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Book Review: Critical Chatter: Women and Human Rights in South East Asia

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Critical Chatter: Women and Human Rights in South East Asia. Caroline Lambert, Sharon Pickering and Christine Alder. 2003. North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press. pp. 193. Includes bibliographical references and index. \$23.00, paperback.

Reviewed by Alison Aggarwal¹

Words slipped and fell about when we did not have shared meanings built from shared histories- unable to grab the falling words (Lambert, Pickering, Alder)

Women in their personal relations tend to speak of their obligations, as a result of which there is an erasure of identity. So to speak about our individual human rights, we first need to discover our identities. (Eleanor, Philippines)

This book is very much about understanding women's human rights in terms of women's words, women's shared meanings, and women's identities. I was fortunate to read this book at the 2004, World Social Forum in India, surrounded by many of the women who contributed to this publication. This was particularly fortunate in the case of *Critical Chatter*, which takes as its focus the chatter among South East Asian women activists. So as I read about the chatting, I was also part of the chatting – over tea and coffee, over dinner, while waiting for the toilet, while shopping. As Eleanor² says 'critical chatter' is ...“intimate sessions, candlelit, squatting on the floor, just being women”.

This publication develops the notion that critical chatter between women activists is both a method and theory for negotiating the strategic universalism of feminisms and human rights and transforming the debates around them. It is a realistic look at the limitations of feminism and human rights as universal discourses, yet also identifies ways for reshaping the terrain of the debates to reaffirm feminism and human rights. The acts of talking and listening captured in the text, gives visibility to individual South East Asian women activists and the way they do their activism. So, for example, below we have a quote from Cheng Kooi, who is able to articulate her rights within her context and dilemmas:

Why am I making coffee and not decisions?
– asked Cheng Kooi of Malaysia when she decided
on her role in the movement.

The 'chattering' is portrayed as a source of solidarity and support among women activists. Critically, it is also a source for advancing the normative content and justifiability of human rights, at the local level, in communities, nationally, and internationally at the United Nations. In conveying this idea, the authors center South East Asian women's experiences within the text with extensive use of long and detailed

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² All women quoted in the book are referred to only by their first names.

quotes, intermingled with a self-interrogation of the authors and their place within the role and text. This self-examination by the authors arises in the second chapter on methodology and is woven into points throughout the book. But for me it is the voices of the women interviewed, through their direct quotes, that form the backbone of this book. The analysis, including the interrogation of their position as interviewers and authors, are the sinews that hold the backbone together. This book will be appreciated most by those who recognise the effort made by the authors to reflect the spirits of the women in this book, as well as include an introspective analysis of 'strategic universalism' and the ways in which women's chatter can negotiate and transform the boundaries of feminism, human rights and activism.

Since the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, there has been a clear articulation and acceptance that human rights are universal and indivisible. Yet the ongoing debate between the universal approach to human rights and the cultural relativist approach to human rights, which the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights was, in many ways, intended to resolve, continues to lurk in the corners, reappearing to surprise us at awkward moments. This has occurred most frequently in the realm where women's rights have been pitted against cultural rights.

The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is surprisingly clear about the debate, falling clearly on the side of the universal application of human rights. Article 5 of CEDAW states: "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures:(a) To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women;" and Article 2 of the same Convention requires, "State Parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women ...". Similarly, the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women solemnly proclaimed by the General Assembly in its resolution 48/104, also states clearly, in article 4, "States should condemn violence against women and should not invoke any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination".

However, Radhika Coomarswamy, in her 2002 report as Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, takes a more balanced approach, wanting to recognise the motivations behind why the tensions between the universal and cultural relativism approaches to human rights are played out in the everyday lives of millions of women throughout the globe. She argues that

*The situation is made more complex by the fact that women also identify with their culture and are offended by the arrogant gaze of outsiders who criticize their way of doing things. Since their sense of identity is integrally linked to the general attitude towards their community, their sense of dignity and self-respect often comes from being members of the larger community ... Cultural markers and cultural identity that allow a group to stand united against the oppression and discrimination of a more powerful ethnic or political majority often entail restrictions on the rights of women. **For this reason, the issue of cultural relativism requires a***

measure of sensitivity. Women's rights must be vindicated but women should win those rights in a manner that allows them to be full participants in a community of their choosing. Without respecting their right to community, any attempt to struggle for women's rights might create a backlash that will marginalize the women fighting for equal rights....Nevertheless, many of the practices enumerated in the next section are unconscionable and challenge the very concept of universal human rights. Many of them involve "severe pain and suffering" and may be considered "torture like" in their manifestation. Others such as property and marital rights are inherently unequal and blatantly challenge the international imperatives towards equality. In pushing for such reform, the issue of cultural identity and cultural respect should also be taken into consideration.³

On the basis of this argument, Coomaraswamy makes a plea, which resonates strongly with the approach taken in *Critical Chatter*, that

The lead for change and transformation must come from them if universal standards are to find resonance in these very diverse societies. It is important that the international community work closely with women from the religious and ethnic groups concerned, so that any change is seen to be acceptable to the vast majority of women who have to live with discriminatory and oppressive laws.⁴

The question that arises is how do we

...fight for women's rights without being complicit in the racism and prejudice that characterises Northern attitudes toward Southern countries of the majority-minority dynamics within particular societies?⁵

It is in largely in response to challenges such as these that the words of women activists from South East Asia, captured so effectively in *Critical Chatter*, take on more significance than just words, but become a space of action, grounded in women's realities.

In debating the benefits and challenges of engaging with feminisms and human rights in their activism, one of the critical tensions raised by the authors is the movement towards and away from universalism. The tensions within universalism are reflected by the term "strategic universalisms" which form the core of the conceptual framework for their arguments. Some women reflected strategic universalisms as the tension between the personalising of feminism and human rights, and at the same time the depersonalising. For example, Tang in Thailand, working with Anjaree a lesbian rights group, noted that the framework of human rights gave them the chance to speak about

³E/CN.4/2002/83, 31 January 2002

⁴ E/CN.4/2002/83, 31 January 2002

⁵ R. Coomaraswamy, "Identity within: Cultural Relativism, Minority Rights and the Empowerment of Women" *The George Washington International Law Review*: 2002; 34, 3; ABI/INFORM Global, p483.

lesbian rights from a depersonalised issue. Tang says, “We don’t have to talk about what happens in the bedroom, [we] can talk on the level of human rights...” On the other hand, for activists in the Philippines the challenge was to make human rights extremely personal, so that women in the community could relate to human rights on an every day level, demonstrating local responsiveness to a universal system.

Some of the benefits of a universal human rights framework identified by the women were having a bridge between South East Asia and women activists of other regions, which lessened the gap among different languages and cultures and the validation of one’s claims provided by universal recognition. At the same time, however, women questioned their engagement with universalisms such as feminism and human rights. They challenged the practices of universality, reflected in the daily practices of activism. How to position oneself as a feminist (or not) in their families and in public life is a continuum that is constantly being negotiated. The women questioned how non-homogenised voices of women are able to transform human rights. As the authors say, “failure to address intersectionality is a failure to achieve universality”.

In reflecting on this tension, the authors return repeatedly to the notion articulated by Slavoj Žižek, “of the universal as simultaneously impossible and necessary”. On this basis the authors conclude that where they perceive commonality in the deployment of universalistic practices they term it strategic universalism, as a way of understanding the multiple forms of engagement with discourses of feminism and human rights that are adopted by specific groups of women.

I would like to highlight two aspects of women’s activism that arise from the current political climate in South East Asia, have significant impact on women’s activism, and which underlie some of the women’s discussions, but are not discussed in detail in the book. First, let us look at the risks these women face in positioning themselves as human rights activists. For example, the women in Aceh in Indonesia, simply by positioning themselves as women’s rights activists, are extremely vulnerable to attack from both the military and the independence movements. In addition, there is the case of Irene Fernandes of Malaysia, who has been imprisoned for speaking out on women migrant workers rights. In 2003, there was an international consultation with Hina Jilani, UN Expert on Human Rights Defenders, during which women identified the differing roles women activists play, and the specific risks they face as human rights defenders in their private and public lives. The consultations highlighted the need for recognising the specific risks women human rights defenders face and making them more visible in order to provide greater protection.

The second aspect deals with the notion of community. One result of having a series of interview responses is that the individual communication between the interviewer and interviewee is highlighted. However, what has struck me about the group of women examined in this book is that they are such a strong community, with ties that bind them together both locally as well as across the different countries. They may meet regularly, monthly, annually or occasionally, but they do meet and the net of chattering is criss-crossed in so many ways. Having worked at the regional level, I think it was this strong sense of community that linked the women’s chatter, and enabled them to chatter not just within their own contexts, but also across each other’s contexts. This has an important implication for the strategic universalism the authors talk about, in the sense that women from South East Asia are able to negotiate their specificities within their own

communities, and with the support of women from other parts of South East Asia, develop common points of view for contesting the universalism.

Reducing the grandioseness of universalisms such as human rights to “chit chat” is an incredibly powerful tool of reclaiming. It establishes a validity and authority for women’s theory based on women’s experiences, and claims a tool for working on human rights. On the final page, the authors conclude by describing “critical chatter” as

the sound of women leaving the building, the disapprobation of the women with whom we spoke, it is also the clamour of everyday voices of women which challenge the UN human rights system....

As I read this ending to the book, I thought—turn up the volume! Let us hear more of this critical chatter everywhere and let us hear it louder!