

Review

Review of Kum-Kum Bhavnani, John Foran and Priya Kurian, eds. *Feminist Futures: Re-imagining Women, Culture and Development*. London and New York: Zed Books, 2003.

Nobantu Rasebotsa

The title of this book is strikingly appropriate. The attempt to envision "futures" and theorise about the contested spaces and meanings of the concepts of "women", "culture" and "development" are critical to the volume. This theorisation draws on many Western critical theories and practices, including rapidly evolving information and communication technologies, and on the diverse cultural traditions and knowledge systems of the Third World.

As the notes on the contributors indicates, the collection is shaped largely by experts whose contributions create combinations and interactions of various fields and disciplines: feminist studies, cultural studies, development studies, literary studies, theatre and film studies, information and technology studies, environmental studies, etc. Coverage of the range of topics and countries is exceptionally broad (Papua New Guinea, Iran, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Costa Rica, India, Nigeria, Zambia, Senegal and Taiwan are included), and this configuration itself reflects varying perspectives and multiple voices representing feminist works, different types of women's (and to a lesser extent men's) cultural experiences and activities, and numerous types of development.

The introduction acknowledges the growing emphasis on interdisciplinary feminist methodologies embracing race, ethnicity, class and sexuality, as well as long-established theoretical and policy approaches to "development processes and women's inequality", such as Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD) and Gender and Development (GAD). In the face of this legacy, the introduction calls for a "new vision of development", based on the understanding and application of a "Women, Culture and Development" (WCD) paradigm. The main thrust of the WCD approach is that the tendency to measure "development" in terms of economic growth and rate of industrialisation, while ignoring the social and cultural issues relevant to "development", demands thorough rethinking to ensure that "political economy is not privileged above culture, but rather that the two are seen as operating simultaneously and in synchrony" (15).

Structurally, the volume is complex. It is organised into sections divided into chapters, with each section being cushioned with layers of different texts further grouped into four main "visions". Throughout, formal and informal essays are combined, and scholarly writing is juxtaposed with either conversational notes or an autobiographical mode of writing.

Clearly, serious thinking and skill has gone into putting together these narratives and critical essays, so that the entire work accommodates the various topics and subject-matter without losing the essence of the volume's stated objective: namely, to use the WCD approach to delineate significant global issues and processes that impact on women's lives and development, while remaining sensitive to the diversity of experiences within the different regional, national and local contexts.

This mosaic of entries ranging over a broad spectrum of subjects demands a high degree of intellectual probing into a medley of cultural experiences. It also points to the difficulties encountered in compiling an interdisciplinary project. Although there is value in interspersing different types of texts, it is distracting, if not confusing, keeping track of the alternative visions, perspectives, and interpretations, which are categorised in ways that do not result in a sense of balance or wholeness. For example, immediately following the introductory

section of Chapter One, the essays in "Visions 1" set women up as survivors, mobilisers or change agents; yet the grounds for grouping these different types of texts together are not entirely convincing. Fortunately, the editors' introduction provides detailed explanation and justification regarding the grouping and positioning of these series of "visions". Despite this, the mix creates a structural tension that tends to permeate the entire volume.

Since the subdivisions of "vision essays" are a recurring feature for marking the end of each major part of the book, it is tempting to consider these major sections and "visions" by sticking to the categories and the chronological order in which they are presented. In other words, I have traced patterns in the text by moving from "Visions 1" through Part One to "Visions 2", then through Part Two to "Visions 3", and so forth. Proceeding in this linear way marks an attempt to follow the thematic logic of the structure.

Part One, titled "Sexuality and the Gendered Body", focuses on specific "lived experiences" of individuals, such as "injured", "harassed" or "tortured" bodies of a particular gender, race, sexuality or class within the context of their specific national cultural policies and programmes. The focus is on how women such as lesbians in Peru, revolutionaries in Cuba, self-sacrificing and sexually harassed women in India, or uninitiated girls in Nigeria and Zambia, negotiate their spaces and positions. The authors are clearly sensitive to the criticism often levelled at those who habitually marginalise women's subjectivities, and "questions about the place of increasingly assertive individual subjectivity and choice for the women and girls in the new globalising conditions of social change" (89) are raised.

Ideas highlighted in "Visions 2" are used as lenses through which issues of development are problematised. These lenses are meant to bring together different ideas expressed through different people; for example, the ordinary domestic worker's understanding of a dignified and autonomous life, the meaning of empowerment, the place of gay men as "gendered other" in Manila, and the effects of the imposition of "global knowledge practices" in condom use.

These visions provide broader scope for framing very varied subjects; they tap into a variety of experiences and knowledge bases that enable consideration of both the individual's ability to exercise choice and rights over his or her own body, and also life from the perspective of the particular person's lived experience. Overall, the visions interspersed throughout the volume highlight, among other things, the significance of pain and suffering, of voice and choice, of imagination and action, and of agency and autonomy. But I do believe that the fractured nature of these visions is a defect; it confuses the reader's sense of core themes in a collection that, because of its extremely wide range, needs to trace such themes very clearly.

Part Two, whose focus is largely on "Environment, Technology, Science", impresses me as the most challenging and interesting section of the volume. Perhaps this is because the authors' interdisciplinary approaches accommodate, rather than ignore, my own lack of familiarity with scientific issues. For instance, the analogy that eco-feminists draw between human exploitation of nature and dominant cultures' exploitation of "others" such as women, broadens and deepens the reader's appreciation of the extent to which the environment deserves our respect and protection. Part Two not only illustrates the destructive effects of technologically-centred development activities on nature and the environment, but also recognises the need for "development studies" to "re-envision" the impact of science and technology in interesting ways that bridge the boundaries between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

"Visions 3" strikes a familiar chord by demystifying technology for the benefit of the uninitiated. Although this section tends to state the obvious, for example, by illustrating how

new forms of information and communication technology bridge the boundaries between "small unknown groups of people" and the first world, it actually promotes effective and desirable development. In "Knitting a Net of Knowledge: Engineering Cybertechnology for Disempowered Communities", for example, the emphasis is on the importance of women's acquisition of technological skills in meaningful ways through which "local contexts" can serve to shape their own futures.

Part Three, titled "Cultural Politics of Representation", covers the representation of Taiwanese women in nativist literature, the mostaz'af or "disempowered" women in Iranian cinema and television, and Mariama Ba's own representation (as an artist and political representative) of women in Senegal. Here again the focus is on the role that local cultural productions, including the visual and the literary arts, play in the development of post-colonial countries. Read in the context of the WCD approach, the assertion that "women's representation of their everyday experience casts a different light on the role of women to development and structural resistance to neo-colonial exploitation" (210) urges the reader not only to see the relationship between the personal and the political, but also to explore the personal in terms of engaging with artistic and theoretical issues.

"Visions 4", as the logical conclusion to Part Three as well as to the entire book, suggests ways and means of creating an on-going process of development. One of the essays, titled "The Subjective Side of Development: Sources of Well-being, Resources for Struggle", reflects on the "potential of a Women, Culture and Development paradigm to address the subjective issues relevant to development" (257), and thereby challenges "a tendency in development research to ignore subjectivity" (256). The editors did well by concluding the book with the series of vision essays pointing to what the future could be if one considers the proliferation of the Internet and the effects of privatisation and globalisation.

Feminist Futures fulfils its promise of identifying what is often not defined as part of development (2-3). For example, it highlights important controversies regarding women's contribution to culture and development, and establishes directions for future critical approaches. It also offers alternative strategies for achieving new and expanded "development" through recognising the political implications and contested nature of terms such as "development" versus "dependent development", "empowerment" versus "emancipation", "out-of-the-way places" versus "Third World", and "well-being" versus "economic progress". This exploration contributes towards challenging hegemonic categories and meanings, and towards showing the extent to which issues of language and its usage are central to the disciplines of feminist studies, cultural studies and development studies.

Drawing on diverse disciplines, the book provides a great deal of fascinating and valuable information about the WCD paradigm, confirming certain better-known critical concerns, illuminating some, reconsidering and altering others, while offering further insights into interdisciplinary studies. The volume is also timely in that it enters the critical scene as cultural production among those with a history of cultural marginalisation is increasingly being addressed by progressive theoretical enquiries into new but previously silenced sources of development and knowledge production.

Nobantu Rasebotsa is senior lecturer in and former Head of the Department of English at the University of Botswana. Currently, she is the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the same university. She is one of the editors of the recently published Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region. She researches gender and cultural issues in African literature and her current research is on HIV-AIDS in African Literature. With Kylie Thomas and Meg

Samuelson, she is co-editing an anthology on creative writing on HIV/AIDS from Southern Africa.