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. There is a shared history of violence that is often distorted or denied: women who engage in sex work; 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 communities in low-income countries have a rich history 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. This is evident in Chapter 1, where Wieringa articulates the concept of how knowledge can be co-constructed by women of different cultures, class backgrounds and women working in different sectors. As women’s 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 patterns 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 polices 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 jolds, sex workers and many falling within 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 complex 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 the contexts of those who construct and maintain 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 specific 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 important 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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