

# Transnationalism and the Formation of Identity in Literature

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to show what transnationalism is and what significance it has in literary discourse. It also studies how the term ‘transnationalism’ came in use and from when it became popular as a literary theory. I have not used this theoretical aspect to show how it has been used in a literary text but I have rather worked on theory itself. For instance, today’s world is the residence of transnational people with their transnational culture, language, arts and literature. Migration to other nations has been so easier now that the world has been a global village. The communities make a village but the countries make a global village. With new issues arise new ideas and with new theory arises a new literature. Transnationalism and its aspects are the new subjects of the new kind of literature. This has given birth to transnational authors, texts and readers. The authors write about their homeland residing in foreign land. Moreover, they connect their homeland with their country of settlement through their imagination in their works. Transnational works are mainly the experiences of the transnational authors who want a sort of connection to their root.*

**KEYWORDS:** Transnationalism, migration, hybridity and migration literature

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**Date of Submission:** 15 January 2018

**Date of Acceptance:** 04 February 2018

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses transnational aspects like migration, hybridity and multiculturalism. Transnationalism basically refers to going beyond the nation. It means crossing the boundary of a nation. It is accompanied with multiple languages, cultures and hybridity. It first starts with migration and crossing the fixed territory of a nation. When an individual immigrates to a foreign land, s/he finds everything new. The immigrants then follow the culture of the migrated place but they cannot completely forget what they learnt and followed in their homeland. So they happen to mix the cultures and that a new culture becomes a transnational culture for them. Not only this, they unknowingly influence the mainstream culture and it becomes a transnational culture to those who are not immigrants. But the impact of it is less on them than that on the immigrants. Transnationalism is not a neutral term. It has its relation with hybridity, assimilation, acculturation and even with nationalism. There must be a nation first to have transnation so transnationalism involves more than a nation.

In this paper, transnationalism is focused more in terms of literary writing. There could be transnationalism in language, culture, festival, food habit, technology and many more. But the aspects of transnationalism based on literature are the main concerns of this paper. The other areas of transnationalism that have relation with the literary discourse are discussed. Literature is the product of the author’s imagination and experiences. Transnational literature is the result of transnational experiences of the author. It is the

sharing of the author's feeling and experiences. It is also a way of compensating the lack of physical presence in the home land. They get that loss repaired with their writing. They feel connected with their home. Now there are numerous transnational writers and their works. They create the characters who are immigrants like them. The immigrant writers have to face a lot of problems including identity crisis. They have to struggle to create their identity in the immigrated place. The characters too are shown facing the problems and struggle to create their identity in the foreign land. Some examples of transnational works are Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. In both these novels, the authors are immigrants and their protagonists are the immigrants like them. Thapa is a Nepali and now resides in Canada and Mukherjee was an Indian and lived her life in America.

## THE CONCEPT OF TRANSNATIONALISM

Various scholars have defined transnationalism in different ways. Their views and ideas on it help the readers to understand the term clearly. Despite some differences in their definitions, there lies a common notion of crossing the boundary of a nation. Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Bash & Cristina Balnc-Szanton (1995) define it as

The process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement. Immigrants who build such social fields are designated 'transmigrants'. Transmigrants develop and maintain multiple relations – familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political that span borders. (p. 1)

This definition clarifies that transnationalism is the product of immigration. The immigrant creates a social field through which s/he gets connected with the country of origin and the place of settlement.

Schiller et al. further define transnationalism as "the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies and settlement" (as cited in Mitchell, 1997, p. 168). The immigrants have to adjust in the place of settlement by following multiple social relations that are completely new for them.

To understand transnationalism clearly some other definitions are to be studied. Nelson Shake (2013) describes transnationalism in connection with the loss of the centrality of the nation as he claims,

As a large-scale concept, transnationalism typically refers to a world where political and economic intersections span national boundaries. Thus, national borders become porous and permeable, and the nation loses some of its centrality as the demarcating point, around which global interactions are defined. Such changes ultimately affect individual citizens. Multiple academic disciplines have examined this evolution of global society for some time. Historians, economists, cultural theorists, philosophers, and anthropologists all have dissected and analyzed transnationalism. Literary studies, though, has entered the discussion only briefly – current literary discourse is still largely rooted in dialogues of nationalism and postcolonialism and continues to try to exist in a world where cultures can be easily separated by nation. (p. 8)

Shake explains that transnationalism refers to crossing national boundaries. He regrets that today's literary discourse is still not giving importance to it. It is rather loitering among the old theories like nationalism and postcolonialism.

Transnationalism is not only the migration of the people; it is also the flowing of other things like culture, language, beliefs, etc. Rainer Baubock (2002) defines it in a bit different way. He quotes:

The term "transnational" applies to human activities and social institutions that extend across national borders. The very definition of transnationalism refers therefore to states as bounded political entities whose borders are

crossed by flows of people, money or information and are spanned by social networks, organization or fields. (p. 2, 3)

Transnationalism studies human activities and institutions related to them that cross national boundaries. Everything is in motion.

Moreover, the term ‘transnationalism’ has some common sharing with cosmopolitanism and universalism. All of them take the world as a common home. Mentioning the same idea, Emma Brouwer (2015) pens:

An interpretation of identity that goes beyond those national borders, that is fluid, allows for identification with several nations and cultures as is therefore more useful when thinking about migrant experience. One of the fields of study where fluidity and borders come together is called transnationalism. Together with phenomenon such as globalization and cosmopolitanism, the study of transnationalism shows a raised awareness of the permeability of national borders [...] Transnationalism thus disputes the idea that national borders define and delimit people’s identification, and emphasizes how we relate across, and beyond borders to other people, places, and cultures. This idea in itself is not necessarily newly introduced by transnational scholars, because theoretical frameworks such as cosmopolitanism and universalism have similar beliefs, and the ever-increasing worldwide economy is proof of global proliferation. (p. 3, 4)

Brouwer opines that transnationalism is the study of migrant experience, fluidity and multiple borders coming together. Several nations and cultures mix together resulting in hybridity and this is what transnationalism studies.

Transnationalism is a new term that has been used and studied in literary discourse. Before it, the importance was given to nationalism and nation-state. There is a long history of nationalism but not of transnationalism. About the history of transnationalism, Simon Macdonald (2013) writes,

The first appearance of ‘transnational’ in a work of academic history has been credited to Laurence Veysey in 1979, writing in the context of United States history, but this intervention seems to have found little immediate echo. More widespread deployment of the term can be dated from the early 1990s, when a series of major journals began to publish forums and special issues discussing transnational history, with the study of United States history again, being especially prominent. (p. 4)

It means the word ‘transnational’ is a new word which has been used time and again since 1990s. The journal writing has been enhancing the development of transnationalism with the study of American history.

The study of transnationalism in any research work is the result of the growing migration. With the increment in the number of immigrants, there is the increment in their experiences too and thus there arise multiple dimensions of transnationalism. Steven Vertovec (1999) too expresses the similar idea in the following words:

Since the early 1990s research on transnational dimensions of migrant experience has expanded. There is now a substantial, and growing body of literature concerning the ways migrants’ lives are affected by sustained connections with people and institutions in places of origin or elsewhere in diaspora (family obligations and marriage patterns, remittances, political engagement, religious practice, regular visits, media consumption and so on). (p. 2)

Vertovec also agrees on the flourishing of transnationalism in 1990s. The use of transnationalism in literary discourse is growing now with the increment in migration and the issues related to it.

Sometimes diaspora and transnationalism are synonymously used. They carry some differences. In *Diaspora and Transnationalism*, Thomas Faist et al. (2010) state the differences between these two terms as given below:

Although both terms refer to cross-border processes, diaspora has been often used to denote religion or national groups living outside an (imagined) homeland, whereas transnationalism is often used both more narrowly – to refer to migrants' durable ties across countries – and, more widely, to capture not only communities, but all sorts of social formations, such as transnationally active networks, groups and organizations. Moreover, while diaspora and transnationalism are used interchangeably, the two terms reflect different intellectual genealogies. (p. 9)

Diaspora and transnationalism are two distinct terms that are used to analyze the migration process. Diaspora has a religious and national connection whereas transnationalism has a connection with crossing the border of countries.

Not only this, transnationalism has a relation with assimilation and acculturation, too. People assimilate with the new culture to adjust in the place of migration. Regarding this, Peter Kivistö suggests,

I would like to propose that the relationship between transnationalism and assimilation ought to be seen in the same light as the relationship between assimilation and ethnic pluralism and multiculturalism [...] This is because at the moment the transnational immigrants are working to maintain hardened connections, they are also engaged in the process of acculturating to the host society. (p. 571)

Kivistö finds similarity between assimilation and transnationalism and recommends others to see these two terms under the same light. He also says that assimilation and acculturation go hand in hand.

## TRANSNATIONALISM AND LITERARY DISCOURSE

Transnationalism has got its high importance especially in migration literature. Writers prefer to write literary texts including more than one nation. Migration plays a key role in their works. Sometimes the authors themselves write about their experience in the foreign land. For instance, the novels by Thapa and Mukherjee are the product of immigrant authors who write connecting their country of origin and the country of settlement. Critics highlight the importance of transnationalism in different ways.

Transnationalism as a theory is less used and talked in literary works. But it is important to study it frequently so that the experiences of migrants could be understood. Sophie Mamattah (n.d.) writes, “The value of transnationalism theory is apparent in cases where an immigrant group is disparate [...] Viewing aspects of migrancy, psychological or cultural, through the lens of transnational theory generates insights into migrant experience which might otherwise be overlooked” (p. 1, 3). Mamattah means to say that the study of transnational theory helps to understand the experience of migrants which otherwise might be undermined.

The borders get displaced because of the globalization and many fusions occur with this. Such fusions can be clearly seen in the literature of globalization that occupies multiple nations in it. S.P. Moslund (2010) highlights the features of the literature of globalization in the following words,

Reading the literature of globalization, the whole world appears to be on the move [...] It seems that we are witnessing a massive international and transnational defeat of gravity, an immense uprooting of origin and belonging, an immense displacement of borders, with all the clashes, meetings, fusions and mixings it entails, reshaping the cultural landscapes of the world's

countries and cities. (p. 1, 2)

Moslund asserts that the world is moving and to understand the movement, transnational study is required. There is the reshaping of nationalism.

The social sciences and cultural studies have started focusing transnational elements. They study and do research work on how cultures get mixed and how a new culture emerges out of the fusion. Nina Schiller, et al. (1995) postulate, "The recent use of the adjective 'transnational' in the social sciences and cultural studies draws together the various meanings of the words so that the restructuring of capital globally is seen linked to the diminished significance of national boundaries in the production and distribution of objects and ideas and people" (p. 49). 'Transnational' has various meanings in various fields. Despite its connection with numerous fields, it has the sole meaning, that is, to cross the national boundaries.

Vertovec (1999) underlines the importance of transnational study. He asserts, "Transnationalism represents a topic of rapidly growing interest witnessed in the proliferation of academic articles, university seminars and conferences devoted to exploring its nature and contours" (p. 2). Immigrant experience has been the matter of interest for the scholars. So they use this theory in academic articles, academic seminars and conferences.

Paul Jay (2010) has the similar view about the study of transnationalism in literary discourse. He positions literary studies within the process of a transnational turn, a process that suggests new paradigm for the study of literature that breaks down the once more common nation-state model (para. 1). He claims that transnationalism in the literary discourse breaks the nation-state model as it goes crossing the boundary of a particular nation and state.

Ian Tyrell (2009) indicates, "National identities have been defined in relation to other identities, including the transnational phenomena that impinge upon the nation as it is constructed and reconstructed repeatedly" (p. 474). In order to define national identities, one has to connect them with transnational phenomena. The nationality is constructed and reconstructed due to migration and transnationalism attempts to see this aspect in literary discourse.

Migration has given birth to transnational communities. These communities help the immigrants to know the world in a place. Faist et al. (2010) highlight the importance of transnationalism in this way,

A transnational community links the global to the whole range of greatly different local networking places, without hierarchy between these different hubs. The role of the border is very much curtailed by a migrant population whose essential element of identity is knowing how to first cross the border itself, pass through the border area and then live outside it, whilst avoiding expulsion. (p. 43)

The world has been taken as a global village due to the easy access to the other nations and nationalities. The border is crossed each and every day without getting expulsion from the country of origin and it is very important to study about those immigrants in the literature.

The expatriate writers have some sense of loss as they are not able to have their physical presence in their homeland. So they imagine their homeland in order to compensate the loss. By creating an imaginary homeland in their works, they give birth to an alternative world in their fictions. They create the characters and the plot according to their imagination to connect themselves with their homeland. In *Imaginary Homeland*, Salman Rushdie (1992) states,

It may be that writers in my position, exiles, or migrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our

physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but visible ones, imaginary homeland, Indians of the mind. (p. 10)

The physical alienation of the immigrant writers from their homeland makes them have a sense of loss. In order to console themselves, they create their imaginary homeland in fictions.

## CONCLUSION

There are various theories applied in literary discourse but transnationalism is a new theory that could be used especially to understand migrant literature. Migration is an unavoidable trend of modernism. People migrate for many reasons. They may migrate due to opportunities, war, facilities, etc. The world has been shrunk into a small village due to means of communication and transportation. The scientific tools and technologies have contributed a lot for the globalization process. In this kind of situation, literature has also expanded its horizon towards the broader border of the world, not just of a single nation. Authors have started writing the transnational texts with their experience of living in foreign countries. Writing of a single nation may invite less number of readers in comparison to the writing that involves multiple nations. Thus, it is very important to write transnational books and texts to invite the larger group of the people including immigrants to read them. It is also important to use this emerging theory to analyze hybridity, assimilation, acculturation and the creation of an alternative world so as to enjoy and understand migration literature.

Transnationalism is a bit different from nationalism. Scholars have been studying about nationalism since past. The concept of transnationalism is a new one. Due to the increasing trend of migration and the changes brought by it, the study of transnational aspect has been the appealing subject of present time.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is based on the draft chapter of my dissertation entitled “Immigrants Writing about Immigrants: A Transnational Reading on Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* and Manjushree Thapa’s *Seasons of Flight*,” which was submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, Nepal in 2017.

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