



Rethinking Transnationalism in the Era of Globalization

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Abstract

This paper examines the growing influence of transnationalism on a number of academics, sociologists, anthropologists, economists and political theorists for the last three decades. Critically analyzing ideas expressed by some prominent research scholars such as Steven Vertovec, Patricia Clavin, Masao Miyoshi, Daniel Mato and Paul Jay, this paper aims at exploring the concepts and developments of this new field that has been closely linked with globalization and deterritorialisation. By assessing the prominence of transnationalism in various disciplines, this paper reaches the conclusion that literature, like culture, society, economy and politics, cannot remain exempt from the waves of global forces as literature in today's world is more an expression of transnational encounters than the record of 'national' experiences alone.

Keywords: Culture, deterritorialisation, globalization, literature, national, transnational

Introduction

Transnationalism, as the term suggests, refers to a concept that defines the categories of language, literature, culture, economy, and politics, among many other disciplines, not as specific to any geographical location. The categories as such apparently display local character, but they are as open to as many practitioners as possible irrespective of their national identity and that too merely by virtue of being a citizen of a particular

nation-state. The issues of globalization, deterritorialization, and immigration, particularly in the past three decades, have constantly loosened the tight-looking national boundaries. Thus, they have given rise to an ambience that yields a transnational zone where the local and the global imbricate and, more often than not, result in eclectic character brushing aside the now traditional-looking singular character.

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In general, the notion of transnationalism basically relates to distinct types of activities and communities that illustrate transnational interests and allegiances. This transnational characteristic differs from what is usually meant by “international” and which designates activities setting in contact official bodies—states, universities, associations or parties—belonging to different states. While by “transnational” one also understands relations that run across states and societies, this term focuses on people and groups and do not necessarily refer to official bodies. It conveys, at the difference from “international”, an association with a condition of dispersal in different states and societies of social entities and actors that share an allegiance to some common attributes. Though the researches on transnationalism are the quite recent phenomena, the term as such was first used by Randolph S. Bourne (1916) in his essay “Trans-National America” emphasizes the importance of the American immigrants to maintain their culture. Criticizing the homogenizing tendency of the ‘traditional’ Americans, Bourne argues:

No reverberatory effect of the great war has caused American public opinion more solicitude than the failure of the “melting-pot.” The discovery of diverse nationalistic feelings among our great alien population has come to most people as an intense shock. It has brought out the unpleasant inconsistencies of our traditional beliefs. We have had to watch hard-hearted old Brahmins virtuously indignant at the spectacle of the immigrant refusing to be melted, while they jeer at patriots

like Mary Antin who write about our “forefathers.” We have had to listen to publicists who express themselves as stunned by the evidence of vigorous traditionalistic and cultural movements in this country among Germans, Scandinavians, Bohemians and Poles, while in the same breath they insist that the alien shall be forcibly assimilated to that Anglo-Saxon tradition which they unquestionably label “American.” (p. 248)

As Bourne in the quote above insists, America, though had already become a multicultural nation, still believes in the monolithic Anglo-Saxon tradition and expects other cultures to merge into the mainstream culture though the concept of ‘melting-pot’ has failed.

Bourne further stresses the necessity for any nation-state like America to emerge out of intended aloofness from Europe and other parts of the world in the name of self-proclaimed autonomy. As the world order dismantled by the Second World War demands a new dimension in relationship, America, Bourne believes, should start afresh in the vortex of cultures. In his words:

The war has shown America to be unable, though isolated geographically and politically from a European world-situation, to remain aloof and irresponsible. She is a wandering star in a sky dominated by two colossal constellations of states. Can she not work out some position of her own, some life of being in, yet not quite of, this seething and embroiled European world? This is her only hope and promise. A trans-nationality of all the

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nations, it is spiritually impossible for her to pass into the orbit of any one. It will be folly to hurry herself into a premature and sentimental nationalism, or to emulate Europe and play fast and loose with the forces that drag into war. No Americanization will fulfill this vision which does not recognize the uniqueness of this trans-nationalism of ours. The Anglo-Saxon attempt to fuse will only create enmity and distrust. . . (p. 255)

What Bourne avers here is the necessity on the part of America to realize the changing global scenario and not to choose between what he calls 'premature and sentimental nationalism' and 'emulation of Europe,' but rather to actualize the uniqueness of American trans-nationalism and act accordingly. It is therefore Bourne, in the early twentieth century, has clearly pointed out the national categories that were gradually weakening one after the other.

This paper attempts to seek an answer of a prominent question in today's academia: how to approach literatures that are overwhelmingly affected by transnational mobilities of the subjects. It endeavours to explore what theorists in today's scholarship offer to interact with the texts that are abundant in cross-cultural interactions in transnational spaces. In this process, this paper scrutinizes some prominent scholars and their opinions on transnationalism in general and literary transnationalism in particular. It would have been ideal if this paper could incorporate reading of a text from this perspective as a case in point; however, because of the limitation of space in a paper, this part has been left out for the time being. The next paper

shall do justice to this much-needed analysis of a text from the perspective of literary transnationalism.

Transnationalism and Globalization

Already in use much earlier though, the use of the term transnationalism got momentum after the second half of the twentieth century with an increasing expansion of the concept of globalization expedited by the eruption of information technology. As in other disciplines, the growth of interest in transnationalism coincided with escalating concerns surrounding the many forms and processes of globalization. Moreover, in anthropology, attention to transnationalism and globalization entailed important attempts to re-think notions of culture in light of global flows and modes of deterritorialization. Clifford Geertz's (advocacy that anthropological theory and methods should address the growing complexity surrounding contemporary conditions of diversity had already set the tone for studies on transnationalism. "...We have to come to such a point in the moral history of the world that," Geertz says, "We are obliged to think about such diversity rather differently than we have been used to thinking about it. . ." (p. 272). The concepts like that of Geertz here provided the researchers with a paradigm to contemplate the increasing diversity which eventually resulted in researches on transnationalism.

Since 'Transnationalism,' as claimed by Vertovec (2009), refers to multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states, the study on the emergence of the areas like global village, global economy, global politics, global literature and global citizen is worthy of

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consideration. As we can hardly remain glued to any isolated territory being cut off from the new wave that cuts across the borders of the nation-states, we need to be mindful of the fact that our particular territory is always already a zone of transnational practices. Vertovec (2008) posits:

Today myriad systems of relationship, exchange and mobility function intensively and in real time while being spread across the world. New technologies, especially involving telecommunications, serve to connect such networks. Despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent), many forms of association have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common arena of activity. In some instances, transnational forms and processes serve to speed up or exacerbate historical patterns of activity, in others they represent arguably new forms of human interaction. Transnational practices and their consequent configurations of power are shaping the world of the twenty-first century. (para. 1.)

As Vertovec in the statements above narrates, the twenty-first century world is more a new field of networks, thanks to telecommunications, that orchestrates multiple events of transnational practices allowing the flow of ideas to influence, and even intervene on some occasions, the regular practices of a particular location than the one in the previous century that usually responded to such activities with hostility.

Talking about evident existence of transnational societies and hinting at the new challenges transnationalism as a theoretical concept has fostered, Ludger Pries (2008) states, “. . . The main task is currently no longer to show that transnational social phenomena exist, but rather, as most researchers in this field agree, to demonstrate that the successful establishment of transnationalism as a valuable concept has led to new theoretical and empirical challenges” (p. 1). As R. Radhakrishnan (2008) rightly puts, theory can be legitimately worldly only if it states and elaborates the conditions of its non-acceptance of the world, transnationalism, despite its pervasive existence in the world, has to endeavour to exempt itself from universalizing tendency and thus has to get rid of the vague and indistinct use of the term.

One of the phrases the theorists of transnationalism have used with high frequency is ‘border crossings,’ as it “suggests a consideration of how a particular phenomenon passed over the nation as a whole, how it passed across the nation, seeing how it bumped over natural and manmade features, or how it passed through, transforming and being transformed” (David Thelan, qtd. in Patricia Clavin, 2006, p. 423). Though this nature of border crossing is more applicable to culture, other areas of human practices, literature being one of them, also equally cross the border ‘transforming and being transformed’ in tandem with culture.

However, as culture, unlike economy and politics in the past, occupied the prima facie of transnational practices in the last two decades of the twentieth century, the problem we face today, as claimed by

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Masao Miyoshi in “A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation State,” is “how to understand today’s global configuration of power and culture that is both similar and different vis-à-vis the historical metropolitan-colonial paradigm” (p. 728). In the postcolonial and/or neocolonial era, it is not the economic but the cultural logic, to use Fredrick Jameson’s phrase, that powerfully functions. The bourgeois capitals in the industrialized world “still make use of the nation-state structure, of course, but their power and energy reside in a different locus” (p. 732).

The practitioners, if not theorists, of transnational activities aim at creating an improbable looking community marked by homogeneity and endeavour to blur the boundaries fostered by natural differences (natural in the sense of their cultural and geographical variations). They believe it is only through the blurring of the boundaries as such that the exchange of communication along with other variables like products (TVs and Computers for instance) has become possible in today’s world. The products as such are not merely the outcome of different raw materials; they rather are the cultural products in real sense. As Miyoshi rightly claims, they are produced by the transnational class. With a view to creating a global community, the agents of transnational class, Miyoshi argues, urge:

Cultural eccentricities are to be avoided, if not banned altogether. National history and culture are not to intrude or not to be asserted oppositionally or even dialectically. They are merely variants of one “universal”-as in a giant theme

park or shopping mall. Culture will be kept to museums, and the museums, exhibitions, and theatrical performances will be swiftly appropriated by tourism and other forms of commercialism. No matter how subversive at the beginning, variants will be appropriated aggressively by branches of consumerism, such as entertainment and tourism, as were rap music, graffiti art, or even classical music and high arts. (p. 747)

As Miyoshi argues above in the quote, in a world that believes more in commonalities than in differences cultural eccentricities or idiosyncrasies are no more the barriers in the act of exchanging any national product-literary or non-literary. The problem in such a world is not the transnationalization of economy, politics, culture, history and literature but to maintain balance between what is national and what is transnational.

Transnationalism as a Multidisciplinary Concept

In today’s world, transnationalism has become so pervasive that “across numerous disciplines,” states Vertovec, “there is a widespread interest in economic, social and political linkages between people, places and institutions crossing nation-state borders and spanning the world” (*Transnationalism*1). As an evidence of widespread research on transnationalism we can refer to more than two dozens of research books published by Routledge alone on the subject. As Vertovec informs, the books on transnationalism focus on diverse areas such as migration, identities and citizenship, transnational value chains and fashion, transnational

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feminist approaches in literature, transnational policy and security, or regional approaches to transnationalism in the European Union, the Islamic world, or Asia. It is, therefore, transnationalism provides a significant theoretical and methodological basis to the study and analysis of a number of human activities including literary productions.

As transnationalism captures a world of fluid borders where exchange of goods, ideas (mostly through literature and mass communication), and people frequently takes place, the boundaries that seemingly bind people and their belongings have so significantly loosened over the years that the innumerable pores formed in the borders naturally let 'national' phenomena transform into transnational. This process of becoming transnational from national, say Smith and Guarnizo (1998), has two major dimensions. They claim:

Transnationalism is clearly in the air. Expansion of transnational capital and mass media to even the remotest of hinterlands has provoked a spate of discourses on "globalization," "transnationalism," and the "crisis of the nation state." A core theme in these discourses is the penetration of national cultures and political systems by global and local driving forces. The nation-state is seen as weakened "from above" by transnational capital, global media, and emergent supra-national political institutions. "From below" it faces the decentering "local" resistances of the informal economy, ethnic nationalism, and grassroots activism. . . (p. 3)

As stated in the quote above we notice how a nation-state faces a tough

challenge to safeguard its borders. 'From above,' loosely from superstructure, transnational capital, global media, and supra-national political institutions and 'from below,' loosely from base structure, "local" resistances of the informal economy, ethnic nationalism, and grassroots activism have been constantly weakening the national borders.

Transnationalism in Literature and Culture

In social sciences, transnationalism (that primarily focuses on migrant transnationalism in recent years), as Vertovec believes, is a social morphology that usually refers to a type of consciousness, a mode of cultural reproduction, an avenue of capital, a site of political engagement, and a reconstruction of 'place' or 'locality'. In literary and cultural studies, however, the recent developments of this field have been "stimulated by critiques of the area studies model still prominent in these disciplinary areas, developments in postcolonial criticism, and renewed interest in comparative literature and translation studies" (p. 3). With the concept regarding the categories of literature-and of course culture too-such as British, American, French or German (that once took pride on being nationalistic) being criticized for having represented predominantly White Christian male ideology, the focus today has reasonably shifted to the category called world literature is-à-vis culture.

The paradigm shifts from American Studies to Asian Studies or African Studies or Non-Western Studies or even Transnational Literary Studies is a clear indication of an outward movement, across national and linguistic boundaries and away from national

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frameworks, eventually heading towards the common ground of area studies and comparative literature. Rey Chow (2006) notes that the term “comparative” functions increasingly “in tandem or interchangeably with such words as ‘diverse,’ ‘global,’ ‘international,’ ‘transnational’” to define a broader framework for literary studies than the narrowly national (p. 72). Transnational studies, thus, displaces the narrow national approach of analyzing literary works, genres and histories, and relocates them within a larger, global literary context.

Pier Paolo Frassinelli, Ronit Frenkel and David Watson (2011), in their seminal work on borders and transnational subjects, believe “Transnational narratives enable reflection upon the nature of a world in which national boundaries are no longer assumed as natural” (p. 7). By ‘traversing’ transnationalism, they seek “models of transnational relationships, whether operating on a planetary or more modest scale, to appear as figures of thought and contestation” (p. 3). While discussing transnationalism, therefore, we should be mindful of the fact Patricia Clavin (2005) puts forth, “A honeycomb binds, but it also contains hollowed-out spaces where organizations, individuals and ideas can wither away to be replaced by new groups, people and innovations”. She adds that when we contemplate transnationalism in literature, our emphasis is on “how we read literary texts when the nation-state loses its centrality as an interpretative framework” (9).

Jahan Ramazani (2009) argues, transnationalism is a move beyond disciplinary reading based on nationalist perspective. For him, it is an act of

deterritorializing nation-based history, criticism and a dialogic energy that mixes different culture and histories in order to reshape literary field to negotiate with global and transnational movements of people and communities. Eliot, Pound, Plath, Yeats, Lawrence, Joyce, McKay, Rushdie and many other canons, Ramazani says, are not just modern and nationalist writers but they are people of transnationalism, celebrating cross-cultural linkages, hybridization, transnational practices and multicultural worldviews. Ramazani’s ideas can consolidate on Rebecca L. Walkowitz’s (2006) following ideas:

WHAT DOES IT mean, today, to be a British novelist, or even an English writer? At the beginning of the twenty-first century, someone who wins a prize for British fiction may have been born outside Great Britain, may be a citizen of Great Britain who lives elsewhere, or may live in Great Britain while remaining a foreign national; a writer may win a prize for English fiction but English may not have been the language in which the award-winning book was first composed; a writer who wins an English fiction prize may also win, in England, a foreign literature prize as well. . . (p. 1)

From the assertion above we can sense blurring of the boundaries between what is national and what is transnational as literature in today’s world is no more geography or language or culture-specific.

Conrad, Joyce and Woolf from Britain, Hemingway, Pound and Eliot from America, Rushdie and Gosh from the Indian subcontinent are some of the notable writers who significantly defy

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the notion of writing that is marked by 'national' categories. Rushdie and the writers of his kind, thinking and acting beyond the local, "have imagined collective affinities in retreat from the nation, or have conceived of the center from the perspective of the margins, to name just a few of the cultural practices that the term "cosmopolitan" has come to designate" (Walkowitz, p. 8). Talking about his controversial work *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie (2010) maintains that the novel "celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs" (p. 394). He disagrees with the opinion that 'mix-up' causes the loss of purity and argues that the novel is "the love-song to our mongrel selves" (p. 394). He further argues that in today's world where "we all are, black and brown and white, leaking into one another" preserving something pure is just a fancy (p. 394).

"The function of the writer," Jean Paul Sartre (1988) proposes, "is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it's all about" (p. 36). He further argues, "Committed writing depends on the correctness of one's topic, whose relevance to international affairs and other matters of political urgency should be obvious and compelling" (p. 40). So, for Sartre, committed writing is transnational writing which deals with the issues and concerns of the people living in different parts of the world, social facts that elicit our attention and political identities that cut across national borders. It is, therefore, serious writing in today's world deals with the global issues, be it social, political, cultural or

economic.

Paul Jay (2010), one of the pioneer thinkers to align literature with transnationalism, contends "Since the rise of critical theory in the 1970s, nothing has reshaped literary and cultural studies more than its embrace of transnationalism" (p. 1). He believes that the influence of transnationalism has not only complicated the nationalist paradigm but has also transformed the nature of locations we study. In his opinion, this new lens has "focused our attention in forms of cultural production that take place in the liminal spaces between real and imagined borders" (p.1). As migration has been a common phenomenon among the people all over the globe, literatures produced by these migrants themselves on the one hand and by any other writers about such migrants on the other richly capture the transnational encounters of these subjects. Since "every culture is always shaped by other cultures," Jay maintains, "agency has more to do with the intelligent and imaginative negotiation of cross-cultural contact than with avoiding such contact" (p. 3). In his words, agency has to be more concerned with negotiating cross-cultural contact as one culture shapes the other. Since English literature and those who study it have been deeply affected by the forces of globalization, scholars like Jay have developed a theoretical and methodological framework viz. Literary Transnationalism for studying these effects.

Jay (2020), consolidating on his earlier work, believes that since the last few decades, both literary production and its study have moved beyond the traditional confines of the nation. He writes, "While literary works have always traveled, and

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while literature long predates the rise of modern nation states, transnational literature has accelerated dramatically in our age of rapid globalization” (p. 1). In this context, the existing theories or methods cannot do justice to analyze transnational literature; therefore, as Jay believes, a new lens has been developed. Elaborating on this challenge, Jay argues:

One of the challenges of approaching transnational literature is that . . . it can be conceptualized in two ways. One involves understanding that storytelling, poetry, drama, and the literary texts that embody them have always been mobile, and long before there was such a thing as nation-states. From this perspective, the focus is not on transnational literature as a kind of literature with a set of inherent qualities that make it transnational. Rather, it highlights and tracks the transnational patterns of production, circulation, and reception that have enabled certain literary works to transcend the historical and geographical limits of their origins, making them significant in a global way. Transnational literature, from this point of view, is not rooted in any particular historical time period, and there are no particular subjects of formal devices that distinguish it from literature in general. From this perspective, transnational literature comprises texts in any form about any subject that have achieved global and historical importance. . . (p. 2)

Because transnational literature is neither rooted in any particular historical time period nor does it have any distinct features that discern it from literature in general, it can entail texts from almost every discipline. According to Jay, any

texts that have achieved ‘global’ and ‘historical’ significance can come under the rubric of transnational literature.

Conclusion

As literary works, like flow of goods and culture, also travel from the place of their origin to different parts of the globe they leave an indelible effect on those who are exposed to them. It is from the incorporation of the texts produced in a particular geographical and cultural location into the university curriculum in multiple disciplines to the immediate and long term effect on both creative and critical writing that literary transnationalism has spread its rhizome in almost all parts of the globe. Neither Nepali nor Indian universities confine themselves to what we used to take pride on teaching Nepali or Indian nor do writers in Nepal or India confine themselves to Nepaliness or Indianness in their works. Moreover, literary analyses, thanks to cultural studies, almost always transcend national boundaries even the text being discussed is Nepali or Indian. Rather than being content with new critical or formalistic mode of interpreting a text, the practitioners tend to make a new historical or Marxist or postcolonial or feminist reading of a text putting socio-political-cultural milieu in the backdrop. In writing, the writers, orienting themselves to global incidents and experiences and practices, elicit materials from various locations and exploit them. Thus, if nations are, as Benedict Anderson posits, “imagined communities” and are constituted by cultural artifacts, thinking of any writing as purely ‘national’ sounds too narrow and obsolete in the world that has hardly anything entirely encircled by national boundaries.

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