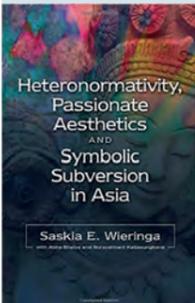


Women living beyond the norms

Heteronormativity, Passionate Aesthetics and Symbolic Subversion in Asia by Saskia Wieringa, with Abha Bhaiya and Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, offers a nuanced cross-cultural comparison of the lives of women from two of the world's most populated countries, India and Indonesia.

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THE BOOK FOCUSES on the identities and life trajectories of three different groups of women living beyond the norms of heteronormativity, these are: women who are divorced or widowed; women who engage in sex work; and lesbians living in urban environments. The cross-cultural comparisons developed in the book are particularly pleasing because they refuse the all too common pattern of comparison between western and non-western cultures. That is, this book takes women from lower income countries within Asia and compares their identities and experiences against one another, without assuming high income and western experiences to be the norm against which other women's lives are compared. This is a reflection of reality, as women in lower income countries such as India and Indonesia constitute the world's majority population.

One of the stellar contributions of this book is the way in which it clearly spells out the complex processes and politics embedded in conducting feminist research in cross-cultural contexts, which is the focus of Chapter 1. It is a fine example of how knowledge can be co-constructed by women of different cultures, class backgrounds and women working in different sectors. This example of collaborative knowledge construction will be of great use to students wishing to embark on politically sound cross-cultural research, as well as activists and staff of community based organizations wanting to engage with more rigorous research beyond the narrow paradigm of monitoring and evaluation.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this outstanding book is the relevance of its theoretical insights and in particular its convincing critique of heteronormativity. In Chapter 2, Wieringa articulates the key concepts that drive the analysis of women's lives in the following chapters. She writes: "as an ideology and practice, heteronormativity

exceeds heterosexuality and permeates all social institutions, such as education, law, religion and the media. Those conforming to its hegemonic pattern are 'normal' human beings, while those who fall outside of, or who place themselves beyond its boundaries, are 'abnormal', 'abjected', and routinely denied rights and entitlements." Further, she rightly describes heterosexuality as "a double-edged sword that not only marginalises those who fall outside of its norms but also patrols those within its constraints." The usefulness of this theoretical construct is virtually boundless; already I have applied it in my own work pertaining to the positioning of infertile women in Indonesia, who like *janda*, sex workers and lesbians are failing in the successful performance of heteronormativity.

Of equal theoretical interest are the concepts of passionate aesthetics and symbolic subversion also developed in this book. Through the notion of passionate aesthetics Wieringa articulates the complexity and interconnected aspects that make up gendered and sexual identities, behaviours, and status in any given society. She defines passionate aesthetics as, "a mix of institutions, dynamics, motivations, codes of behaviour, (re) presentation, subjectivities, and identities that make up the complex structure of desires, erotic attractions, sexual relations, and kinship and partnership patterns that are salient in a given context." Symbolic subversion is also used to refer to a sliding scale of resistance to heteronormativity, ranging from public advocacy for rights to self-defeating strategies and various forms of adaptation. This chapter also provides an analysis of sexual citizenship in India and Indonesia that is carefully embedded within historical context and the wider debates and struggles occurring around sexual citizenship and rights in both societies.

Chapter 3 of this book is where the reader is engaged in greater detail with the women who are the narrators or subjects of the study. It explores how these different groups of women negotiate their lives in the public arena and details the varied ways in which such women are denied their rights and/or are socially excluded. Additionally, the chapter spells out how women respond to discrimination and exclusion, the varied strategies and positions they take up to make sense of their own subjectivity and to reconcile their religious and sexual identities. Chapter 4 moves into the private realm and offers a compelling destabilization of the happy Asian family norm. It exposes how heteronormative families do not necessarily represent safe spaces for women, regardless of their sexual identification or marital status. It traces lives

affected by early marriage, intimate partner violence, and the denial of sexual and reproductive autonomy in marriage. It also shows how suffering in women's families of origin, most often heteronormative families, left them wanting but ill-prepared to negotiate family lives with any more equality than those they were raised in.

Chapters 5 and 6 are concerned with unpicking how particular forms of heterosexuality are represented as both 'normal' and as 'abnormal'. It draws on women's narratives to explore how normal sexuality in both India and Indonesia are produced and enforced through mechanisms ranging from formal legal and religious injunctions to more subtle forms of persuasion and subjugation. Wieringa reveals that while the narrators of the study are positioned on the margins of heteronormative society, this does not mean they are free from the values and demands of heteronormativity. The exploration of 'abnormal' or abjected lives and sexualities delves into women's liminal experiences. It identifies stark contrasts between how society views women and how they view themselves, while at the same time revealing how women still seek out heteronormative respectability.

Chapter 7 examines the intimate sex lives and desires of the women narrators of the study. It shows how the sex lives of non-normative women are closely surveilled in both societies. It exposes the many barriers women face in achieving satisfying sexual partnerships and experiences including self-censorship, gossip, family violence and social isolation. At the same time it illuminates that humour, a supportive partner and good friendships all contribute to the attainment of satisfying sex lives. Chapter 8 further explores how these non-normative women understand their own subjectivities and the identities bestowed on them by the societies they live in. The common pattern between all groups of women in both cultures is that they construct their identity in relation to the heteronormative society in which they are embedded, but which also seeks to exclude them.

Chapters 9 and 10 theorize the nature of women's symbolic subversion, as well as the explicit strategies for imagining their futures – futures in which they will most likely remain marginalized by heteronormative society – but may still construct alternative relations of belonging and acceptance. Chapter 11 concludes the volume by teasing out the usefulness of the conceptual complexities developed within academic, activist and policy circles.

This volume demonstrates the importance of research that incorporates women's interpretations and experiences of their intimate lives and personal subjectivities, and the enmeshment of personal and private sexual politics. The book is of wide appeal, starting with those working within queer studies and sexuality studies more broadly, as well as anthropologists, Asian studies and cultural studies scholars. It should be essential reading for all people seeking to understand both normative and non-normative gender and sexuality regimes in India and Indonesia. The work also extends the scope of earlier landmark contributions on female same sex desire in Asia (Blackwood and Wieringa, 1999) because of its inclusion of several categories of women who are constructed as 'other', according to the boundaries of heterosexuality. The theoretical contributions of the volume also serve as an important correction to the imbalance of western-derived queer theory.

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the Massacre) who remained in China but suffered for this decision; other student protestors (like Wu'er Kaixi) who managed to flee abroad, but have come to regret this choice; Bao Tong, "the highest-ranking government official to serve time for the events of 1989" (160); and a 76 year-old grandmother (Zhang Xianling), one of the founders of the 'Tiananmen Mothers', with resonance to similar groups like the 'Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires', demanding to know the truth about their disappeared sons and daughters.

At the heart of Lim's work is a fear and argument that the Chinese Communist Party has been successful in changing the narrative (86), incentivizing a reason to forget the state-orchestrated violence through the carrots of greater economic freedoms and prosperity, and the stick of severe silencing and punishment if anyone decides to challenge that state narrative. Lim calls this the "great forgetting", an idea initially formed through her interviews with contemporary students who seemed to have scant, if any, knowledge of what happened on June 4th 1989. This great forgetting is prevalent on college campuses. Lim writes: "It has happened in homes around the country, too. Parents who knew about or took part in the protests now want to protect their children from learning about what happened" (95). At issue is how the value of remembering seems to serve little purpose: as forgetting is rewarded and remembering punished. Lim quotes from author Yan Lianke: "our amnesia is a state-sponsored sport" (50). It thus seems fitting for Lim to provocatively replace China with amnesia in her title, a further irony when one considers the rich and ancient history of the Chinese people and land.

There are many historical parallels one can address here. German Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz, trying to face and grapple with the horrors of World War II, and especially Christian treatment and slaughter of the Jewish people, spoke of the need to embrace dangerous memories. These are memories that challenge, and even threaten to annul one's core identity and belief in one's orthodoxy, purity, or beauty. Linked to the suffering of others and one's own complicity in such suffering, these truths demand to be remembered and acted upon. Likewise, in the context of black oppression in the United States, James Baldwin, in his work, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, highlights the need for deep awareness in how what we choose to remember or forget instills a value and power in such presence or absence. If European Americans choose to believe their history in the language of Manifest Destiny and God-given protection, then the cries of the Native American and the African American will be muffled, seemingly unimportant. For Baldwin, echoing similar thoughts of the Native American Crow chief Plenty Coups (see Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope*), the cries of the victims must eventually be heard, especially as the acts of violence against the Other were also damaging to oneself. Thus, philosopher Avishai Margalit advocates an ethics of remembering; and others like Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel call for an obligation to remember. How could such contentions play out in the context of June 4th, when it seems too many Chinese people do not want to remember, or choose to forget; and the elite or aspiring elite youth are satiated by mobile phones, designer clothes, and other expensive, materialistic ephemera?

One of the key closing chapters in the work is Lim's investigation of similar protests, inspired by the one in Tiananmen Square, that also occurred in other parts of China, including Chengdu, a Chinese city in the southwest. There, too, the government sent military personnel to quell the protests, which resulted in dozens of deaths and disappearances. Again, the Chinese government brutally suppressed investigations and then denied and concealed most of the evidence. Lim writes: "The whole truth may never come out. But what happened in Chengdu was very nearly the perfect case study in first rewriting history, then excising it altogether" (205). She further adds: "In Chengdu, the events largely existed in memory alone, but the party knew all too well that memories are mutable – even the memories of tens of thousands of people" (205).

Global humanity and, here especially, the Chinese people, are obligated to remember such hidden truths. The violence has already occurred, but it is a repeated and double violence when the crime is denied or erased – or even worse, when the victims are rendered into enemies or terrorists. No country is spared these dangerous memories and sadly, the amnesia that Lim highlights in China is prevalent elsewhere, too. If my 13 year-old-self had been told that twenty-six years later such blatantly vile and immoral acts of state violence were no longer remembered, that they were even transformed into something justifiable, what would I have said? Can any words do justice to such injustice? Lim's work provides informative and ample material to address and overcome such amnesia.

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