



How it all began? : A brief introduction to Asian American literature

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Research Snippets

Short Overview of Asian American Immigration A precise understanding of what constitutes the literature of immigration in America, its modes of representation, and its themes requires a clear knowledge of the history of immigration, the nation's attitude towards immigrants and its cultural mythology that leads to the formation of the so-called American national character. Immigration to the United States occurred in three great waves. Immigrants who came to the U.S. in the mid-nineteenth century were mostly from northern and western Europe, specifically the British Isles, including Ireland, Germany, and Scandinavia. Assimilated into the melting pot of America's immigrant populations, these Europeans contributed significantly to the nation's economic and social growth. However, public attitude toward immigrants in America began to change in the latter part of the nineteenth century with the arrival of millions of poor and uneducated people from southern and eastern Europe, specifically from Italy, Greece, and the Slavic countries. These immigrants not only dressed differently but also followed religions that were different from the Protestant majority of the native-born American contemporaries. Consequently, they were considered inferior and made into victims of prejudice and racism in America (Payant xvii).

Significantly, the liberal social and political climate of the American sixties saw some major changes taking place in the immigration policies allowing many more immigrants, even from non-European countries. During this period, immigrants arrived in the United States mainly from underdeveloped nations such as Mexico, China, Vietnam, India, Poland, Ukraine, El Salvador, Ireland, the Philippines, and the Dominican Republic. With this third wave of immigration, the gap between the native-born Americans and immigrants grew wider. Coming from non-European backgrounds, carrying a wide variety of cultural baggage, practising various religions, conversing in their native language, following different customs and, most importantly, being "coloured" these immigrants had almost no similarity with their American counterparts.

These newer immigrants differed from the immigrants of the earlier waves in their wish to retain ties to their native lands and cultures, rather than completely renounce their ethnicity for the sake of assimilation. Unlike the earlier immigrants who were forced to sever all ties with their home, these newer immigrants used modern communications and technological advancement to retain connections with their native countries through brief but frequent visits. Significantly, this new "transnationalism" of the newer immigrants which allowed them to simultaneously enjoy the benefits of dual citizenship and a multicultural lifestyle in the United States complicated their process of assimilation. Consequently, many of these people preferred to live in ethnic enclaves, follow the customs of their native lands, and reject certain aspects of the American lifestyle that they thought were damaging their families, even while considering themselves American.

In order to understand the political significance of Asian American literature, it is necessary to trace the emergence of the category of immigrants called "Asian American." Asians in America often considered as representatives of distant and exotic civilizations, suppliers of cheap labour, racially corrupting presences, and unsolicited invaders became a visible threat to the national character of America when their population started growing. Ready to work for meagre returns, Asian Americans soon began to undermine white Americans' job security. Significantly, the seemingly useful categorization of Asian Americans into a "model minority" is, in reality, reductive and pernicious in unacceptably simplifying the experiences of Asian Americans and also creating divisions between Asian Americans and other coloured groups of America. In order to counter this adverse and abridged discursive history, several Asian American writers, artists, activists and historians developed an alternative understanding of their community comprising its diverse geographies, journeys, and experiences that resist simplistic representation.

The category "Asian American" emerged in the history of U.S. immigration in the late 1960s and 1970s with the arrival of immigrants specifically from East Asia (China, Korea, and Japan) and the Philippines. The later addition of groups from Southeast Asia, South Asia, and West Asia both problematized and developed the field of Asian American writing. Paradoxically, the terrain of Asian American writing that attempts to challenge the marginalization of Asian Americans within the U.S. history, politics, and culture culminated in creating divisions within its own domain. The early Asian Americans who were mainly Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino sought full and unquestioned membership in the U.S. body politic. Ironically, if on the one hand, their desire to be acknowledged as a part of the U.S. was being fulfilled by the retraction of exclusionary immigration laws, on the other, they themselves were disowning immigrants from other parts of Asia by confining the notion of being Asian American mostly to immigrants from East Asia and Philippines. However, despite the early Asian Americans' attempt to tighten the boundaries of their domain, the arrival of a growing number of immigrants from South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and, later on, refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos soon began to challenge such a narrow definition.

Asian American Literature and Literary Criticism

Much like the U.S. immigration policy, the literature of immigration in America has undergone several transformations reflecting the historical and social contexts from which it emerged. In the later decades of the twentieth century, immigrant literature evolved from being multicultural to transnational in the hands of a new wave of immigrant writers who celebrated and nurtured their ethnicity. One must remember that Asian American literature does not merely refer to artistically constructed texts by American authors of Asian ancestry. It also refers to a counter discourse developed by early writers such as Sui Sin Far, Carlos Bulosan, and John Okada who wrote before the Asian American movement of the 1960s. The later writers of the tradition such as Onoto Watanna, Jade Snow Wong, Amy Tan and Bharati Mukherjee have received a more ambivalent response from the critics of Asian American literature. While the former set of writers were quite explicit in acknowledging ethnicity and confronting discriminations, the later ones embraced the political ideologies of their literary antecedents and reinvented those systems to suit the times. However, regardless of their differences from the early Asian American writers, the works of later authors continue to share the preoccupations of the earlier writings such as an emphasis on resistance, and identity issues.

Along with the literature, Asian American literary criticism has also undergone a transition from an ideologically driven emergent phase that lasted from the 1970s to the 1990s to the institutionally-driven established phase of criticism. When the civil rights movement of the 1960s gave birth to the notion of "new ethnicity" in the 1970s, ethnicity suddenly became tolerable and even preferable in some circles. Sociologists such as Michael Novak, Nathan

Glazer and Daniel Moynihan disparaged the "myth of the melting pot," and advocated the need to acknowledge "the ethnic pattern [as] American, more American than [the] assimilationist," for America to become a diverse but collective society (Novak 71, Glazer and Moynihan xxii-xxiv). Besides the sociologists, several literary critics began to express their interest in studying ethnic literature, including the literature of immigration. For instance, Werner Sollors and William Boelhower argued that literature of immigration had much in common with the mainstream American culture than its authors would agree. In 1987, William Boelhower in *Through a Glass Darkly* claimed that in the United States ethnicity is flexible rather than reified by a cultural essence (31-32). Werner Sollors further underscored the dynamics of ethnicity in *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986) and *The Invention of Ethnicity* (1989), in arguing that ethnicity is continuously reinvented and reinterpreted by not only each generation of immigrants but also by each individual immigrant. Gradually literary critics developed a particular interest in the works of young writers from the "new" immigrant groups, comprising mostly of non-European and non-white stock, which had been immigrating to America since 1965. This newly developed branch of Asian American literature sought to address key issues regarding the assimilatory pattern of immigrants in America. The impression of uprooted and alien immigrants arriving in the strange land of America to be thrown together into a stew pot, yet not assimilating into the American society until their second generation, is a theme that is found in many works of recent non-European immigrants.

It is not surprising that authors of Asian American literature directed their critique mostly towards the nation-state to which they desired to belong to but which refused to acknowledge them. The co-editors of *An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, one of the first works to demand recognition of the growing number of Asians in the United States and acknowledgment of their contributions to the nation, often expressed their disdain over Asian American writers' attempt to inveigle the attention of mainstream American white-readers by using formulaic or stereotypical elements in their fictions. The first major academic work to outline Asian American literature was Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and their Social Contexts*. As an early critic, Kim played a significant role in establishing Asian American literature as an important corpus of work worthy of scholarly attention. In contrast to the rebellious and polemical language of *An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, Kim's book retooled the arguments of Asian American literary critics into academic conventions of methodology and discourse.

The anti-exclusionary dynamics of claiming America marked the emergent phase of Asian American literature. Asian American writers and critics harped on the importance of recording the experiences of Asian American immigrants which had been, for a long time, excluded from American history and culture. Most of the prominent works of Asian American literary critics that emerged after Kim's book, covertly or overtly agreed on the fixing of a national boundary for Asian American literary studies. Sau-ling Wong's *Reading Asian American Literature* that offers a close and textured reading of some of the key Asian American literary works is the best possible representation of this strategy. Some other notable works that defined Asian American literature in terms of national boundaries were David Leiwei Li's *Imagining the Nation*, Jinqi Ling's *Narrating Nationalisms*, and Rachel C. Lee's *The Americas of Asian American Literature*. Though critics, then, were mostly trying to limit the field of Asian American literature nationally, the specifications of an Asian American writer and the privileges and limitations imposed on a writer by such specifications continued to be debated. In this respect, Susan Koshy's focus on the transnational aspects of Asian American literature in her essay "The Fiction of Asian American Literature" rejected Wong's argument to make the case that the nationalist orientation of Asian American literary criticism, which had sustained since *An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, would no longer be unquestionably accepted.

In her pivotal work, *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe decentralizes the nation-centred logic through which Asian American literature was for long defined. The exclusion of Asian immigrants in the United States, argued Lowe, was paradoxically responsible for uniting them and also for making them critically aware of their exclusion. Lowe's thesis marked the completion of the emergent phase of Asian American literary criticism and also offered a strong theoretical foundation for the political functions of Asian American literature. Although, the later critics of Asian American literature rejected the U.S. centrism while articulating Asian American differences, not many changes took place in the manner in which America constituted the subjectivities of Asian Americans. King-Kok Cheung's *Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* provides an apt instance of how, despite their diverse existence, Asian Americans continue to articulate their differences through their national or communal spaces. Therefore, at one level, by remaining immutable, the category "Asian American" allows one to thematically organize a group of texts according to the authors' ethnicity and national origins. It is necessary to gauge the contributions of Asian American literary criticism in the making of a successful Asian American writer. For instance, although a bestselling author is more famous than any critic of Asian American literature, many mainstream readers may not necessarily recognize that author as an Asian American writer or her works as integral to Asian American literature. Literary criticism in legitimizing a piece of writing can add to the accomplishments of an author.

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