

Formation and Features of Transnational Consciousness

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Abstract

This theoretical review article argues that transnational consciousness deals with the way the border-crossing communities think about their life in connection with their past and future. As they are not physically in the homeland and not emotionally in the hostland, they are the people hanging in somewhere between these two spaces. Such a living condition and the thought pattern shapes the way they believe who they are. Consequently, they live with ethnic consciousness related to the homeland, hybridity that mixes up the life pattern from both the homeland and hostland, memories of homeland and imaginations of the possible life in the hostland, and finally with the double consciousness that works as a coping device in an unfulfilling new life away from the society of origin. To reach to this conclusion, I have reviewed the major transnational theorists from 1970s to early 2020s. Vertovec (2009) and Dahinden (2010) have been the major theorists as they summed up almost all the concepts related to transnationalism developed by 2000s. The findings of the researchers and opinions of the commentators on the formation of transnational life, literature and consciousness from the 2010s and early 2020s have been incorporated to establish the basic parameters to look at the formation and features of transnational consciousness.

Keywords: consciousness, hybridity, identity, nostalgia, transnationalism

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Introduction

Traditionally, scholars used the terms ‘transmigration’ and ‘transmigrants’ to discuss the cross-border migration. These days, this phenomenon is studied under transnationalism. At the turn of the century, Baia (1999) reported that transnationalism was emerging “as one of the central theories in the study of immigration” (p. 93). After four years, Guarnizo, Portes, and Haller (2003) evaluated the condition of its use in research and reported that “The proliferation of grassroots transnational ties worldwide is a phenomenon of great significance but one that, so far, has received little attention in sociological literature” (p. 1212). By then, the researchers were convinced that transnationalism was the study of connections (of multiple types including the emotion) across national borders. It sustained ‘nation’ as a basic socio-politico-emotional unit and went beyond it. After a decade, Werbner (2013) claimed that “transnationalism emerged as something of a parochial American argument: it denied an alleged prevailing

American melting-pot ideology which assumed that immigrants arriving in the New World would cut their ties with their homeland and ‘assimilate’ to become true Americans” (p. 108). These days, it has been in wide use as a theory to analyze different types of cross-border activities on the level of common people.

Transnationalism as a perspective to look at cross-border migration started in the early twentieth century. The term ‘transnationalism’ was used, for the first time, in the discussion of the transborder migration in the US in 1919 (Clavin, 2005). The use of this term, then, was made to distinguish between the people who migrated to America in their own will from the army related migration. It was primarily used for the voluntary migrants to the US. Later, in the 1950s and the 1960s, the use of the term was extended to the migrants who used to cross the border for a short time to return to the land of origin. At that time, migration was two polar practice: short term migration to return home, and long-term migration for the permanent settlement in the new place (Baia, 1999). Baia further found that with the change in the American migration policy in the 1960s, the nature of transborder migration changed into multipolar one from the existing bipolar practice. Then the migrants could continue their relation with the land of origin because of the development in modern communication. Till that decade, transnationalism was used to discuss only the American experiences.

The discourse on transnationalism took its global coverage in the 1970s. Vertovec (2009) highlighted the role of *Transnational relations and world politics* edited by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in 1971 in the development of the concept of transnationalism in academic use. Then the concept “emphasized the importance of ‘global interactions’ (defined as movements of information, money, objects and people across borders) and their impacts on interstate politics” (p. 28). The scope of the concept was further extended in the 1980s with the publication of Rosenau’s (1980) book entitled *The study of global interdependence: Essays on the transnationalization of world affairs*. Vertovec (2009) argued that it was a milestone in the development of the concept of transnationalism. He supported Rosenau’s claim that the post-1950 period in the history of world migration was ‘an era of fragmented loyalties.’ Then the concept began to incorporate the idea of both the personal and institutional interactions across the border.

The 1990s saw the extended use and practice of the concept of transnationalism. In the first issue of the seminal journal in this field entitled *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, its editor Tololyan (1991) named the decade as ‘transnational moment’. Baia (1999) termed the decade as ‘the age of transnationalism’ (p. 95). It was the same decade when the term ‘transnational community’ was brought into wide academic practice. The high amount of remittance began to get transmitted to the neighbouring countries of the then developed countries such as the USA, Canada, Japan and the countries from West Europe. These countries experienced the transmission of people and other goods. The villagers who migrated to the cities of the neighbouring

nations developed strong relation with the village they migrated from. Most of such migration was of temporary nature.

The discourse on transnationalism that developed in the 1990s was primarily related to the people and their family connections. The migrants and their everyday activities were connected to their families left back in the homeland. This practice is also known as “transnationalism from below” (Lee, 2009, p. 13). This focus of transnationalism dealt with two basic connections between homeland and hostland. The first one was the “revived interest in assimilation, reconceptualization as a context-dependent, multipath, uneven and potentially reversible process of immigrants, and their offsprings into the host society” (Morawska, 2004, p. 1372). The second one was the social connection of identity and the migrants’ economic and political practices. The same concepts got extended in the 2000s and 2010s; and now transnationalism is an established theory that critically looks at the multifaceted practices of the common people’s border-crossing phenomena.

The border-crossing phenomena are discussed under the following headings in transnational discourse: quality of transnational experiences, transnational relations and connections, mobility and stability, transnational social structure, transnational ethnic consciousness and identity, transnational nationality and double citizenship, and types of transnational migration. Shrestha (2023) claimed that “Transnationalism . . . appears to be a powerful theoretical tool which on the one hand is related to diaspora, nationalism, globalization and cosmopolitanism and on the other hand, is related to theories such as hybridity, mimicry, double consciousness” (p. 38). Among the ideas related to transnationalism, this study deals with transnational consciousness. It has tried to answer the following research questions:

1. How is transnational consciousness formed?
2. What are the major features of transnational consciousness?

Method

This is a review article that has incorporated and categorized the theoretical ideas related to transnational consciousness. The source of the ideas presented here are theoretical writings related to the development and practice of transnationalism. The major theorists who contributed to this idea are Vertovec (2009) and Dahinden (2010). Their ideas have been based on the research conducted by Gilroy (1987), Appadurai and Breckenridge (1989), Hall (1990), Clifford (1992), Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton (1992), Cohen (1996), and Ong (1999). The recent theoretical discussions by Bratini (2012), Bauridl (2013), Werbner (2013), Budarick (2014), Kim (2015), Joseph (2017), Qiu (2018), Alexander (2021) and Shrestha (2023) have been reviewed to support the argument of this article. Dahinden’s (2010) four basic types of transnational communities— localized diasporic transnational formations, localized mobile

transnational formations, transnational mobiles, and transnational outsiders— have been used as the base of the categorization of transnational migrants.

Discussion

Formation of the Concept of Transnational Consciousness

Transnationalism primarily deals with the way the border-crossers think about their way of life and things related to it. Kim (2015) posited it as “a form of consciousness” (Abstract). He reported that literary critics “apply transnationalism in order to understand the story of immigrants or that of their next generation” as the literature about immigrants “embodies the clash of different cultures or stories that a person or a group of people experience” (p. 5). Qiu (2018) found that the first-generation immigrant authors, as the transnational writers, created “an alternative space to represent the struggle their characters experienced, the challenges of displacement and alienation in the new land” (p. 318). Their writings expressed the consciousness of their community as a whole.

Transnational consciousness has its history and parameters. Alexander (2021) traced the beginning of transnational consciousness with the rise of the Black Diaspora in the early nineteenth century when the Haitian Blacks started their cross-border consciousness raising campaign to free themselves from slavery. He found that they retained “a deep connection to their loved ones throughout the diaspora” and worked for fostering “a common sense of identity and community” (p. 216). It was the revolution of the “enslaved and free Black people’s vast, transnational political consciousness” and so was “bound by national or imperial borders, they forged real and imagined communities across the diaspora, inspired by a burning desire to gain freedom and equality worldwide” (p. 222). It is basically a consciousness that puts individual freedom that helps to keep the community intact as the goal of existence.

Joseph (2017) used the phrase ‘Black Transnational Consciousness (BTC)’ in the study of transnational African literature. He defined BTC as “a system of thought-relations, a network of communication, and a web of discursive interconnections shared between African peoples” and added that “BTC is a critical embracement of the processes of hybridity, creolization, and the cultural métissage that shape and reshape the communities in the African diaspora” (p. 53). Such a consciousness is made up of and expressed through “the commonly shared literary motifs, themes, and parallelisms” in the community, and it “rejects all forms of human oppression including racism, classism, sexism, and neo-imperial colonization, that is, the subjection of peoples by dominant forces or hegemonic nations”. The commitment of such a consciousness is “toward the connectedness of histories, things, events, people, movements, and ultimately, of human values, beliefs, and cultures” (p. 54). It is a type of the historical consciousness of a transnational community.

Kumari (2014) provided the matrix of diasporic consciousness as “alienation, loneliness, rootlessness, nostalgia, questioning, cultural conflict” (p. 59). They are the aspects of transnational consciousness as well. Along with them, the transnationals are guided by the consciousness of class, culture, hybridity, dual identity, creolization, minority status, split self (double consciousness as a survival strategy), accumulative stress resulting into anger, sadness and grief, connection with the loved ones from the same ethnic community, desire for freedom and equality, and finally, the need for the continuous adjustment in the hostland. Summarily, transnational consciousness reflects “the life experiences of the immigrants which are built on the basis of their displacement, exile and migration” (Shrestha, 2023, p. 5). Their life experiences help them to form the consciousness and so the life gets shaped by the consciousness they have developed.

Double Consciousness

Transnational consciousness is a typical consciousness of a migrant. It is termed as double consciousness as well. As the migrants mentally belong to the two spaces- hostland and homeland- their mind works with the mixture of the realities from both places. It is the condition of all migrants’ thought. Werbner (2013) described such a mentality as an awareness “of seeing oneself through the eyes of others; a doubling up of a subject’s sense of belonging and alienation” (p. 107). They are always the Other in both the homeland and the hostland. In the homeland, they are perceived as the people who have left it and have become the population of the next land; and the hostland mainstream thinks that they are never their part as they have come from the next place.

Even they themselves perceive their self as a split one: sometimes they are like the hostland people and the other time they are like the members of the homeland they are away from. It is a type of the experience of ‘stranger-hood’ from both societies. Moving a step ahead in the argument, Doyle (2009) termed the transnational consciousness as third person consciousness that results from an alienated bodily consciousness within a field of relations. Their thinking itself becomes hybrid.

In the process of adjusting in the hostland they happen to develop such a mentality. Shrestha (2023) argued that diasporic experience embodies “negotiation between the national and the transnational” (p. 1) as “they would maintain their identities of hybrid, double consciousness, triple consciousness and multiple consciousness in their individual identities” (p. 8). They have to know at least two languages; they have to deal with two cultures; and they have to adjust with the new work spirit in-keeping the workstyle of the homeland. Thus, “their heritage and / or identity comprises more than two cultures or nations and thus results in multiple consciousness” (Bauridl, 2013, p. 223). Whenever they do something new in the hostland, they happen to compare it with the similar thing and process from the homeland. Thus, the development of the double consciousness is natural for the transnational migrants.

Developing double consciousness is a need of the migrants. Shrestha (2023) claimed that “Double consciousness appears to be a desire for immigrants” because even before they become migrants in the geographical terms “they hear and even make the mind of having consciousness of living in the diaspora . . . due to the information and knowledge about the life style of immigrants which they get through different sources such as familiar immigrants” (p. 107). It is accepted that they leave the homeland mentally before they migrate. They need to learn the skills and cultures of the hostland before they reach there. So, they start modifying their way of life even before they migrate.

Doyle (2009) claimed that “[f]or this doubleness there could hardly be a richer figure than "diaspora" and “theorization of the diasporic perspective as double consciousness is made particularly fruitful by such an emphasis on a transnational scope for contemporary Cultural Studies” (p. 48). He meant to argue that the development of double consciousness helps the transnationals know their position in the hostland: minority, marginalized, outsider. It slowly takes the form of racial consciousness that becomes “an active process of developing awareness of two social and political systems of racial oppression” (Britani, 2012, p. 150). They are frequently reminded of their position through activities, shocks and the behaviours of the hostland mainstream. Even though they show their loyalty to the host nation and its culture, they are made to feel that they are the outsiders (Shrestha, 2023). As a result, the transnationals develop their positive attitude towards other minority groups that have the similar feelings. Dayal (1996) argued that “Double consciousness compels us all to see ourselves and our others in the same mirror” (49). This is the beginning of the cosmopolitan thinking that all people from anywhere in the world are same; and it is fine wherever one has to live in search of opportunities in the globe.

The next effect of the development of the double consciousness is homeland nostalgia. They happen to remember their past back in the homeland and feel that time very good in comparison to the present life they have been living in the new land. Dayal (1996) claimed that ‘doubleness’ “often laced with nostalgia, filial piety, and credulity.” At the same time, “There is strategic value in cultivating a diasporic double consciousness” because doubleness is “less a ‘both/and’ and more a ‘neither just this/nor just that’”. It can be used “to explode the positive and equilibristic constructions of diaspora around the desire for belonging ideally to two or more places or cultures” (p. 47). When they think from this perspective, double consciousness works as a survival strategy in the new land (Shrestha, 2023). But sometimes double consciousness “weakens and confuses them in such a way that they always doubt their identity and judge themselves from others’ eyes in place of judging themselves from their own” (31). Here, they feel themselves as failure in terms of racial identity formation. Such a realization can keep them in mental conflict and ultimately unhappy about their life and all the material achievements in the hostland.

When they are unhappy with what they are now, they gradually come to realize that the world is an open space for them to move as no place is with the fixed happiness for anyone. They had to leave their homeland because it could not provide them everything they wanted to have. Even the hostland is not able to satisfy them. So, now they can move to any other place in search of some better life. They can use their hostland life as an opportunity for “a celebration of difference in which the shackles of nationhood and ethnic identity are broken to allow for a more cosmopolitan, hybrid social agent” (Budarick, 2014, p. 143). Thus, the double consciousness is an essential aspect of transnational consciousness with both positive and negative consequences.

Ethnic Consciousness and Hybrid Identity

The split-self or double consciousness of the transnationals can also be found in their contradictory activities of getting attached to the homeland and trying to develop a new identity in the hostland at the same time. One major aspect of transnational consciousness is their ethnicity (homeland-based community as the base of identity formation) oriented thoughts. When they live in the Other nation, they find themselves marginalized minority in terms of identity and culture. Qiu (2018) termed the transnationals as “a racialized minority” (p. 313). In most of the cases, their homeland becomes the base of their racial formation. Their living becomes difficult in many respects because of such a status. Shrestha (2023) gave an example of the south Asians in the West: “When South Asians migrate to the United States or Great Britain, they live in the diaspora with multiple identities. Their color, religion, language, and geographical location make them the ‘other’ and they begin to question and search their identity” (p. 7-8). They “face different problems such as racism, identity crisis, family fragmentation, isolation” (p. 114). Bratini (2012) also discussed the minority status and the consequently oppressed socio-psychology of transnational migrants. She stressed on the fact that their “transnational bonds, connections, and ties to systems of oppression” impact on their “psychological processes” (Abstract). So, they find themselves marginalized minority in terms of number and culture.

As a result, they face the problem of identity crisis. The first aspect of this crisis is the presence of multiple identities developed with their connections with “multiple societies and multiple nations” (Bratini, 2012, p. 50). “Their colour, religion, language and geographical location make them the other and they begin to question and search their identity” (Shrestha, 2023, p. vii). They originally find themselves the members of the community from the homeland, but now they are not there. At the same time, they think that they are the people of the hostland, but they are not well accepted there, too. Similarly, they have to show the loyalty to both the homeland and hostland. Homeland, for them, is the space of the origin of life; whereas, hostland is the space of livelihood. They involve themselves in multiple organizations related to both the homeland and hostland. So, they gradually develop multiple identities. Their base of identification, finally, becomes “heritage and family history, as well as on present influences, i.e., the cultural environment, national and transnational political issues, and personal goals, and

thus consequently its relation to the future” (Bauridl, 2013, p. 238). Finally, they lose their original ethnic identity and gain hybridity.

Gradually, the transnationals begin to cope up with the shocks they experience in the hostland. A transnational community experiences ‘accumulative stress’ resulting from the cultural shocks every member of the community undergoes. Bratini (2012) linked this situation with the adjustment process in the hostland where “cross-cultural interactions” and “negative mental health outcomes” result from the “pressures to learn a new language, negotiating differing cultural values and daily cross-cultural experiences” (p. 133). They had to experience “intense feelings of anger, sadness, and grief about not fitting into a social context that may relocate them into different location in the social strata” (p. 134). Only when they develop the transnational consciousness that defines such experiences as normal happenings in the hostland, they start fitting into it. So, the transnationals identify consciousness-raising is “a process of learning to look at self in relation to others within concrete social and political locations of power, privilege, and oppression” (p. 139). “The challenge for transnational immigrations involves learning to understand and dismantle false consciousnesses in their own country of origin... as well as the host country” (p. 140). Thus, development of transnational consciousness is a remedy to their divided selves and other cultural shocks.

Transnational consciousness is also the result of the cultural mix they undergo in the hostland. With the collision of the migrants’ homeland culture and hostland culture, a new culture takes birth. The immigrants negotiate with “different cultural motifs such as food, dress, festivals, music and religion” (Shrestha, 2023, p. 168). They “have to do negotiation for their survival” and it helps to give birth to “the third space” which is “the hybrid space where different cultures mix and hybrid identity becomes productive”. It works in the positive understanding of the new life where their “negotiation with dual identities” works as “their strength for survival” (p. 138). Werbner (2013) found a similar and predictable pattern of adjustment of almost all transnational communities: “similar cultural spaces and institutions are produced in different countries across the diaspora, often following predictable patterns” (p. 118). He stressed on the role of their aesthetics and rituals in the formation of such patterns and the consequent consciousness: “Transnational aesthetic and ritual translocation . . . produces inversions of gender and generational authority, reconciles past with present and reconstitutes a sense of home and personal integrity in the face of rupture and disintegration” (119). So, all transnationals are culturally hybrid.

Nationality also becomes a matter of question for them. Their double loyalty makes them rethink about their nationality: “the burden of citizenship usually weighs heavier for members of diasporic communities than for the regular citizenry, since they have more than one society to improve” (Torres-Saillant, 2005, p. 281). Ultimately, their national identity “gets reflected in their culture, language, religion” (Shrestha, 2023, p. 1) that is hybrid in nature. Even then, they try to define themselves as the

people of the homeland: “despite having transnational identity, they desire to keep their national identity” (p. 6). This state of confusion and divided mentality defines transnational identity. Despite so many lacks in the life of the hostland, the transnationals adjust there as they do not have easy way to return to the homeland. So, a negotiation between two cultures and two ways of life becomes their coping strategy. Ultimately, they become mentally prepared for these negotiations and the necessary adjustments to achieve their life goals.

Remembering the Past and Thinking for the Future

The contradiction of transnational consciousness can be seen even in the way they deal with their past and future together. They leave homeland in search of a better life in the hostland; but they are mostly unhappy there. They become nostalgic every time they remember home. But still, they [especially the diasporas] do not plan their future going back home. They develop the futuristic thought to get adjusted in the hostland though they have to live the life of unfulfillment.

The life they live in the hostland gives them a space for being nostalgic. Though economically their life can be better than the life in the homeland, in cultural terms and the consequent satisfaction, they are mostly unfulfilled. The migrants live with the “guilt, loss, and rupture” (Werbner, 2013, p. 109). It means “the sense of incompleteness, loss, and alienation” (p. 117) become the integral parts of their everyday existence. After the initial shocks, they begin to adjust in the hostland, and get hybridized. The result of hybridity and hybridization is also the pain of being away from the homeland. One clear effect is found in the “emotional bitterness and trauma suffered by families” (p. 109). The transnationals compare their past with the present and get emotional in everything that reminds them of their homeland. Such a memory works as a form of suffering. Qiu (2018) found that the Chinese Americans went through the process of “remembering” and “reimagining,” their Chineseness and lived in the “conflicts of deconstructing and reconstructing Chineseness in the process of Chinese/American immigrant identity formation” (p. vii). Their new life and identity constantly remind them of their life in the homeland. Such a memory makes them nostalgic.

At the same time, their emotional attachment with the homeland results into their love of homeland, the contrast between the homeland and the hostland, concern for the homeland affairs, and connection with the homeland. Some clear effects of nostalgia on the transnational community are found to be the painful present in memory of the homeland/birthland, connection with the homeland, memory and cultural identity, and love and respect to the homeland wisdom.

Gradually, they begin to develop good thinking about the hostland; and praise and celebrate its beauty and finally accept the life in the new place. The permanently settled transnationals, the diaspora, are “always in the waiting rooms of the nation-

space” and they are “preserved at least from the illusion of a fixed identity and a prefabricated cultural role” (Dayal, 1996, p. 51). They accept the hostland as the place for their future. And so, they begin to get adjusted there. They gradually widen their networks in the new land and incorporate “previous strangers into ethnic networks.” Gradually, their “prior close relationships at ‘home’ are shed”; and finally, they “inscribe their presence symbolically on their new environment in order to build home and homeliness abroad” (Werbner, 2013, p. 117). They develop a home away from home.

The migrant’s creative engagement in the hostland is the next feature of their life. They develop a new connection among the members of their own transnational community scattered across many borders. They live “sharing conviviality with others like themselves through ritual performance, pilgrimage journeys, mobilization for rights, religious worship, and new intimate relationships” (Werbner, 2013, pp. 118-119). So, “migrants work hard to create an ambiance, a spatial sensorium imbued with multiple sensorial experiences that enrich their sense of self and connect them experientially to fellow migrants elsewhere in the world and in their homeland” (p. 119). “Indeed, through ritual and cultural performance the illusion of simultaneity sustains them on their transnational journeys” (p. 120). Shrestha (2023) also found that “the immigrant characters adapt the cultural identity of the host nation as a kind of their survival strategy” (p. 115) with the hope for the good future in the new land. Dayal (1996) also contended that “The transnational migrant’s double consciousness can continually reinvigorate the regulative ideal of an endlessly open and unpredictable negotiation of civil society and its quickening principle, social justice” (p. 56). Adjustment and plan for the future remain an essential aspect of transnational consciousness.

Conclusion

Transnationalism is a recent theory to look at transborder social formation and the consciousness related to such a society. Transnational consciousness is basically a cultural consciousness. It addresses multi-locality, multiple identities, fractured but collective memories, personal cum collective meanings and perspectives, refusal of fixity and a new transnational imaginary. Their multi-locality stimulates the desire to connect oneself with others who belong to both ‘here’ and ‘there’, and share the same ‘roots’ and ‘routes’. Their multiple identities link them simultaneously to more than one nation. Similarly, the fractured but collective memories about the places they had to leave and the time they gathered some valuable experiences help them create new maps of desire and attachment. They feel rich in terms of the multiple personal and collective meanings they give to the life they had lived through manifold situations and societies. As a result, they do not think it is necessary to stick to a particular place, time and culture for survival and growth.

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