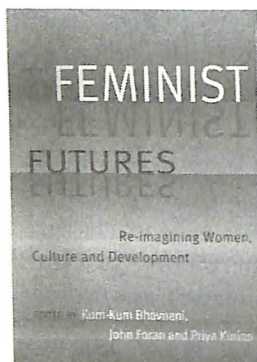


BOOK REVIEW



Global (mal)development?

A review of *Feminist Futures: Re-imagining Women, Culture and Development*.
 Edited by Kum-Kum Bhavnani, John Foran and Priya A. Kurian

Reviewed by Ciedelle G. Piol

How do women in the Third World make themselves heard through the din of a male-dominated world gone awry because of globalisation?

How should we view the struggles waged and being continually waged by Third World women in relation to development in its truest sense? Is it enough to gauge the situations of women in poor Southern countries using econometric and masculine ratings of markets, values in trade? Or should one use gender-egalitarian principle of democratizing aid opportunities, as is the fashion among international development institutions such as the World Bank?

What could be a more relevant discipline to analyse, reflect, study, assess and project futures for women in the Third World?

Feminist Futures: Re-imagining Women, Culture and Development is more than an exploration into the answers to these questions. Its advocacy of women, culture and development is a path-breaking guide that convincingly lays the groundwork for assessing and contributing to the writing of the stories being told by, for and of women in the Third World. It does so not by any means of an elaborate system or design, just by the honest and candid narratives of the women—straight from the heart, yet with airtight logic of the practical, pragmatic advocacy of culture as a tool for social change and genuine development.

In the introduction, the editors trace the progression of the instruments or principles that tackle the relationship between women and development, from Women in Development (WID) to Women and Development (WAD), and then back to Gender and Development (GAD).

All of these frameworks contributed to current literature on development and feminist studies. But although

WID, WAD and GAD evoked a new and vibrant interest in the field of women and development, in their omission of the significance of culture, they fail to grasp the full reality of women.

The three previous approaches, said the editors of the book, “fall short of a larger analysis of the ways in which capitalism, patriarchy and race/ethnicity shape or are shaped by women’s subordination and oppression.”

A new approach is necessary, and from such a realization evolved an emphasis on culture as the lived experiences of various actors in development, with a focus on women in poor countries.

Women, Culture and Development (WCD) differs from previous discourses by putting women in the Third World, and their lives, at centre stage, thereby making them more visible, in contrast to a mere acknowledgment of gender concerns in development studies and development projects. WCD’s notion of culture has nothing to do, however, with the structuralist, static or set-of-habits-and-traditions concept of culture. The editors, Bhavnani, Foran and Kurian, take note of Raymond Williams’s notion of culture as lived experience. Culture, according to the editors’ parenthetical interpretation of Williams, “insists on an agentic notion of human beings and is understood as a dynamic set of relationships through which inequalities are created and challenged, rather than as a singular property that resides within an individual, group or nation.”

The definition of development comes, meanwhile from Light Carruyo, one of the contributors: “Development is not something that is ‘done to’ the Third World.” She argues instead: “[T]here is an acknowledgement that Third World actors, elite and non-elite, male and female, organized and not organized, contribute to the construction of the discourse and practice of development.”

From these differentiations, and throughout the

inspiring stories and insights propounded by the contributors, *Feminist Futures* succeeds in making a fresh and clear assessment of the situations of women across the Third World.

And more.

I must agree with the editors that because of this volume, a renewed interest toward the three disciplines of feminist studies, Third World-centred development studies and cultural studies is emerging as a way forward out of the impasse in development studies. That is, even though the editors refuse to credit themselves for something new. "We are certainly not proposing something no one else has done before—we are merely trying to focus attention on and give a term and platform to an emerging approach."

Despite a supposed shift in development studies from an emphasis on political economy to studies on the environment and gender, *Feminist Futures* declares, "overly structural and economic approaches" to development predominate, as espoused by international aid agencies such as the World Bank.

"The Bank's stated commitment to women's participation in economic development is a fundamental part of its neoliberal strategy for improving economic productivity, involving the embodiment of Third World poor women as able workers and entrepreneurs while ignoring their other roles as wives, partners, mothers, citizens and activists—roles that form the backbone of all societies, but which are difficult to discern, let alone comprehend, within conventional economic analyses.

"As such, the World Bank has not been able to engage with the actual realities of people's lives, including gendered realities," the editors conclude—correctly.

What could happen when Third World women are placed at the centre of development and global processes? The editors posit that as with the diverse realities explicated in *Feminist Futures*, such an eventuality not only transforms projects of development, but also starts to make culture(s) visible. This is illustrated by, according to the editors, the Parreñas (2001) study of the migration of Filipinas as servants/labourers that demonstrates the centrality of community and family in understanding the textures of women's lives.

Feminist Futures is indeed a fresh whiff out of contemporary development literature, arising out of the directionless and wayward debacle of globalisation, out of the desperate hegemonic design whose male lust is leaving an entire planet in the throes of further ruination.

However, though the volume is steeped in the multiversity of Third World cultures, unexplored are topics

or stories about Third World women fighting class oppression, not only gender and global exploitation. These women who call themselves liberationists or revolutionaries in fact echo many of the gender, racial and socio-political issues of development feminists, albeit with different vocabularies.

A chapter on women's liberation/revolutionary movements as well as the contexts, conditions and future of their struggles, and the dynamisms between their ideological framework and the other development approaches would probably complete discourse on Third World women.

The book is divided into three parts and 11 chapters with each part, including the introduction, followed by thoughtful 'Vision' articles that enrich, enliven and diversify the many thoughts and nuances put forth. All in all, 25 articles in the book unravel a varied, multi-faceted discourse on women, culture and development, ranging from discussions on gender and sexuality (queering institutionalized heterosexuality in Latin America to a pedagogy on condoms among sex workers in Manila); environment, technology and science (Hollywood-inspired "alien" films, human-nature boundaries, India's development nationalism and the Vaastushastra; the Internet and the so-called digital divide); and the cultural politics in representing poor women in Taiwan, Iran and Africa.

The book begins and ends with inspiring stories, visions and messages for a future of hope, equality and love for women and people, for cultural and socio-political revolutions.

Beginning with Maria's Stories (a biographical interview of Maria Ofelia Navarette, Salvadoran guerilla, revolutionary leader and former National Assembly member), where the contributor imparts a simple but poignant message of faith in the organisation of women and societies, a brother- and sister-hood united in the vision of a just society "with love and solidarity between peoples," *Feminist Futures* winds up with John Foran's tribute to revolutions and revolutionaries whose loves and dreams animated the world's social, political and cultural history for the last preceding century—and may yet again do so, according to Foran, precisely because of globalisation.

The book is a must-read not just for development scholars, nor even only for activists but for every people-loving individual. ♪

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