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## **Beyond Multiculturalism: A Pan-ethnic Asian American Perspective**

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**M**ulticulturalism, in the context of the United States had been brought into cultural discourse to understand the various constructions of cultural identity in a multi-ethnic and multiracial America. But multiculturalism in a broader sense generally refers to the doctrine that "cultural diversity should be recognized as a permanent and valuable part of political societies."<sup>1</sup> And so, by recognizing cultural diversity as a permanent aspect of political societies, Multiculturalism in the United States has not succeeded in projecting the ongoing processes of social construction of collective identities. The different theories of Multiculturalism virtually work out the different possibilities of the doctrine of otherising, based on the politics of inclusion and exclusion. One significant aspect of the politics of Multiculturalism is "the façade of welcoming non western *others* into putatively interdisciplinary and cross cultural exchange, a continual tendency to stigmatize and ghettoize non western cultures precisely by way of ethnic, national labels."<sup>2</sup> Multiculturalism appeals as a kind of cultural globalization to non-western countries with its apparent liberal democratic contents. This is why Multiculturalism has become an obsession with literary authors and critics who claim to 'decentre' the hegemony of the west.<sup>3</sup> But actually, Multiculturalism with its agenda of exclusion has denied cultural pluralism because 'difference as exclusion actually denies difference.' Mutual recognition in the Taylorian sense<sup>4</sup> or 'fusion of horizons' on the Gadamerian lines has not been able to be a part of the multiculturalism politics, especially in the United States. A 'fusion of horizons' can operate "through developing new vocabularies of comparison by means

of which we can articulate these contrasts.”<sup>5</sup> The evolution of a democratic Multiculturalism requires the assignment of transitive, transformatory and emancipatory meaning to cultural differences, rather than confining it to ‘exclusionary’ mode. Thus, Multiculturalism cannot liberate oppressed *classes*—both in the sense of economic classes and the classroom as a space for pedagogical practices.<sup>6</sup> Universality remains a far cry.

Therefore, transcending the limits posed by exclusivist, national and global policies like Multiculturalism involves what Barthes has described as ‘going beyond the sentence’,<sup>7</sup> which is one of the ways of resisting cultural and political closure. The possibilities of a ‘fusion of horizons’ which would appropriate a non-dialectical form of closure lies in a process of articulation of subjects of exclusion, whose dialogic encounter would emerge as relocation and reinscription beyond the essentialism of western theoretical productions. Contrarily, Pan-ethnicity to an extent has been able to appropriate the logic of multinational capitalism in Multiculturalism.<sup>8</sup> The politics of localization and globalization makes it necessary to have a workable notion of how social groups are unified by a common culture and at the same time the need to “identify genuine cultural differences (and similarities) across groups.”<sup>9</sup> Pan-ethnicity makes an adjustment of the multiplicity of racial, ethnic and national boundaries, within a larger world of global ‘civic friendship.’ Pan-ethnicity assumes a conglomerating form with chunks of identities coming together in a contingent fashion. Further, it acts as a search for common grounds for living together between diasporic, racial, and other identities. What looms large through such a construction of pan-ethnicity is the possibility of a moment of difference and alterity that gives it a dynamic and changing character. Pan-ethnic identity deploys on foreignness, a mixness of various identities that articulate their sameness and difference in a language that preserves the sense for itself. Pan-ethnic discourse leads to a political, economic, and ideological intention and imagination that is capable of decentring symbolic power relations within which they are embroiled. One is aware that there is an ongoing metropolitan debate on the construction of pan-ethnic identities—an ir-

resolution between belonging to an ethnic community or polity and a sense of belonging together in the new world order. It has been a new global experience that produces a shared identity across cultures by expanding the latitudes of race ethnicity and other specific markers. It has a surge to move beyond the limits of subjecthood to emerge into subjects-in-the-making or a class of non-subjects. This further destabilises the need for a privileged/under privileged voice but alters it to a decentred narrative of hope and despair.

This dynamics makes the Asians of the East to appropriate the Western symbols, especially the symbol of the 'Frontier.' Asians have dispersed, migrated and have spread across the globe. They have settled especially in the United States where they are a significant population. The social significance of the Asians in America is that they are neither black nor white and hence beyond the binary construction of difference. The Asians in America exhibit complex manifestation of the East-West encounter and complicate the either/or definition of the colour lines of the twentieth century. The 'East' and the 'West' in their mutual encounter of inclusion and exclusion suggests the carving out of a 'third space' of 'neither/nor' and as 'both/and'.<sup>10</sup> The politics of inclusion and exclusion mostly operates through a discriminatory discourse that marks and unmarks identity. As racial others, Asians in America occupying this 'third space' disrupt and conform to the hegemonic dualisms. Racial and ethnic categories have been used in the United States to distinguish groups in relation to a white majority, both for the purposes of exclusion and inclusion. Asian Americans, as a racial or ethnic category in the United States were defined first with respect to their legal status. After the 1990s, "Asian American" is gaining common usage as a pan-ethnic category, relative to other groups—first is the relationship of Asian Americans with Asians who have emigrated from Asian countries of origin and settled in other regions and second, the relationship to other Asians throughout the world. Interestingly the formal classification of Asians in America "as a racial group by the federal government coincided with the self-identification of Asian Americans as a

pan-ethnic group in the 1970s and 1980s.”<sup>11</sup> Within the United States, the terms nationality, race and ethnicity are sometimes overlapping but are also quite distinct. Given a civic culture, nationality is based on citizenship; race is imposed by the dominant group and is meant to distinguish people of colour with the white majority. The construction of Asian-American pan-ethnicity in this context has been a projection of the ‘other’ from the settled American point of view, a telescoping of American identity into others. One can mention here that ethnicity has been used mainly as a self-definition of “white ethnics,” “not necessarily related to or based on a majority group.”<sup>12</sup> It may be mentioned here that, ‘ethnic nationalism’ makes a distinction between ‘ethnos’ and ‘state’ and allows people to imagine a different—often conflicting type of community.<sup>13</sup> Asians in America categorised as ‘Asian-American’ and ‘American Indian’ view the need for a pan-ethnic unity, as the “polar alternatives of traditionalism and assimilation—both still pursued—have proved unsatisfactory as adaptive responses to contact with Whites.”<sup>14</sup> The way Indians and Asians view themselves has been significantly influenced by the way outsiders view them and lump them as broad categories with an ethnocentric ‘myopia.’ Within the confines of race, class and gender politics of exclusion, Asians in America and Ameri-Indians have tried to maintain independent self-definitions, challenging controlling images and replacing them with ethnocultural stereotypes. The civil rights and ethnic studies movements of the late sixties have also inspired other ethnic minorities of the United States who shared solidarity with the blacks. Ethnic and minority movements within the Asian countries have also inspired the Asian minorities in the United States. Grounded in the U.S. black power movement and in anticolonial struggles of Third World countries, ethnic antihegemonic projects have been unified by a common goal of articulating cultural resistance. Given the historical distortions and misrepresentations of Asians in America in mainstream media, most cultural projects produced by Asian Americans and Ameri-Indians perform the important tasks of correcting histories, shaping legacies, creating new cultures, constructing a politics of resistance, and opening

spaces for the forcibly excluded. Therefore one significant way of producing such cultural resistance has been through the construction of cultural stereotypes, which traces a community's ethnic identity and appropriates the strong modern subject of the 'West.' These cultural stereotypes reveal heterogeneity rather than regulating ideas of cultural unity or integration. Such a cultural project also seeks to destabilize the dominant racial discourse that constructs 'Asians' as a homogeneous group conforming to types such as 'yellow peril'; and 'Oriental Mastermind.' The myth of the United States is deconstructed by the 'cultural nationalism' of the Asians, which has been crucial for their struggle for self-representation.

There is a lot of ambiguity reflected in the attempt for self-representation in the growing body of Asian literature in English translation and Asian-American literature. Cultural projects in literature and pedagogical practices constitute the deconstructing of the myth of the benevolent United States which offers a lot of promises to men and women of Asia. For example, Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* (1943/1973), is one of the core works of Asian American literature that challenges the narrative of the United States as a land of opportunity. Rejecting the myth of the United States also involves an interrogation of ideological racism through a system of promoting and controlling racist images. John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957) is a strong indictment of the racist hysteria. Asian American literature of the 1970s has been mainly male centred, as gender is only a part of a larger pattern of unequal social relations. Reacting to such gender discriminations, Asian American feminists have tried to expose Asian American sexism. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Women Warrior* (1977) and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) are two such texts which make a critique of the Asian American community's patriarchal structure. These divergent positions of Asian American men and women should be however understood from the more complex relationality of the categories of oppression. It is only when Asians and Asian Americans recognize the intersections of race, gender and class, that the transformation of the existing hierarchical structure can take place. It is in the uni-

fying function of culture and literature, that the greatest importance has been attached. An 'imagined community' not bounded by colour, race, gender and class, but crucially by a shared struggle against all pervasive and systemic forms of domination is what constitutes the liberating spirit of the 'third space' between the Western and Non-Western dichotomy. The system of drawing boundaries and arbitrarily isolating the immigrants' history and culture of the homeland under the rubric 'Asian Literature' has been questioned. Asia has been understood in relation to multicultural America and vice versa, focusing not only on the period after the immigrants' arrival in the United States, but linking the immigrants to his ethnic roots. Eric Wolf suggests a more collaborative enterprise between Asian studies and Asian American studies, forging new paradigms. Methodology, that would not look at Asian identities and the United States "as fixed entities opposed to one another by stable internal architecture and external boundaries" and that which would not interfere with "our ability to understand their mutual encounter and confrontation." should be adopted.<sup>15</sup> Ethnic groups are formed and changed in encounters among groups and therefore ethnicity is the basis of a pan-ethnic experience. Rey Chou has indicated that Asian literature is increasingly defined in terms of ethnicity rather than nationality. Asian literatures are taught in American Universities not for their 'intrinsic value.' She states that, it is "in terms of the cultural interventions which Asian literatures, in alliance with other minor literatures, bring to American society as a politically constituted community, that answers should and will be sought in decades to come."<sup>16</sup> A desire for a Pan-ethnic bonding through a recognition of mutual ethnic differences and heterogeneity has become a typical characteristic of self-expression for Asians especially those in the United States, in the new global order. Wayne Chang's commercial film *Chan is Missing* (1981) indirectly conveys the message that Chinese Americans, like other Americans or Asian Americans are heterogeneous. Ethnicity has been given preference over nationality. Doak<sup>17</sup> observes that many people in Japan envisage a natural ethnic body as a national community, and it is through 'ethnic

nationalism' that the Japanese people are imagining an alternative community to oppose the state. The most significant agenda of the Asian Movement in the contemporary times is a redefinition of the Asian experience within the United States as 'Amerasia,' which is also a campaign carried out by the Asian-American studies programmes at various universities.

These cultural and academic interventions also produce their extremities. One can notice a celebratory impact of such contestation over identity in its ludic expressions. A text like David Shambaugh's *Beautiful Imperialist: China Perceives America 1972-1990*<sup>18</sup> expresses the professional point of view of China's America watchers while it strikes at the roots of individuals' acculturation to American conditions in terms of their cognitive dissonance. Shambaugh shows full agreement with an experienced and senior American official who said, "None of these individuals can put themselves in the place of a United States decision-maker; they lack the sociological-anthropological training necessary for them to transcend their own system and view the United States as American world." Another mode of intervention could be something like that of Jack Goody, who in *The East in the West*<sup>19</sup> problematises the contingent and inscriptive character of Asian American ethnic identities, while at the deep cultural level he dissolves the apparent differences between civilization. The Asian-American imagination could perhaps transcend the limits of multiculturalism as a doctrine of exclusionivist politics by problematizing the question of cultural identity on the one hand and dissolving the differences through a dialogic encounter. Only then a "fusion of horizons" could be made possible.

## Notes

1. S.N. Eisenstadt and B. Giesen have discussed the doctrines of multicultural exclusivism in "The construction of collective identity" in *Archives of European Sociology*, XXXVI (1995).
2. Rey Chow in "Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem" *boundary* 225; 3, 1998 quotes from the section "Chinese film in the age of interdisciplinarity" in *Primitive Passions: Visu-*

- ality, *Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
3. See Rey Chow, "In the Name of Comparative Literature" in Bernheimer: *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, 108.
  4. See Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" in C. Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
  5. Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Heideggers Wege: Studien Zum Spatwerk* (Tuhingen: Mohr, 1983) quoted in *Beyond Orientalism*.
  6. Bell Hooks has recounted that performance of the text in the classroom involves the use of personal experience with the issues under the construction of identity as difference and difference as exclusion.
  7. See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. R. Miller (New York: Hill 1975).
  8. Zizek states that 'true universalism' is yet to come in "Multiculturalism or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism," *New Left Review*, No. 225, September/October 1997.
  9. Satya P. Mohanty makes a study of the epistemic status of cultural identity in *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (New Delhi: OUP, 1998).
  10. Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). Due to their racial ambiguity, Asians in America or Asian Americans have been constructed historically to be 'like black' or 'like white' or as neither black nor white.
  11. Gen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).
  12. Jorge del Penal, "Impact of Ethnic Data Needs in the United States" in *Statistics of Canada and the U.S. Bureau of the Census: Challenges of Measuring an Ethnic World* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993).
  13. Doak, "Ethnic Nationalism and Romanticism in Early Twentieth Century Japan" in *American Historical Review*, 102, 1997. Cited by Ellehiro Azuara in *Pacific Historical Review*, 1998. Chandra Mohanty has called such a community, an "imagined community."
  14. Richard W. Trottier, "Charters of Panethnic Identity: Indigenous American Indians and Immigrant Asian-American" in *Ethnic*

- Change* ed. Charles F. Keyes (London: State University of Washington Press, 1981).
15. Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982).
  16. Rey Chow, "The Politics and Pedagogy of Asian Literatures in American Universities," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, No. 23, 1990.
  17. Doak, "Ethnic Nationalism and Romanticism in Early Twentieth Century Japan," *American Historical Review*, 102, 1997.
  18. David Shambaugh, *Beautiful Imperialist: China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
  19. Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).