

THE FUTURE OF ASIAN FEMINISMS

CONFRONTING FUNDAMENTALISMS,
CONFLICTS AND NEO-LIBERALISM



Edited by

Nursyahbani Katjasungkana
and Saskia E. Wieringa

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-3450-5, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3450-6

PREFACE

This anthology originates in the Second Conference of the Kartini Asia Network, held in Bali, November 2008. Already in the preparation of that conference we aimed to put together a coherent set of ideas and research findings, linked with the five themes of Kartini, namely women's studies, fundamentalisms, globalization and livelihood, conflict resolution and sexuality. In the course of organizing the conference and editing the book, many thanks are due. In the first place to the funders who made it possible for us to invite over 200 researchers and activists from 21 countries, mainly in Asia. These are The Ford Foundation, Hivos, the Dutch humanist aid organization, NOVIB, The Asia Foundation and the Dutch Embassy in Dhaka which funded the contribution of the Women's Studies Programme of Dhaka University. Special thanks are due to Barbara Klugman who has supported the Kartini Asia Network from the start, especially its sexuality theme. The Dhaka University team, particularly Najma Chowdhury, Nazmunessa Mahtab, Ayesha Banu and Amrita Chhachhi shared our vision and supported the organization in many ways. The Conference Organizing Team, consisting of Sepali Kottogoda, Gabrielle Jaschke, Maznah binti Mohammad, Kamla Bhasin, Chika Noya, Sita van Bemmelen and Saskia Wieringa painstakingly selected the papers and remained helpful throughout the long process of conceptualizing the conference. All other theme convenors stimulated their networks to attend the conference and helped finalizing the programme; these were Babette Resurrection, Kristi Poerwandari, Sunila Abeysekera, Abha Bhैया and Mahmuda Islam.

The Indonesian secretariat, with unending dedication and patience, carried out the manifold tasks that organizing a major conference such as this entails. Particular thanks go to Chika Noya who not only skilfully and cheerfully led the secretarial team, which was strengthened by Nurdiana Diah Bintarini, Soka Handinah, Irfie Melani Putri and Imelda Taurina; she also managed to set up the Youth Forum, with colleagues Niluka Gunawardena and Benu Verma. In Bali itself we were assisted by the women's organization Bali Sruti. Sita van Bemmelen and Leny Setyawati proved to be of invaluable assistance. Gunawan and Reza Katjasungkana filmed the whole conference.

We were honoured that the then Minister of Women's Empowerment, Meutia Hatta, graced the opening ceremony with her presence and presented the opening address on the gendered effects of globalization in Asia. Oka Ariani Agung from Udayana University in Denpasar delivered the impressive closing address.

During the conference the many energetic discussions created a special flow of energy, which fed into the editorial process of the chapters in this anthology. To strengthen the cohesion of the volume, papers were extensively rewritten in an intensive editorial process. We, the editors, thank all contributors for their patience and commitment in dealing with the exacting task of converting a conference paper into a chapter of a coherent book that deals with a topic not less grand than the future of Asian feminisms. Pritika Kalra painstakingly copy-edited the whole text and produced a genuine English text, which was no mean feat, considering all contributors are non-native English speakers. The book is dedicated to the millions of young and old women and men in Asia who are struggling to build a future characterized by social, gender and sexual justice.

As editors we thank each other for the dedication and the sheer pleasure of working on this book together.

Nursyahbani Katjasungkana
Saskia Wieringa

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CHAPTER ONE

FEMINIST REFLECTIONS ON NEO-LIBERALISM, FUNDAMENTALISM AND SURVIVAL

KAMLA BHASIN

The future of Asian feminism is as bright and strong as our determination. We feminists, both women and men, recognize close links between fundamentalism, conflict, neo-liberalism and the control over women's sexuality, which are the themes of the *Kartini Asia Network*, and we need to confront all of them. The world has enough resources and scientific knowledge to provide a decent life to all. The poverty and vulnerability imposed on more than half the world is manmade. Globalisation is today's buzzword, symbolized by the footloose executives and icons of the industrialized world. Yet the economically poor men and women are truly the global citizens. They give more to this earth than they take. They produce more than they consume. They do not waste or pollute like the most educated, scientific, developed 20 percent people belonging to the global north do. They are already practising the "gift economy," which has been suggested as an alternative. If there is still hope alive, it is because of these millions who refuse to accept the TINA (there is no alternative) syndrome. They believe that a better world is possible and struggle to create it. This is the spirit in which our foremothers acted. Feminists like Kartini, Rokeya Shakawat Hussain, Rosa Luxemburg, and many on whose brave shoulders we stand today.¹ There were other rebellious and cultured women who much predate these feminists of what is usually called 'the first wave' of feminism, such as Akka Mahadevi.²

¹ These are pioneering, early 20th century feminists. Kartini (1879-1904) was a Javanese princess. She became a national feminist icon mainly through her passionate letters. Rokeya Hussain (1880-1923) was a Bengali writer. She fought for women education. Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) was a German philosopher and politician.

² Akka Mahadevi was a 12th century poet and philosopher from Karnataka, India.

Feminists of today are trying to keep alive their radical and creative spark in the midst of storms of neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism, and neo-imperialism. Feminists are also fighting for social justice and equality as the following story illustrates:

The leader of an indigenous group was questioned about the three most important things in the world. She replied:

"I think the first most important thing in the world is the people. The second most important thing in the world is the people, and the third most important thing is also the people."

I agree with this wise woman. By "people" we refer to the 60%-70% of the world which is excluded and marginalized by the present paradigm of development. It is excluded economically, politically, and culturally. People and their lives are indivisible. Their sexuality is connected to their livelihoods; their livelihoods are connected to their agriculture, crafts, industry; and their agriculture and crafts are further connected to their culture. So let us try not to fragment people and their lives when we view them.

We could start by recognizing and saluting the millions of ordinary people, both women and men, whose extraordinary wisdom, hard work, and fearless actions are keeping this earth alive, offering a ray of hope. I mean the *dalits* (considered as a class of untouchables) in India, the indigenous people everywhere, and the working castes, classes, and races. We must remember the Zapatistas, the women of the Chipko movement, the Minamata and Bhopal activists, women and men working in Gonoshastho Kendro in Bangladesh, women from the US who raised the slogan "Not in my backyard"; "Not in my name". Let us remember the people's struggles in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific.³

³ Zapatistas are followers of Emiliano Zapata, an agrarian reformer during the early 20th century Mexican revolution. In 1994 in Chipas, Mexico, an armed revolutionary group was set up to oppose the free trade agreement with the US. They wanted democratisation and land reform. The Chipko movement started in the 1970s when women resisted deforestation of the Himalayan mountainous region in Uttarakhand, India. If they saw anyone cutting a tree, they would hug the tree so as to cover it with their body and hence protect it from felling. The Minamata scandal is a case of mercury poisoning in Japan, while the Bhopal disaster refers to a chemical explosion in 1984 in that Indian city. In both cases, many people died and were affected with serious illnesses. Gonoshasthaya Kendra (GK) started its activities in 1972 after war with Pakistan. With the assistance of 22 volunteers and doctors, health care services were provided to people, particularly women and children.

Feminism

Let me define feminism. From a personal view, feminism is a perspective, a discourse, a way of looking at the world. Feminism looks not just at the world of women and girls. It looks with a woman's eyes at all issues, because all issues are related to women and all women's issues are societal issues.

We do recognize that all women are not the same; hence we focus on the marginalized and excluded ones. We feminists are concerned not just about patriarchy. We also address hierarchies, such as those of class, caste, race, the north-south divide, majority versus minority, and so on. We must try to understand their interconnection. In addition, feminism is an activism, a constant process of devising strategies to transform the world we live in, to make it more sustainable, equitable, and just. Women's studies and feminist studies, for me, are essentially towards understanding the world and how to transform it. Theory and practice have to go hand in hand.

Feminists, in my view, also need to look at the world from the perspective of Mother Nature or ecology. We admit that human beings are children of nature and not her master. We also recognize that there is not, and cannot be, a monolithic feminism. This is why we speak in the plural—feminisms. Feminisms, I feel, should be like water. Water is the same everywhere but it takes the shape of the container it is in. Feminist principles are the same but the form and shape and priorities of feminist perspectives and struggles are contextual.

I believe that the clash of civilizations is not between Muslims and Christians. It is between profit and the people. The present greed- and profit-based economic system is the biggest hurdle to the well being of the majority of the people. It is the biggest hurdle to peace, to sustainability, to justice, to genuine democracy, and to anything of value. For millions it is the biggest killer. This economic system is the father of all problems. It is the father of all wars. It is the father of many fundamentalisms and terrorisms. In many ways it is also the father of patriarchy.

Already in 1884, Friedrich Engels linked private property to the emergence of class and patriarchy (Engels 1972).⁴ In my opinion, the

⁴ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State: In the light of the researches of Lewis H. Morgan* is a historical materialist treatise written by Friedrich Engels and published in 1884. It is partially based on notes by Karl Marx to Lewis H. Morgan on his book *Ancient Society*.

ugliest form of terrorism today is market terrorism while the worst forms of fundamentalism are neo-liberalism and neo-imperialism.

The standard of living of rich countries is responsible for the plunder of mother nature, of the so-called third world, of the working classes, castes and races, and of course, of women. It should be clear to all that excessive consumption and wasteful lifestyles of the global north are destructive and unsustainable. Once a journalist asked Mahatma Gandhi if he would want India to have the same standard of living as that of Great Britain.

He paused for a moment and said: "That tiny country had to exploit half the world to have its standard of living. How many worlds will India need to plunder?"

Vandana Shiva, a feminist ecologist, says an economy based on greed and profits alone is inevitably an economy of death for it creates a politics and culture of death. According to Shiva, the present global economy is a permanent war economy. The instruments of this war are coercive free trade treaties used to organize economies on the basis of trade wars; and technologies of production based on violence and control, such as toxics, genetic engineering and nano-technologies. She maintains that these are the real "weapons of mass destruction," which kill millions in peacetime by robbing them of food and water, thus poisoning the web of life. A few greedy corporations and countries turn the world into a supermarket in which even our water, our genes, our cells, our organs, our knowledge, our cultures, and our future are for sale (Shiva 2005).

In her view, the first principle that corporate globalization sacrifices is that of "real democracy". Governments get divorced from their people. Representative democracy is no longer representative or democratic under pressures of corporate globalization. The combination of corporate rule and electoral democracy inevitably shifts politics towards fascism, fundamentalism, and militarism.

The economics of exclusion produces a politics of exclusion. Economic failures are leading to large-scale insecurity not just amongst the poor but also amongst the middle classes. The increasing fascist tendencies, fundamentalism and repressive laws can be seen as the result of this economic system. Right wing fascist groups are rampant all over Europe. The neo-liberal economic policies of the European Union and the US have led to unacceptable levels of inequalities, economic hardships, insecurity, and social disruption elsewhere in the world. Large number of people have become development refugees as their communities and cultures have been destroyed. This has created immense discontent and anger, which can be contained only through brutal repression. The emergence of repressive

laws and regimes, and attacks on human rights and human rights' defenders can be attributed to these factors—they are all children of the mythical free market. Markets are free (for a few) but information is locked up, transparency is locked up, people and their basic freedoms are in chains.

The governments of G8 countries can instantly provide hundreds of billions of dollars, pounds, and euros to bail out rich banks and corporations. The US can spend 1,000 billion dollars on a single war, but these countries will not provide 18 billion dollars a year to save the lives of millions of children and to provide basic services to millions of people.

Because of the greed-based paradigm of development, there is war against life itself. Our environment is full of violence; daily life is full of violence. For millions of women, men and children, all times are war-times. There is no peace for them; there is no ease for them. Power, profit and patriarchy have vitiated everything and brought our universe to the brink of disaster. This, I believe, is at the core of the crises we face today.

The following story from Gautama Buddha's childhood sums up many things about our world today. Gautama was about 12 years old, playing in the garden, when he saw a beautiful bird fall from the sky. He rushed to the bird, picked it up and saw that the bird had been hit by an arrow. He ran home with the bird and started nursing it. Just then, one of his male cousins came rushing in, saying: "Gautama give me my bird, this is my bird." Gautama asked him why the bird was his. He replied: "It is mine because I hit it with an arrow and brought it down."

Gautama understood what his cousin said but he did not like his logic. He thought for a while and said:

"You wanted to kill this bird, which means you are its enemy. How can I give the bird to the enemy? I love this bird; I want it to live, so it is mine."

The agents of globalization are like Gautama's cousin. For immediate profit, they will "shoot" anything down. For profit, they will turn fertile lands into golf courses; they will over exploit seas, poison the land by over use of fertilizers, sell cigarettes, Pepsi and Coke, pornography, and weapons. While the peasants, farmers, fisherfolk, craftspeople, tribals, and indigenous people are like Gautama because they have a relationship of love with the nature. They have a caring and nurturing relationship with the nature because their lifeline is linked to her. The cousin to me represents masculine thinking which is anti-life. To me Gautama shows the only way forward. This is the path of compassion, love, caring, nurturing, the path based on feminine principles.

The future

What is the way forward under the present circumstances for Asian feminists?

First of all we must ensure that our personal lives and lifestyles are not destructive towards the environment and of interpersonal relationships. Our organizations should not become bureaucratic, undemocratic, or hierarchical. We should avoid genderization of our language and programs. By genderization I mean slowly giving up the use of words like patriarchy, feminism, structural violence, and exploitation. Our analysis, our writing, and language should not be diluted in order to please donors or people in power. It should remain sharp and crisp with a feminist sting; it should look at gender relations in the context of class, caste, race, North-South relations, disability, and other social and economic hierarchies, and unjust structures. We must ensure that we are not mainstreamed into streams which are filthy, polluting, anti-people, and anti-life. We go to the mainstream only to clean it; only to turn it around.

On our path we should be walking on the two legs of economics and culture. Many of us have given up talking about economics, of the material basis of patriarchy, political economy of violence against women and fundamentalisms. A balanced approach is necessary. We must also ensure that we walk on the two legs of theory and practice—understanding and transforming.

We should give our full attention to Mother Nature, our nurturer. We must remember the principles of being and of living; the principles of ecology, of interconnectedness, the principles of diversity, and harmony. She tells us in Pablo Neruda's words: "They can cut all the flowers but cannot stop spring from coming."⁵

We should also incorporate men in our thinking and practice. We have to challenge them to reflect. Since men and masculinity are also social constructs, men have to be encouraged and cajoled to change. I have been trying to do some of this. I conduct three- to four-day workshops with men, where I help them see how patriarchy and notions of hegemonic masculinity are de-humanizing them, brutalizing them, killing their gentleness, their beauty, and their femininity. Men and boys, especially gentle boys and men are also sexually abused and emotionally castrated in and by patriarchy. Like us they are exploited by hetero-patriarchal capitalism. I think the best way to humanize men is to involve them in bringing up children and in reproductive work. Involvement with creating

⁵ Pablo Neruda (1904-1973) was a Chilean poet, diplomat, and politician. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971. This is one of his most quoted sayings.

and nurturing life will help them give up the many deadly games they play.

Looking into our inner selves we must rediscover our inner strengths and energy, celebrated as the principle of Shakti, and reconnecting with what goddesses as Gaea, Isis, and Tara stand for.⁶ We must also move towards a strategy of building rainbow alliances to develop common visions because our numbers will be our strength. We have to realize that bigger goals require bigger networks. If I want to be big, I have to give up my small identity. A drop becomes an ocean only when it merges with the ocean, when she gives up her identity as a drop. We must build bridges between local and global actors, between individuals and the communities we live in, between rational and emotional motivations, between nature and culture and between economics and ethics.

Unjust globalization can be challenged only through our global connections and actions. So we too need to go global to build global trust and global love, and to dream of better worlds. We spread our principles of justice; human, women's and sexual rights; democracy and diversity; the integrity of our bodies, spirituality, and the wholeness of our minds.

We denounce the destruction of Mother Nature, of local communities, of human values such as compassion and sharing, and of harmony and diversity. We need to redefine legitimacy—the legitimacy of our claims, our views, our feminist perspectives and goals, our choices, and voices. Our values are honesty, integrity, autonomy, and the balance between Yin and Yang, Prakriti and Purush, Anima and Animus.⁷ We need to spread the word that feminism is not a commodity or industry. It involves love, caring, nurturing, belonging, both life and culture, both passion and compassion. We need younger feminists (women and men) into our movements, because they are our hope and future. We must nurture them, help them to become strong and gentle, rational and passionate.

In short, we want freedom from violence, silence, exploitation, monocultures, patriarchy, and all other hierarchies.

⁶ Shakti is in the Indian worldview the female principle and female power. Gaea is the ancient Greek goddess of the earth. The Egyptian goddess Isis was seen to give birth to heaven and earth. Tara, the goddess of peace and protection is the most popular Tibetan goddess.

⁷ Yin and Yang are the Chinese principles of complementary female and maleness. Prakriti is mother nature in Indian philosophy while Purush refers to the universal cosmological male principle. Anima and animus are similar terms mainly used in the analytical psychological writings of Carl Gustav Jung.

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CHAPTER TWO

MOVEMENT BUILDING AND FEMINISM IN ASIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES*

TAN BENG HUI

The challenges of movement building present some commonalities across Asia. Therefore, although I focus my views on feminism locally, within the context of Malaysia, I trust these reflections may be relevant to other Asian feminists as well. The processes of movement building are key to achieving success while transforming unequal relations in society. I borrow my definition of the women's movement from the book which Cecilia Ng, Maznah Mohamad and myself have forwarded on feminism and women's movement in Malaysia (Ng, Mohamad, and Tan 2006). This definition builds on the work of Wieringa (1995); Molyneux (1998); Batliwala (2003); and Griffen (2002). It recognizes that women's movements can take a diversity of forms and interests, so they are not homogenous. They can refer to a "spectrum of conscious and unconscious individual or collective acts...concerned with diminishing gender subordination" (Wieringa 1995). This is understood to intersect with other forms of oppression. We agree with Batliwala (2003) that movements are political processes; that they have political agendas; and that these agendas are about changing power relations.

In spite of the many achievements of women's movements in Asia, the work we are taking on as individuals or organizations seems to be increasing everyday. In fact, it is turning into a never-ending task. And yet, if we were truly successful in our task, that is, in making the world a better place, women in particular, we should be doing much less. Some would even argue that a true sign of success for women's movements would be

* I acknowledge the support of Susanna George, Melody Lu, Mujde Bilgutay, Ng Tze Yeng, and Cecilia Ng in making this text possible.