several Tibetan exilic works against the backdrop of Tibetan exodus in the aftermath of Chinese occupation. Since the national moorings of these diasporas are different, Lahiri, through the Freudian notion of “mourning,” has tried to distinguish the two diasporas.

The third section of the book titled, “Settling Down: Responses of the Authors in Diaspora,” moves on to various issues that are generated after settling down in the diasporic space. The chosen texts, authored by women diasporic writers, highlight female agency within the changing family space. The ninth chapter critically analyses Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club* (1989) and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Women Warrior* (1976) to bring out mother-daughter relationship in the context of Chinese diaspora. The transcultural and inter-generational dynamics are problematised, as mothers representing the Chinese culture and daughters representing the cultural patterns of the host country, both differently approach the question of selfhood. Yet, the possibility of ‘connection,’ as expressed in the two novels, has also been looked at by Lahiri. The tenth chapter is an exposition on the ghetto mentality, the issue of cultural citizenship and the promise of ‘American Dream’ through Bharati Mukherjee’s literary

oeuvre. Lahiri has pointed out Mukherjee's cautionary take on the obsession with 'nostalgia.' Her insistence on "two-way transformation" (172) in the process of immigration, with both the immigrants and the white Americans being faced with the question of cultural locations and their perspectives being altered, are brought to the attention of the readers. In the last chapter, the author, through his reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter" and "Interpreter of Maladies," examines how family performs in the process of settling down in a new land. He shows that in Jhumpa Lahiri's writing, the diasporic families do not conform to the Asian concept of family as a cohesive unit. Individual human predicaments are given specific attention as "The characters are not reduced to a 'token' of the ethnic group they belong to" (180).

In the concluding chapter of this volume, Lahiri identifies the reasons for the diminishing momentum of pan-Asian forces. Though political and economic platforms (e.g., SAARC) for promoting Asian cooperation exist, Lahiri opines that they are "mired more in inter-nation rivalries than being home to a pan-Asian spirit" (195). He is more optimistic on the cultural forefront as he talks about collaborative academic activities and research ventures that can unite the Asians to actualise "textual activism" (195). In view of the global vision which became more prominent during the epidemic outbreak of COVID-19, Lahiri believes that "a pan-Asian vision has become almost passe in the present time" (207). Yet, there has been proliferation of diasporic discourses, evident in the anthologies which, as a political space, engages in the interrogation of homogenising labels like 'South Asian American' or 'Asian American.' Further, in the Appendix section, Lahiri accommodates five book reviews. The texts, chosen for book reviews, talk about building pan-Asian connections through cultural forms.

It is beyond the scope of a single volume to cover every cultural perspective that have characterized the vast continent of Asia. In Lahiri's *Asia Travels*, there has not been adequate

representation from West Asia and Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, it marks a significant contribution to the Asian Studies. Against the failure of Pan-Asianism to materialize into a potent historical movement, Lahiri approaches the issue from literary-cultural perspectives. The texts from different cultural spaces are threaded together in search of common concerns. Travel then becomes the leitmotif in the author's quest to understand whether diaspora, as a form of cultural travel, can be blended with the idea of Pan-Asianism.

***About the reviewer**

Tathagata Sagar Pal has a Master of Arts in English from University of Hyderabad (2021). His research area includes tantric deities and iconographic analysis. He has presented papers in UGC-approved national and international conferences. Presently, he is a Ph.D. scholar at Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University.