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**REVIEW OF HIMADRI LAHIRI'S *ASIA TRAVELS: PAN-ASIAN CULTURAL DISCOURSES AND DIASPORIC ASIAN LITERATURE/S IN ENGLISH***

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Himadri Lahiri's *Asia Travels: Pan-Asian Cultural Discourses and Diasporic Asian Literature/s in English* (Birutjatiyo Sahitya Sammilani, 2021) is a novel addition to the domain of Asia Studies. It is probably the first attempt to address the question of Pan-Asianism from a literary perspective. Lahiri's concept of 'Asia' is expansive, extending the rigid geo-topographical space to include migrant identities, diasporic nations, and literary as well as political activism by people of Asian origin. The development of the pan-Asian discourse is traced through travels undertaken by Asian intellectuals from one Asian country to another during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and through the wider diasporic migrations to the West that continue even in current times.

Beginning with a Foreword by Nilufer Bharucha, which is slightly sweeping in nature and does not engage much with the thrust-areas of Lahiri's arguments, *Asia Travels* has three main sections. Sections I, II and III are titled "From Home to the World: Pan-Asianism and Diaspora," "Shadows in the Nations: Diasporic Perspectives" and "Settling Down in the Diaspora" respectively. The Introduction explains the rationale of writing the book and reveals the foci of arguments. The conclusion points out rationally the reasons why pan-Asian philosophy is on the wane in contemporary times. Lahiri also includes an 'Appendices' section, containing five book reviews, published earlier in academic journals, of fiction, anthologies and non-fiction, that approach pan-Asian discourse from various textual angles.

In the Introduction, Lahiri claims the book to be "about travel, dwelling in travel, and sharing transnational solidarity with fellow travellers from the same continent—Asia" (vii). Travel as a motif is therefore central to Lahiri's scheme of things. It is through travel and

movement beyond narrow national identities that the question of wider Asian solidarity can be addressed. In the book, 'travel' connects Asia and the wider diasporic world. He chiefly talks of two kinds of travel, relating to pan-Asian movements and diaspora, in the process connecting the two. The first category of travel occurred way back in history, undertaken by various intellectual thinkers, authors, political activists and others. They played a crucial role in the germination and consolidation of pan-Asian ideology and discourse. Japan's victory over the Russians in 1905 had boosted its national prestige. Japan emerged as a perfect meeting point of leading thinkers and activists from across Asia. Pankaj Mishra rightly observes that "Tokyo became a Mecca for nationalists from all over Asia, the centre of an expanded Asian public sphere—a process quickened by Japan's victory over Russia in 1905" (166). Liang Quichao (1873-1929), Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), Kang Youwei (1858-1927) from China, Rash Behari Bose (1886-1945), Taraknath Das (1884-1958) from India, Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940) from Vietnam are some of the expatriate activists who gathered in Japan. Pamphlets and newspapers began to be published mainly in Japan and China but also in the USA. Maulvi Barakatullah, an Indian émigré collaborated with the Egyptian nationalist Ahmed Fadzli Beg, exiled to Tokyo, and Abdurreshid Ibrahim, a pan-Islamic, pan-Asianist Russian who visited Japan in 1909, to launch an English language paper *Islamic Fraternity*. Intellectuals such as Ibrahim, Jamal al-din al-Afghani, Taraknath Das, Liang Quichao and Kang Youwei visited many countries in Asia. Kazuo Okakura (1862-1913) who made the famous proclamation "Asia is One" in his book *The Ideals of the East* (1903) interacted closely with Tagore in India. Both these indefatigable travellers were also vocal pan-Asianists. As result of such intense activities, "a transnational intellectual network grew, bringing Asian intellectuals into dialogue with each other" (Mishra 168).

Lahiri devotes an entire chapter to Tagore ("Tagore's Pan-Asian Discourse: Reception and Resistance") in the first section, narrativizing the accounts of the poet's travels to Java and China. Lahiri also highlights how Tagore's visions of pan-Asian thought were met with critical, hostile responses in China, which was at that time in the throes of radical socio-political and intellectual changes. This chapter foregrounds the fact that acceptance of the concept of Asian solidarity is contingent upon "[the] specific socio-cultural condition of a country..." (xvii). Despite the 'us/other' dyad being integral to the discourse, remarkably enough, the core impulse of Pan-Asianism was to 'connect'. Lahiri's reading of two literary texts, Mahadevi Verma's "Chini Pheriwala" and Tagore's "Kabuliwala" in chapter I ("Pan-Asianism and its Prospects: Through the Cultural Lens") focuses on transcending narrow national identities by

de-prioritising the idea of ‘foreignness’ and emphasising the importance of common grounds through acts of neighbourliness. In an insightful definition, he frames ‘foreignness’ to be “an uncritical assumption that overlooks the deep structure of humane affiliation between individuals” (22). In fact, in his analysis of the two stories, Lahiri presents neighbourliness as the antidote to ‘foreignness’. In the context of contemporary times, Lahiri acknowledges the importance of transnational governmental platforms such as ASEAN and SAARC but is wary of the extent to which such official organisations can improve relations between nations. He rather lauds the efforts of cultural bodies such as Sahitya Akademi, the National Academy of Letters in India, in effectively utilising the government funds to initiate cultural exchange programmes such as the Anand Coomaraswamy Fellowship. He believes that cultural exchanges can improve pan-Asianist understanding.

The second category of travel involves international diasporic journeys (both colonial and postcolonial) from Asia. This phenomenon has also led to the development of Pan-Asianism abroad, in diasporic nations. Lahiri shifts his focus to the American scene where immigrants from Asia settled and faced racist slurs and attacks. Intellectuals and activists visited the country, exploring conditions of Asian communities and bemoaned their clannish attitudes. It is in this respect that pan-Asian activities in the USA in 1960s and 1970s assumed importance. Asian immigrants in diasporic nations victimised through racial discrimination sought solidarity in their Asian-ness. Lahiri explores this trajectory in the chapter “Asian American Literature: Problems and Possibilities.” He contextualises the “creation of pan-Asian literary-cultural platform[s]...in the wake of the Civil Rights movement in 1960s” (44). This critical moment in the development of pan-Asian discourse outside Asia has not been adequately connected with the historical pan-Asian movement of the early twentieth century. Lahiri foregrounds this connection, thereby making the statement that under the hegemonic, racist and imperialist gaze, Asianist solidarities tend to form and develop. The four chapters in Section I focus mainly on Pan-Asianism—the discourse itself, points of its origins, trajectories of its development, and its many entanglements. Along with this focus, the transformative dimensions of diasporic journeys have also been discussed in this section.

In Section II titled “Shadows in the Nations: Diasporic Perspectives”, Lahiri brings out how the nations in Asia face challenges to the ideals of a “united living together...either in the nation of origin or in the diasporic nation” (xviii). While the previous section had focussed on transcending national identities to forge a Pan-Asian understanding, this section analyses Asian identities in politically turbulent, challenged spaces. In this section Lahiri examines some Asian

texts authored by Asian Americans of Japanese, Indian and Afghan descent. In politically volatile nation-spaces, individual identities, processes of self-individuation and notions such as equality (for immigrants and citizens alike) are subjected to major challenges. Human beings are reduced to mere national, religious, or ethnic identities. Lahiri's chapters examine representations of politico-historical phenomena such as Japanese internment on American soil during the Second World War ("Pearl Harbour Echoes: Japanese American Internment Experience in Monica Sone and Hisaye Yamamoto"), the partition of India ("Insane Characters, Innocent Child Narrators: Partition in Ranbir Sidhu's "Border Songs" and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*") and Afghanistan ruined by "[i]mperialistic designs, ethnic pogroms and religious fundamentalism" (104) ("The Nation in Peril: Khalid Hussein's *The Kite Runner*"). Lahiri also explores some literary texts from the Himalayan region in the chapter "Diaspora from the Himalayan Region: Nation and Modernity in Select Literary Works." The chapter reads Nepalese author Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight* set against the backdrop of Civil War in Nepal, and some Tibetan exilic works against the background of exodus from Tibet in the wake of Chinese occupation. This chapter is a valuable contribution because these works have hardly figured in academic discussions. Under abnormal political situations people go into survival mode—where survival takes precedence over issues of connecting with others. This whole section explores how and why hardly any attention is paid to pan-Asian discourses. It also implicitly raises the question of whether ideologies and intellectual movements such as Pan-Asianism are strong enough to survive the onslaught of racist and imperialist forces.

In Section III, "Settling Down in the Diaspora" Lahiri dwells exclusively on the issue of Asian identities in diasporic spaces. Various issues of diaspora—acculturation, processes of identity formation, women's relationships across generations and the family space in diaspora, are the areas of focus in this section. The chosen texts are incidentally written by women diasporic writers. Lahiri explores the writings of Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston in "Mother-Daughter Relationship in Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston", Bharati Mukherjee in "Nation, Nationalism and Cultural Citizenship in Bharati Mukherjee" and Jhumpa Lahiri in "Family as Space in Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Stories". Women navigate issues of selfhood and agency, negotiate the 'homeland-host(land)' dyad, everything taking place within the diasporic nation space. This section focuses on Asian identities in the diasporic nation-state during the period between 1970s to the 1990s. This was a time of acculturation and consolidation. To this generation, issues of ties to the homeland, preservation of 'homes' in their memories and negotiating experiences of settlement in the host nations played a significant role.

In the Conclusion, Lahiri dwells on the politics of literary anthology production. Most of these anthologies were edited/produced by authors of diasporic Asian origin. Only two of these listed by Lahiri were produced from other diasporic locations – United Kingdom and Canada, the USA being the space generating the major chunk. He uniquely projects the anthology as a site of exchange and “textual activism” (195). Conceiving of anthologies as a political space, an accommodative collaborative platform, is indeed an interesting trajectory of Lahiri’s discussion. An anthology integrates “a plethora of voices which interrogate and contest hegemonic constructions, and give[s] an inside view of their conflicting cultural locations” (199). Through the mapping of anthologies of Asian and South Asian writings, Lahiri traces the changes and shifts in the trajectory of pan-Asian thought. Lahiri explores the reasons for the decline of pan-Asian forces in the empowerment of the Asian Americans, social integration, restructured inclusive policies at the governmental level, increased visibility of Asian voices in media and politics, growth of globalised cosmopolitan cultures and the like. Though politically created platforms promoting Asian cooperation (SAARC for instance) actively exist even today, Lahiri states that they are “mired more in inter-nation rivalries than being home to a pan-Asian spirit” (195).

The reviewed books in the Appendices capture issues/voices related to different parts of Asia—Nepal, Tibet, Singapore, India, Sri Lanka and so on. One of the books reviewed – Ashish Sengupta’s *Mapping South Asia through Contemporary Theatre: Essays on the Theatres of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka* (2014) – focusses on theatre movements in South Asian nations. In his review, Lahiri talks about the role of theatre as a unifying medium. Theatre can remind us of our commonalities and neighbourliness. This review can be linked to the first chapter, “Pan-Asianism and its Prospects: Through the Cultural Lens”. Lahiri also reviews the following books: Selma K. Sonntag and Mark Turin eds. *The Politics of Language Contact in the Himalaya*, Lee Chiu San’s *Buy My Beloved Country*, Tsewang Yishey Pemba’s *White Crane, Lend Me Your Wings: A Tibetan Tale of Love and War* and Tishani Doshi’s *The Adulterous Citizen: Poems, Stories, Essays* (2015). The latter is characterised by the experience of “[t]ransnational residency and participation in many cultures” (241). Doshi revisits Madras (now Chennai) which is her birthplace, Berlin, Nairobi, Mexico and many other places in her works. This act of bonding with many cities and countries is a marked contrast to the earlier generation diaspora. The older generations gravitated mostly between the homeland-host land. Read in retrospect after the review of Doshi’s work, Section III of the book makes even more sense. After all, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and others

who wrote during the 1980s and 1990s have dealt with the issues of the generation exactly before Doshi's. This generation (Doshi's), on the contrary, believes in multiple identity markers and is comfortable with the idea of multiple affiliations.

Lahiri has not focussed on works from West Asia and South East Asia. Asia is a vast landmass. Naturally, including works from all regions would be beyond the scope of a single volume. Despite this lacuna, the book will be immensely useful for students, researchers and teachers of Asia Studies and Diaspora Studies mainly because of the insightful discussion of some hitherto unaddressed areas.

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