

September 2009

Book Review: Power, Resistance and Women Politicians in Cambodia: Discourses of Emancipation

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Recommended Citation

Sen, Debarati (2009). Book Review: Power, Resistance and Women Politicians in Cambodia: Discourses of Emancipation. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11(2), 222-224.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol11/iss2/16>

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Power, Resistance and Women Politicians in Cambodia: Discourses of Emancipation.
Mona Lilja. 2008. Denmark: NIAS Press. 214 pp. (Includes Endnotes, Bibliography, and Index). \$70 (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Debarati Sen¹

Mona Lilja's book, *Power, Resistance and Women Politicians in Cambodia: Discourses of Emancipation*, examines the challenges that women politicians in Cambodia face in their daily political lives. In Cambodia, men are naturalized as politicians and women are seen as fulfilling men's needs and ambitions, even when they join politics. Cambodia's history of violence has shaped popular perceptions about women's political lives. Women are believed to be in constant need of protection and are not perceived as political leaders. Under these circumstances, Lilja claims that individual women politicians' "speech acts" become very important for understanding women's subjectivities and agency.

The book helps us understand the careful negotiations that women politicians and NGO workers have been making in Cambodia over the last two decades. Lilja is deeply interested in the deconstructive possibilities of individual women's "speech acts." The speech acts make possible the enactment of new subjectivities, which are the foundations of what she calls "discursive resistance." Lilja defines resistance "as everyday occurrences that characterize the speech of women" (2). Resistance occurs through "speaking," which for her are "individual interviews and the notions and different representations expressed in those interviews—of Cambodian women politicians" (4).

Lilja makes a methodological contribution by using the theoretical framework of deconstruction to analyze non-literary text, in this case "speech acts." She writes, "Reading about deconstruction, I found that there are different researchers promoting different strategies of deconstruction. Most of them, though, seem to be about how to deconstruct novels more than speech-acts" (13). Further, in Lilja's research and analysis, deconstruction occurs on two levels. Firstly, she as a researcher is engaged in deconstructing the speech-acts and creatively reinterpreting the transformative possibilities of individual women's speech acts. Secondly, her research subjects are engaged in deconstructing dominant discursive formations which tend to marginalize women politicians. Women's deconstruction of popular negative stereotypes about their capabilities takes various forms, but most notably repetitive deconstruction, using the irony of stereotypical images of politicians. However, women also use silence and denial. For Lilja, women's resisting practices are equal to deconstruction in that they are always "sliding and multiple, and ... involve[s] both conscious and unconscious strategy" (14). Women thus produce "hybrid truths" (113), which destabilize the popular image of them as needing protection.

Lilja uses Judith Butler's theory of performativity to demonstrate how discursive truths are both upheld and deconstructed in women's speech acts. She also uses Gayatri Spivak's concept of "catachresis" to see how Cambodian women politicians creatively misuse popular ideas. For example, one way some women NGO workers tried to create change was by redefining and expanding the popular repertoire of what counts as "politics" and what being a politician means. As one of Lilja's informants argues:

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You know if you are NGO [sic] they say we don't do politics. So I say that: I agree you cannot support any individual party but if you do it for everybody and go to every political part: you do politics. You talk to people to support your goal, what you want to do. That is politics! You go out and you tell people this is your idea and you need support: that is politics! (119).

Women NGO workers in Cambodia, through these speech acts, raise awareness about the importance of their work for society and define it as politics, thus unmooring it from the standard notion that joining a political party is the only way to do meaningful politics. For women NGO workers, development work emerges as a key way to redefine their political roles in society.

In discussing the predicaments that current women politicians and NGO workers face in Cambodia, Lilja details the relevant history and the politics of the country. Cambodian democracy functioned in such a way that women's success in politics depended on family ties. According to Lilja, female politicians often had husbands in the same party. Women politicians were also faced with a "double identity," as women and as politicians, since the dominant image of a politician was that of a male one. Lilja reasons that women's display of docility in following their husband's political ambitions and by becoming symbols of compromise and unity should not be read as mere subordination. Women became politically active by accepting obedience and increasing support for their husbands and themselves. Women's family-based participation made the private sphere play an important role in public politics (65).

Another problem that identified by Lilja is that aspiring women politicians in Cambodia do not have strong female role models from which to draw inspiration. Lilja asks whether women need a third space, because their identities as politicians do not always correspond to the general idea of a politician. While women are very active in the economic sector, this phenomenon does not lead to an increase in their political power. A proposition for reserving 30 percent of the seats in political parties for women was rejected. Lilja concludes that in the absence of a third image, "there is no image for women to identify with, which results in less freedom of political action for women" (95).

As a result, women themselves used essentialisms in describing their roles and identities, which furthered the stereotyping of men as politicians. She details the gender ideologies in poems and popular discourses which uphold docility as a virtue for Cambodian women. Lilja also underscores the ambiguities and contradictions in gender ideologies that simultaneously portray Cambodian women as weak, but at the same time strong, hardworking and brave based on socialist revolutionary discourse. On the whole, women have a subaltern status in Cambodia where women are seen as "non-political." Women experience subordination through naturalized images of women as primarily responsible for domestic roles.

The history of political violence in Cambodia also influenced women's political futures. Women were thought to be in need of protection. Even some women's NGOs, like the Women's Media Center (WMC), used stereotypical images of women in need of care which added to the popular view that women were incompetent to act as protectors. While women were on the one hand weak, their dissociation from violence also increased their political truthfulness, which in turn increased people's sense of security about them

(82). Thus Lilja concludes that, “Women’s perceived disconnection from violence thus both reduces and increase their political potential” (82).

In spite of the book’s rich accounts, the book could have devoted comparatively less space to summarizing works of key deconstructivists. It would have been more useful to make more Cambodian women’s voices to be heard. While there are rich interview details across the chapters, sometime such details are mired by the weight of theory, especially since an entire chapter is dedicated to discussing the theoretical frameworks. While Lilja drives home her point about resistance, the analysis uses too many theoretical frameworks to bolster her argument.

This book is an important one and will make good reading material for anyone working at the intersection of literary analysis and qualitative research. The book would also be useful for anyone interested in a nuanced engagement with questions of human agency. Feminist and other scholars and students of politics and Asian studies would immensely benefit from this book.