

Lahiri, Himadri. 2021. *Asia Travels: Pan-Asian Discourses and Diasporic Asian Literature/s in English*. Bolpur: Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni. i-xxiv+1-272. ISBN 978-81-953067-8-7. Price: Rs. 600.

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While mapping the history of migration in Asia, Sunil S. Amrith observes, “Migration has been a widespread experience in many regions of Asia”, and “Asian history” can be studied “in more mobile terms” by focusing on the travelling of migrants across national borders and “the connections that migrants made between distant places” (Amrith 2011, 1). This idea of looking at Asia from the perspective of mobility renders a new dimension to Amrith’s analysis of the history of the modern Asian diaspora. Using a similar ideological paradigm, Himadri Lahiri’s book, *Asia Travels: Pan-Asian Discourses and Diasporic Asian Literature/s in English* (2021), seeks to foreground the notion of “travel”, in both real and metaphorical senses, in the Asian socio-cultural milieu. Each country in the Asian continent has a history of migration and these migrations, according to Lahiri, were instrumental in uniting the Asians. By emphasising the idea of “travel”, this book discusses the theoretical concept of “Pan-Asianism” in the context of Asian literary and cultural productions. “Pan-Asianism” incorporates “a discourse born out of a spirit” of travelling away from one’s own “nation and coming back ‘home’ (often in metaphorical sense)”, “with the urge to form” a close association with “the people of other nations in the continent of Asia” (Lahiri 2021, ix). It is a “transnational ideology” (ibid., ix) which aims to strengthen the “anti-Western impulse” (ibid., xiii), providing a sort of alternative critical framework to analyse the idea of migration in the East. Indeed, Lahiri’s book is shaped by the spirit of “Pan-Asianist” discourse, and the three sections of this volume amplify the interface between “Pan-Asianism” and diaspora. “Pan-Asianism” is a historical phenomenon, and although its heydays are gone, its spirit can be found in present-day incarnations of the same phenomenon. It takes the word “travel” both in its material and figurative senses.

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In the “Introduction” of his book, Lahiri refers to some Asian intellectuals, Sun Yat-sen, Okakura Tenshin, Rabindranath Tagore and other important Asian activists, who attempted to define the idea of “Pan-Asianism”. These activists, as Lahiri explains, formulated various theoretical ideas of “Pan-Asianism” based on the cultural, political, geographical and sociological frameworks. Though these theoretical ideas, in some cases, seemed to be truly representative of “multicultural Asia” (ibid., x), in the case of Tehsin’s thesis, the “superiority of Japan” (ibid., xi) was embedded in the discourse. In the context of building a “Pan-Asian” consciousness, Lahiri argues that collaborative academic/literary activities can play a vital role in integrating the intellectual minds of the Asian continent, contributing to the idea of a transnational Asian network. This aspect has been effectively explained by Lahiri in the first chapter of the book “Pan-Asianism and Its Prospects: Through the Cultural Lens”. Lahiri believes that “Literary-cultural anthologies could provide a platform for” discussions on multiple issues related to the rich variety of literary productions in Asia (ibid., 6). Citing the titles of various anthologies that have been published to promote Asian unity, Lahiri emphasises the need to work on such projects that invariably will generate a practical model of “Pan-Asianism”. The chapters included in the first section of this volume discuss the critical frameworks of “Pan-Asianism” and the possibilities of achieving a true Pan-Asianic spirit. This section titled “From Home to the World: Pan-Asianism and Diaspora” rightly addresses the problems and prospects of the Pan-Asianist discourse in Tagore’s literary writings (Chapter Two), Asian American literature (Chapter Three) and the aesthetics of border crossing (Chapter Four). In the fourth chapter of the first section, Lahiri explains the idea of “academic activism” (ibid., 59) by referring to the literary narratives of some specific Asian writers who have sought to represent new possibilities of mapping the Asian diasporic imaginary.

The second section of the book, titled “Shadows in the Nations: Diasporic Perspectives”, contains four chapters and each chapter in this section deals with the diasporic literary texts produced from different nations of Asia. This section, in fact, casts the shadows on the possibilities of “Pan-Asianism” in the sense that the nations themselves cannot keep up their unity (they get fragmented), not to speak of continental unity. Lahiri’s main thrust in this section is on the idea of imagining the nation space which assumes various dimensions depending on the context of a diasporic subject. The condition of Japanese American internment experience has been narrativised by Japanese American authors, and Lahiri explains the significance of the “ideological positions” (ibid., 80) of two such writers, Monica Sone and Hisaye Yamamoto, in the first chapter of this section. In the second chapter, Lahiri appropriately exemplifies the ideological framework of “Pan-Asianism” by establishing a curious link between the diasporic perspectives of two writers of the Indian subcontinent, Ranbir Sidhu and Bapsi Sidhwa. Sidhu’s “Border Songs” and Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy Man* deal with the issue of the Partition of India through the imaginative lens of “the insane and the innocent” (Lahiri 2021, 98). The Pan-Asian consciousness is suitably explained in the discussion on these two literary narratives. Lahiri’s effort to locate and critically study the

diasporic literature from the Himalayan region is commendable. The last essay in this section attempts to study the cultural distinctions of the Tibetan and Nepalese diaspora. Both these diasporas are geopolitically connected to the Himalayan region. However, the national moorings of these diasporas are different, and Lahiri, quite succinctly, applies the Freudian notion of “mourning” to distinguish these two diasporas. Despite the subtle differences between these diasporas, the Tibetans and the Nepalese diasporic subjects are bound to the idea of Pan-Himalayan identity, and Namita Gokhale (2018) has adequately discussed this aspect in her edited anthology, *The Himalayan Arc: Journeys East of South-east*. Gokhale refers to the Himalayan arc region and asserts that “the entire sweep of mountains has a shared cultural context” which is evidently “manifest in worship, food, habits, cuisines, musical traditions, and folklore...” (Gokhale 2018, Kindle Location 72 of 4639). This comment amplifies the presence of Pan-Himalayan identity which is a miniaturist version of “Pan-Asianism”. In fact, Lahiri’s essay draws attention to this new identity formation as well as it also shows the discordant notes in this identity.

“Settling Down in the Diaspora” is the title of the third section of this volume. Three essays in this section seek to foreground the evolution of human relationships in the context of various Asian diasporic literary texts. Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri are the Asian American writers who have been discussed in these essays. Lahiri specifically focuses on the Asian American immigrant experience to explore the affective aspects of adapting to the American socio-cultural matrix. Interestingly, in this section too, the underlying idea of “Pan-Asianism” is the binding phenomenon. Literary narratives based on Chinese and Indian American immigrant experiences contain some similar traits which reflect the anxieties and aspirations of the Asian communities desiring to settle in America. Lahiri successfully projects this phenomenon in the third section of his book. In the concluding chapter of this volume, Lahiri reiterates the significance of engaging with “pan-Asian philosophy” particularly in the contemporary scenario when collaborative academic activities and research ventures can unite the Asians to actualise “textual activism” (Lahiri 2021, 195). Beyond the main text of Lahiri’s book, the appendices present five book reviews which were written by the author at different points of time and published in different journals. Reprints of these book reviews are contextual to the conceptual framework of this volume as they are thematically connected to the Pan-Asianist discourse. The texts chosen for book reviews are reflective of the spirit of “multicultural Asia”, building connections beyond national borders and forging transnational networks within Asia.

Though Lahiri’s book convincingly argues the need for establishing a Pan-Asianist cultural discourse, some critics believe that Asia cannot be imagined in a singular and unified manner. Amitav Acharya’s article “Asia Is Not One” interrogates the idea of Asia, arguing that “there is no singular idea of Asia”, and in spite of the efforts made by the political and social thinkers, Asia remains an “essentially contested, notion” (Acharya 2010, 1001). He refers to the four major “contested visions” within Asia: “*imperialist Asia*”, “*nationalist Asia*”,

“*universalist Asia*”, and “*regionalist Asia*”; which have prevented the emergence of a true Pan-Asian consciousness (ibid., 1002-1003). The notion of “pan-Asianism”, according to Acharya, was a “hegemonic” discourse (ibid., 1003) that aimed to address the economic and political perspectives of major Asian nations like India, China and Japan, marginalising the needs of minor stakeholders like Burma, Nepal and Philippines (ibid., 1006). Against the backdrop of Acharya’s perspective, Lahiri’s notion of “Pan-Asianism” offers a sort of solution to the “contested visions” within Asia. If the notion of a unified Asia remains elusive in the social, political, and economic domains, this unity can be achieved through “academic activism.” Lahiri’s book argues this point with clarity and precision. On the whole, this book will be immensely useful for the students and academics interested in studying Asian diaspora and cultural discourses.

References

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