

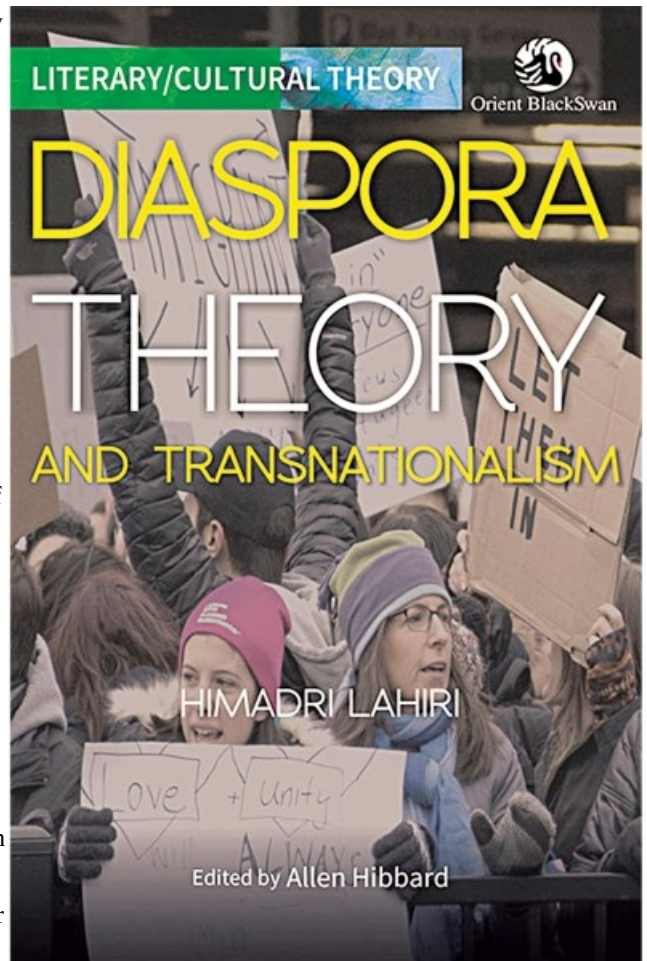
Himadri Lahiri's Diaspora Theory and Transnationalism

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The Routledge Diaspora Studies Reader (2017) co-edited by Klaus Stierstorfer and Janet Wilson made significant observations about the increase in global movement of people, capital, products, cultures and ideologies; and the consequent rise in research interest in the field of diaspora studies in the twenty-first century. In this light, Himadri Lahiri's *Diaspora Theory and Transnationalism* (2019) is both a timely South Asian response and a relevant intervention at that; given the dynamics of the Global South as a hub of outbound migrations. As part of Orient Blackswan's Literary/Cultural Theory series, the book, edited by Allen Hibbard, aims at explicating basic terminologies with clarity; tracing historiographies of diaspora(s) vis-à-vis acculturation and cultural hybridity; and discussing future configurations. Across the spectrum of social classes, the constituent aspects of the book are of interest to related studies in Bangladesh for clarity on the inclusions and exclusions to diaspora. In the choice of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* for textual enunciation of the veracity of his theoretical propositions, Lahiri's book gains in relevance in the Bangladeshi diasporic context.

In his sustained Introduction to *Diaspora Theory and Transnationalism*, Lahiri has simplified the term Diaspora; and simultaneously expressed his intention of erasing certain innocuous but baffling misconceptions that surround the terminology. Short-term stays outside of one's nation state or forced migrations are not diaspora though these may constitute a diasporic community; the prioritising of "contexts" and "dimensions" in defining each case of dislocation being important. He writes, "diaspora is a social formation outside the nation of origin. It is a phenomenon involving uprooting, forced or voluntary, of a mass of people from the 'homeland' and their re-rooting in the hostland(s)" (4). Lahiri elaborately delineates the etymology of the word, and also its several wrong usages; to show at length how it differs from several forms of migration. For example, internal migration, that is, the movement of a group of people from one corner of the country to the other, cannot constitute diaspora. He also suggests how skin colour may influence one's settlement in a new country and consequently becoming a native. A white man in a white man's country would easily mix with the natives and become part of the indigenous community; while the same does not often hold true for people of colour. In our national context, familiar examples may be drawn in the case of people who successfully exchanged "homes" between the two Bengals post 1947; and cannot be easily differentiated down the line. However, the "refugee" tag may not wear off easily from one's new/ acquired



national identity; and it is by examining such critical issues or creating a framework for approaching similar complicated identities that Lahiri's explanation of the evolution of terminology is handy as a ready reckoner.

Conversely, the term "transnationalism" is a more recent coinage, first used by Randolphe Bourne in 'Trans-National America' (1916) to refer to "the linkages between the national and transnational spaces through established networks of different kinds, sometimes with the help of the governments concerned" (Lahiri 14-15). The example of the Chinese investor who lives in San Francisco and claims to have the ability to live anywhere in the world, justifies Lahiri's epithet of transnationalism as "a cognate term" (Lahiri 14).

Diaspora and transnationalism may at times seem to overlap insofar as both are essentially "cross-border processes"; but Lahiri draws upon Rainer Baubock and Thomas Faist to emphasize that they are not coterminous. In this age of globalization and internationalism, communities are prone to transnationalism. Lahiri writes that transnationalism is heavily dependent on the functions of networks across the world, sustained and aided as they are by globalization, IT and facilities of fast travel (16). He discusses the six types of transnationalism referring to Vertovec's classification, in which transnationalism is seen as social morphology, type of consciousness, mode of cultural reproduction, avenue of capital, site of political engagement, and reconstruction of place or locality. Diaspora too has its types. One classification of diaspora endorses the historical/classical, modern/recent, and incipient diasporas. Another classification of diaspora based on one's homeland status suggests two categories: stateless and state-linked diasporas. There is a third kind broadly based on experience and profession, which can be seen to have different categories - victim, labor, imperial, trade and deterritorialized diasporas. Lahiri comments that missing in the lists are the highly skilled transnational scientists, technologists, human-resource personnel from middle and upper middle classes, who are termed "cyber coolies" or "coolie diaspora," quite an interesting import of the nineteenth century.

Having discussed transnationalism and diaspora at length, Lahiri moves on to the stages of the development of diaspora criticism. There have been paradigm shifts in the history of diaspora theory due to the sociopolitical, economic and technological developments since the 1990s; these have in turn changed patterns of global movements, and simultaneously our worldviews. In the first phase the idea of hostland-homeland had concrete shape as "cohesive" tentional entities. Sudesh Mishra's idea of homeland being "auto-centred, racially self-evident and ideologically homogenised" reminds of Benedict Anderson's idea of a nation as "imaginary" space that has "deep horizontal comradeship." Mishra along with Gabrielle Sheffer, Walker Connor, William Safran, Robin Cohen, *et al.* have participated in this theoretical field of root-generated diaspora criticism that one may connect with Derek Walcott's idea of "divided loyalty."

The second phase that Lahiri calls the second "scene" is of situational laterality. In this scene, the duality of home and hostland vanishes in the mire of indeterminacy that supplants "stable points of geo-psychical recognition"; making diaspora studies an extension of postmodernism in context. Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, James Clifford, Deleuze and Guattari are important names in this phase.

The third is of archival specificity in which the old cannot be equated with the new diaspora. For example, while the old version was "triggered by plantation economy", the new may have "features of migratory flows in the era of advanced capital" (Mishra quoted in Lahiri 22). Indeed, the role of advanced capital is very important in the third scene. This era generates the transnational networks of capitalist projects that involve human migration.

After the long and informative introduction Lahiri presents the idea of diaspora and transnationalism in five elaborate chapters. In the first chapter he classifies diaspora into three phases: classical, early modern and contemporary/late modern. He has also rendered his thoughts on home and homeland. In the second chapter he has dealt with the diasporic subject. Complicated issues like generation, citizenship and cultural hybridity have been defined with much lucidity. In the third chapter he focuses on gender and sexuality. Construction of masculinity and femininity in the diasporic spaces is a debated issue, and in Lahiri's rendition, much of the haze that shrouds masculinity-femininity issues become intelligible. As bearings of reproductivity and state policy on citizenship are important issues for diasporic subjects, gender and sexuality become integral elements of the sociopolitical scene. Lahiri throws light on the relation between the "queer subject" and "diasporic subject" too, as many consider them to be theoretical twins. In chapter four he takes up the relation between religion and

diaspora. Re-establishment of religious traditions in diasporic spaces can be very crucial, as we witness in today's United States for instance. With this "locative" operation of religion, 'translocative' operations are also related; and that calls for "drawing sustenance from the legends and history of the homelands and keeping institutional practices" (Lahiri 98) while being located in an alien land. These two are interrelated in many ways. Religion is also operative, for example, in the practices of nomenclature, though geographical or national connections are mostly influential here. A South Asian Muslim has a different pattern of name than a Muslim from Middle East even though they both may be citizens of the US. In the fifth chapter Lahiri addresses several issues in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, beginning with the history of its title, to assess literary representations of diasporic subjects.

In concluding his book, Lahiri clarifies that he takes transnationalism as falling within the rubric of diaspora studies, and this explains the rather fleeting discussion on it. The author factors the paradigmatic evolution(s) that "diaspora" as terminology has undergone, which makes transnationalism a related vector. He also includes the crucial role of mass media and cyberspace in present times in the continuation and hybridisation of cultural-religious practices, and in the mobilization of political initiatives. He even writes that ICT plays the role of a catalyst in the formation of diasporic identity! Finally, Lahiri has pointed out how liberal immigration policies have backfired in the US or in some EU countries, where today we see ascendant right wing politics introducing major changes in migrancy laws. Cumulatively, the frontiers of diaspora studies thus continue to expand in concentric circles, taking on additional significance in the lives of increasing numbers of people.

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