

# The East-West Encounter: Towards A Pan-Ethnic Discourse

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It is generally assumed that European Imperialism in the countries of Asia had isolated the Asians, colonising the Asian imagination of culture, literature, trade and commerce, until America replaced Europe as a redeemer. Given the history of America, she was an inspiring symbol of hope and emancipation for all the colonials of the East'. While the East admired Western ideas of progress, it also watched with interest how the West was drawn to Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism as a relief for the material pursuit of boom and amplitude. However, in one's understanding of the Western/Non-Western or Eastern dichotomy and in the debate whether there was any Colonialism at all, the term 'encounter' is a more descriptive term that carries one's analysis beyond the simplistic dualism of East and West. It is no longer adequate to study "the impact of the West on Asia" as a part of the debate between tradition and modernity due to the impact of Asia on the West on the one hand and also the modernization of Asian countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore (in addition to Japan) on the other. These countries have been interrogating not only the economic hegemony of the United States but also the term 'West' being "associated with modernization and industrialization".

The East-West encounter needs to be viewed from the point of view of a discursive break between the East and the West. It is an understanding of one's singularity, with an infinite responsibility towards the other. No interface between the East and the West can be situated in terms of linear conjunctions whether political, historical, and/or cultural. Rather it is a matter of separating the two sides of the encounter, put in critical terms, which takes the form of disjunctions between a series of oppositions—central/marginal, stable/unstable, cultural/economic and a whole lot of other eventual co-ordinates. Further, the asymmetry between the discursive realities of the East and the West produces a mutual incommensurable sense of belonging quite in a breach, with a persistent sense of reciprocity. In other words, reciprocity and incommensurability call out at each other to make the interface an uneven and fluctuating horizon without a clearly demarcated boundary.

There are at least two ways of situating cultural criticism. The first is the critique of post-colonial Reason which disembarks the already constructed dichotomies between colonialism/post-colonialism, East/West, Self/Other, Colonizer/Colonized, by reinterpreting the emerging identities. The second is the critique of cultural postmodernity, produced by disembarking the logic of simulacra and replacing it with a more rooted concern for various identities. These two lines of critique are represented in the divergence between cultural and economic processes. Within culture there persists a severe contestation over markets and specific signifiers, producing a

continuation of modern and postmodern projects; within economics such differences are dissolved, to emerge into partners of a common global market place. In this divergence, the cultural question is - how can one belong to a culture or a nation while one is already placed within the broader sphere of a global market? This question assumes a specific context in the case of demarcating the borders of citizenship as well as in the cases of atrocities and horrors of migration and displacement. In a nutshell, situating the self, community, culture and other specific markers of identity within the heterogeneity of globalization has become the real problem for Asian and South Asian communities. Seemingly, the dichotomy re-emerges in the form of the dichotomy of the *citizen subject* (belonging to nation, race and other markers) and the *citizen consumer*, whose identity is interlaced with other consumers. So what matters is this internally evolving tension between the citizen subject and citizen consumer that further evolves into cultural postmodernity, ethnocentricity and the struggle for economic superiority.

Given the conflict, the markers like place, culture, language etc. produce a sense of belonging, an affiliation, while markers like economic prosperity produce a simultaneous sense of multiplicity and specificity. This double movement produces a hermeneutic context for asking new questions about identity, location and culture. Multiculturalism, as a significant practice in this context, made it necessary to have a workable notion of how social groups are unified by a common culture and at the same time to "identify genuine cultural differences (and similarities) across groups<sup>2</sup>." But multiculturalism conceives the 'other' as a self-enclosed community towards which multiculturalists maintain a privileged universalist position, thereby following the cultural logic of multinational capitalism<sup>3</sup>. Therefore 'true universality' remains a far cry in multiculturalism.

Conversely, panethnicity makes an adjustment of the plurality and multiplicity of racial, ethnic and national boundaries, within a larger world of global 'civic friendship'. Panethnicity 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 diasporical, racial and other identities. What looms large through such a construction of panethnicity, is the possibility of a moment of difference and alterity that gives it a dynamic and changing character. Panethnic identity deploys foreignness, a mixture of various identities that articulates their sameness and difference in a language that preserves the sense for itself. Thus, panethnic 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 panethnic identities -- an irresolution 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 mak... Asians of the East appropriate 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 hyphen between 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 'both/and'<sup>4</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 in the East-West encounter, both disrupt and conform to the hegemonic dualisms of race, gender and class. The third space is also the in-between, of the Eastern mode of silence and the Western mode of public speech, which questions memory and language, inquisition of history and Western racism. This space is also a space of assimilation or synthesis of the East-West encounter, which Tagore conveyed through his lectures in Japan, China, the United States and Europe in the years between 1916 and 1930<sup>5</sup>.

The East-West encounter specifically in relation, to Asians in America suggests the problematique of Asians as a racial category in America and as "a multiplicity of identities in the United States<sup>6</sup>. 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 first defined with respect to their legal status. After the 1990s, "Asian American" is gaining common usage as a panethnic category, relative to other groups -- first in the relationship of Asian Americans with Asians who have emigrated from Asian countries 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>7</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 panethnicity 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>8</sup>. It may be mentioned here that, 'ethnic nationalism' makes a distinction between 'ethnos' and 'state' and allows people to imagine a different and often conflicting type of community<sup>9</sup>. Asians in America categorised as "Asian-American" and "American Indian" view the need for a panethnic unity, as the "polar alternatives of traditionalism and assimilation, both still pursued. These

have proved unsatisfactory as adaptive responses to contact with Whites"<sup>10</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 ethno-cultural stereotypes. The civil rights and ethnic studies movements of the late sixties have inspired other ethnic minorities of the United States who shared solidarity with the blacks. Ethnic and minority movements within Asian countries have also inspired the Asian minorities in the United States. Grounded in the US 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.

The interrelations between stereotypes and patterns of exclusion are complex and persistent<sup>11</sup>, especially in relation to the definition of the 'self'; and the ways of looking at the 'other'. The concept of the decolonization of imagination is very important here, because every cultural image or stereotype involves an interplay of different languages and systems of representation. The 'Samurai' in the Japanese context is one such stereotype, which exhibits the complex representational mechanism of the relation between the East and the West. In the West, 'Samurai' is associated with everything that is Japanese whereas in Japan, the Samurai projects quite a different value system than the Japanese subject with a protestant ethic. The 'Samurai' has been an imaginary mode of self-representation for the Japanese Nation and as an epitome of a confrontational image to Western values; but the presence of the 'Samurai' instead has generated a psychological ambivalence for the Japanese people, who can recognize the Samurai as a cultural symbol but lacks historicity to contextualize it. The 'Samurai' then is like the Indian archetype 'Brahman' which are the Japanese and Indian responses respectively, against the threat of cultural westernization. Yet, both the symbols are responsible for creating cultural ambiguity for the modern subject of both these nations, who are economic and political actors in the new world order. It is in this spirit of a strange cultural ambiguity that cultural stereotypes provoke the modern Asian

subject to ask her/himself, whether it is possible to go back to her/his own cultural roots without the mediation of an alien culture.

The ambiguity is also reflected in the attempt at self-representation in the growing body of Asian literature in English translation and in Asian-American literature. Cultural projects in literature and pedagogical practices constitute the deconstructing of the myth of the benevolent United States which offer 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 this myth 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 racist hysteria. Asian-American literatures 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 discrimination, Asian-American feminists have tried to expose Asian-American sexism. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1977) and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) are two such texts which critique the Asian-American community's patriarchal structure. However, these divergent positions of Asian American men and women should be 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 unifying function of culture and literature, that the greatest importance has been attached. An 'imagined community' not bound 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 their 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 would not interfere with "our ability to understand their mutual encounter and confrontation" should be adopted<sup>12</sup>. Ethnic groups are formed and changed in encounters among groups and therefore ethnicity is the basis of a panethnic experience. Rey Chow 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>13</sup>." A desire for a Panethnic 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. Hence, for instance, 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>14</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 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 in various universities.

These cultural and academic interventions also produce their extremities. One notices a celebratory impact of such a contestation over identity in its ludic expressions. A text like David Shambaugh's *Beautiful Imperialist: China Perceives America, 1972-1990*<sup>15</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 cognitive dissonance. In Shambaugh's opinion, while most of these America watchers have sophisticated experience, he is in full agreement with an experienced and senior American officials 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 is someone like that of Jack Goody, who in *The East in the West*<sup>16</sup> problematizes the contingent and inscriptive character of Asian American ethnic identities, while at the deep cultural level, dissolves the apparent differences between civilizations. Therefore our task at this century's end would be to conceive of an identity which Karnoouh<sup>17</sup> has called 'logos without ethos'. 'Ethos' formed by such identities are 'open' and sensitive to many emergent global and cultural factors, and are therefore a more effective means to panethnic bonding.

# Notes

- 1 C. D. Narasimhaiah discusses how America inspired the Indian freedom struggle as a symbol of new life.
- 2 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*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998.
- 3 Zizek, Slavoj: 'Multiculturalism or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism', *New Left Review*, No. 225, September/October 1997. Zizek states that 'true universalism' is yet to come.
- 4 Cohen, Paul A. (1979) *Discovering History in China*, New York: Columbia University Press. Due to their racial ambiguity, Asians in America or Asian-Americans have been constructed historically to be 'like black', was 'like white', or as neither black nor white.
- 5 Tagore's exact 'message' was the concept of synthesis between Indo-Asian spirituality and Western practicality.
- 6 Tamayolott Juanita (1998) 'Race: a major organizing principle', *Asian Americans: From Racial Category to Multiple Identities*, Alta Mira Press, C.A..
- 7 Espiritu, Gen Le (1992) *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, cited in *Ibid*.
- 8 del Penal, Jorge (1993) 'Impact of ethnic data needs in the United States. In Statistics Canada and the U.S. Bureau of the Census', *Challenges of Measuring an Ethnic World*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- 9 Doak (1997) 'Ethnic nationalism and romanticism in early twentieth century Japan', *American Historical Review*, 102. Cited by Ellehiro Azuara (1999) in *Pacific Historical Review*. Chandra Mohanty (1991) has called such a community, an "imagined community".
- 10 Trottier, Richard W. (1981) 'Charters of panethnic identity: indigenous American Indians and immigrant Asian-American' in *Ethnic Change* (ed.) Charles F. Keyes, State University of Washington Press, London.

- 11 Hiroshi Yoshioka makes a critical analysis of Samurai and self-colonization in Japan in Jan Nederveen Pieterse & Bhikhu Parekh (eds.) (1997) *The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*, Oxford Univeristy Press, Delhi.
- 12 Wolf, Eric R (1982) *Europe and the People Without History*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- 13 Chow, Rey (1990) 'The politics and pedagogy of Asian literatures in American universities', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, No. 23.
- 14 Doak (1997) 'Ethnic nationalism and romanticism in early twentieth century Japan', *American Historical Review*, 102.
- 15 David Shambaugh (1993) *Beautiful Imperialist: China Perceives America, 1972-1990*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- 16 Jack Goody (1996) *The East in the West*, Cambridge University Press.
- 17 Claude Karnoouh (1998) 'Logos without ethos: interculturalism and multiculturalism', *Telos*, 110, Winter, p. 19-133.