Book Review

Women’s sexualities and masculinities in a globalizing Asia

By Saskia Wieringa (Ed.) (Evelyn Blackwood and Abha Bhaiya: New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 279 pp., $69.95 (hbk), ISBN 1-4039-7768-2.

Globalization can be a difficult concept to pin down and this collection of essays suggests that Asia may also resist simple geographical definition. The editors of this volume have brought together chapters that specify some of the diverse forms women’s same-sex sexualities and alternative genders may take in a range of locations geographically located in Asia. Their success in destabilizing assumptions about what such an inquiry might be expected to produce emerges not only in the diversity of experiences they report but also in the ways that these forms avoid specifying any particular Asian reality. Indeed, in the introduction to the volume, Blackwood and Wieringa disavow ‘Asia’ as a coherent object of study, worrying that its use might ‘reinforce an Orientalist definition created by European and American colonizers’ (p. 3), but they soldier on with the term, using it to ‘refer to a contemporary geopolitical region’. This is a convenient referent that the reader might excuse, though by the end of the volume the notion that Asia is, in fact, a useful geographical marker seems even more uncertain than at the outset.

The editors have done a brave thing in assembling this collection: they have explicitly sought to put academic and activist voices into conversation with one another, including academic contributors from the West and from Asian countries (India and Japan), who represent a range of disciplines, and activists from several Asian countries. The results are provocative enough to make one wish for more actual conversation, but that is perhaps too lofty a goal for an edited volume of essays. The academic essays, predominantly by anthropologists, make clear that women’s same-sex experiences in this region cannot be described with the terminology of the West. Queer theory, even gay and lesbian formulations, have little currency, even when the forces of globalization seem to have overwhelmed local concepts. Perhaps even more than for men (though explicit comparisons are not provided), women who might be identified as lesbians in the West must exist without reference to global sexual lexicons or associations. As they present their findings, the authors are careful for the most part to avoid modernist assertions of progress; the local is simply what it is. Whether women can achieve some measure of autonomy or must bury their desires in the demands of heterosexually oriented kinship systems, their solutions make sense in the context of their particular situations.

The editors have divided the essays into four sections, organized thematically: ‘Historical Legacies’, ‘Conditional Subjectivities’, ‘Female Masculinities’ and ‘Silencing and Modes of Invisibility’ – though it might be said that all focus on themes of visibility and naming. In ‘Female Masculinities’, for example, authors present compelling portraits of how same-sex relationships and subjectivities are organized in a range of Asian contexts. While details and lexicons differ, all the essays in this section offer ethnographically rich accounts of how some female-bodied persons organize their understandings of their sexuality. The story is a familiar one: female same-sex desires are categorized as part of a seemingly conventional gender order in which masculine women, variously seen as ‘men’ or as hovering between being men and women, choose partners (girlfriends) who are understood to be ordinary, i.e. potentially heterosexual women. The system bears obvious similarities to Western iterations of butch/femme, particularly in historical periods before ‘homosexual’ came to be viewed as an identity.

Yet, the variations in its employment, the diverse ways in which individuals can shape strategies around these categories, even while sometimes having to make major compromises,
provide useful illustrations of the agency that women can achieve while manipulating binary
gender conventions. Megan Sinnott’s paper focuses on ‘toms’ (from English ‘tomboy’) and their
partners, ‘dees’ (from English ‘lady’) in Thailand. She shows that some fissures in the conviction
that these categories are the same as men and women have begun to emerge, most tellingly
among the dees, who may resist the notion that they are just ordinary women. Sharyn Graham
Davies and Evelyn Blackwood provide chapters that detail similar systems as they are enacted in
South and West Sulawesi, respectively. Both essays offer rich analyses of how women with
masculine sensibilities perform gender, paradoxically resisting conventional limitations and re-
enacting them, sometimes asserting their difference and at other times moving between
masculine and feminine strategically. Similarly, Franco Lai’s essays on tomboys (TBs) in Hong
Kong situates the performances of TBs and their girlfriends in the real-life struggle to support
themselves. Gender performances are basic tools in their economic arsenals and cannot help but
shape the women’s understandings of what the categories mean.

All of these essays, then, trouble the conventional wisdom that would take the use of
terminology derived from Western gay/lesbian language to indicate the presence of a globalizing
hegemony. While women whose sexualities involve same-sex attractions call themselves by terms
we can readily recognize, these terms are imbued with meanings that have more to do, it would
seem, with gender than with sexuality alone. Sexualities, in these accounts, are realized through
gender, with identities firmly situated in the language of gender. Queer sexualities occur, but are
driven by the expectations and meanings that attach to gender. Gender, then, need not be tied
inextricably to sex; more slippage and flexibility is allowed there than in some Western
formulations of sexuality that privilege desire.

Other sections of the volume display less coherence than that on female masculinities. Saskia
Wieringa’s historical essay, for example, seems to rest on the premise that discovering past
evidence of women’s same-sex desire or alternative genders somehow provides a charter for
present-day behaviours. She makes these claims using Japanese religious iconography, seeking
‘to provide building blocks that may help construct a space in which women’s same-sex love can
be incorporated into the temple of present-day Japanese society’ (p. 24). Her analysis, like that of
Kanchana Natarajan on Tamil folktales, is nimble; but the larger question of how such materials
might open a space for female same-sex experience to be more freely acknowledged or more
proudly affirmed remains unaddressed. They may demonstrate that both Japan and India ought
to have inherited a way to assimilate sexual difference, but the problem of how such histories or
cultural substrata might be accessed in the present is never really approached.

Some other essays in the book are more concerned with the immediate experience of same-sex
experience among women in Asia. They vary, though, in terms of how ready the authors seem to
be to accept the integrity of the local lexicons and identities. Abha Bhaiya’s two essays seem to
present her with a dilemma: the women she describes in her first chapter ‘refuse categories’ and,
while she would like to view these refusals as instances of resistance, she seems to worry that they
might actually reveal actual barriers to politicizing the women’s understandings of their sexuality
or gender. In her second essay, an examination of the uproar that followed the opening of the
film ‘Fire’ in India, she struggles between two issues: that the film was denounced across India
because it dealt with a lesbian relationship and her view that the film is not really about
lesbianism at all. The plot that unfolds in the film concerns two women who are drawn to each
other because of the bad treatment they get from their husbands. Therefore, she argues that it
undermines efforts to allow Indian lesbians to proudly declare their identities.

Similarly, Peichen Wu, a scholar of Japanese literature, examines relationships among
members of the Seito¯ Society, a women’s literary society active in the 1910s. Her focus is on the
well-documented romance between two women in the society and their struggle to sustain their
relationship in the face of dominant gender norms. That they were forced to understand their
attraction in terms of conventional gender categories is not surprising; that Wu sees this story as
an instance of Adrienne Rich’s ‘lesbian continuum’ seems to miss the essence of Rich’s view that
the continuum consists of all sorts of female bonding and loyalty, not specifically limited to
sexual relationships.
Maya Sharma’s chapter makes some similar missteps as she reports on a study undertaken in some Indian villages of gender variant women. While the women involved disavowed the categories she hoped they would embrace, Sharma succeeds in situating her own coming-out story at the heart of the chapter. While valorising her own (urban) experience, she portrays the village women as helpless in the face of their own victimization, probably the only moment in the volume when the editors’ commitment to avoid global progress narratives falters.

More satisfying is Shermal Wijewardene’s chapter on the self-perceptions of two trans persons in a Sri Lankan village, which offers a grounded account of how individuals with unconventional presentations can make sense of their gender difference. Jennifer Robertson’s fascinating account of lesbian (attempted) love suicides in 1930s Japan situates a culturally specific protest modality in the larger system of gender and class that prevailed in Japan. Focusing on a particularly publicized case in the 1930s, she uses press accounts, writings by the women and other materials from the period to show how lesbian desire, even when repudiated by the wider culture, also can fit comfortably into the wider national discourse.

Despite my dissatisfaction with some chapters, I think the book may serve as a landmark effort to bring together disparate voices on women’s sexualities. The editors reach beyond interdisciplinarity here, including authors from many different countries as well as activists from several of the countries also discussed by academics. They have succeeded in displacing unified representations of both Asia and women’s same-sex desires and that is a goal very worth pursuing.

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