

Book Review

Intimacy and Injury: In the Wake of #MeToo in India and South Africa

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This fresh-off-the-press volume, *Intimacy and Injury*, is not only an attempt to think with and through #MeToo in the geopolitical contexts of India and South Africa; it also serves as a vital and energetic exchange of ideas between feminist activism in these two global Southern spaces. It is also of course a dialogue between feminist activism and feminist scholarship. Perhaps even further it may be seen as part of a larger conversation about what scholarship is or should be, and questions about where activism begins and scholarship ends. The argument for activism as feminist knowledge is part of a larger critique of the neoliberal capitalist, colonial and patriarchal logic that still dominates in the university. The call for collaborative work across disciplines, modalities and other spaces of knowledge unrecognised by the academy is clearly a priority for decolonial, feminist and queer scholarship. The book models this admirably, it is threaded through with art, images and poetry, both in the chapters and in the reflective pieces that so poignantly draw the sections together. This is indeed a strength of this book which also presents us with a rich account of #MeToo and other feminist activism within these two global Southern contexts, offering an important contribution to the larger scholarship around #MeToo and extending the lens of the recent international handbook (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir, 2021) which, while providing a valuable and wide scan of geopolitical contexts, included a minority of global Southern voices.

This book starts off, appropriately, in a place of discomfort, acknowledging the widespread critiques of #MeToo as a global feminist movement. The introductory chapter reiterates the multi-layered contestations and debates as well as the divisions between feminists and polarisation of genders that have been ignited by the taking up or not taking up of #MeToo, particularly from the vantage point of global southern feminists. For example, the editors succinctly point out the ways in which the movement has been globally northern, white dominated and caution that

Simplistic over-emphasis on #MeToo as a transformational moment of global feminist solidarity threatens to violently obscure the work and histories of feminist organising in our parts of the world; this is a trend we want to redress, by considering the manifestations of #MeToo in these contexts as well as its silences, weaknesses and incapacity to encompass the scale of longstanding local feminist work. (Roy, Falkoff and Phadke, p. 3)

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As Shefer and Hussien (2021: 402) have noted in the South African context: ‘One key question has been about who gets to speak and whose voice matters. Locally articulated critiques about the way in which the movement is classed, raced, and reproduces a neoliberal individualism lacking intersectionality have mirrored some of the international arguments.’ Similarly, Desiree Lewis (2019, n. p.), in her presentation at the academic forum from which the book emerges, draws attention to the neoliberal capitalist and individualist underpinnings of the movement, noting that stories have mostly been told about middle class, professional, and high-profile women, with emphasis on ‘their absolute victimisation, powerlessness and vulnerability’. She argues that ‘rarely in recent years has the South African media highlighted the horrific violence affecting women who continue to be coded as “dispensable bodies” – farm workers, domestics or migrant women?’.

Jyotsna Siddharth (p. 102) in this volume echoes this point:

The discourse on ##MeToo in India changed a few things. It gave upper-caste, upper-class, cis women in India a moment to express their agency to bring public attention to their sexual offender. It created, for them, a space to publicly express their anger offering a moment of celebration for the contemporary feminist movement. This moment may be seen to have brought some respite to this subset of women who experienced sexual harassment and violation. One might argue that this moment was useful but partial.

The author also goes on to ask ‘how did we forget to #MeToo the Indian state?’ (Siddharth, p. 103). The same question may be directed at any state and speaks also to the limitations of testimonial resistances with respect to institutionalised and material change.

These critiques and others are also the focus of the second section of the book, which together with other chapters in the book, call out the silences and erasures that are embodied in or consequent of the #MeToo movement. These include: silences around sexual violence against men raised by Louise du Toit; the silencing of rural and other subaltern women and Disha Mullick further points to the material dangers, even loss of life, many women face when speaking out in particular contexts; and the lack of representation of the diversities of Dalit and Bahujan groups and Rupali Bansode also highlights the way the movement may have led to the particular victimisation of already subjugated and marginal men in these communities.

On the more positive side, throughout the book a wide range of activisms are show-cased and elaborated as are the politics and contestations around these. We hear about a multiplicity of localised activisms, with ‘online spaces as a particularly active location for feminist organising and resistance’, the deployment of diverse symbolic and material narratives and strategies, across times and places, including the ‘pre-histories’ and “‘new” feminist interventions’ as the editors call them or new kinds of feminist ‘noise’ as Chakravarti and Roy articulate this. We also encounter artistic and creative activist installations, as for example the poignant art and performances in both India and SA that Swati Arora shares to illustrate how a politics of refusal may work to challenge gender binaries, sexual violence as well as dominant stereotyped tropes of gender and violence. Together with Peace Kiguwa’s chapter and others in the book, the emphasis on the power of affect, women’s rage together with care, relationality, response-ability emerge as powerful thematics in the activisms and artistic responses documented here. Many of the chapters also illustrate the way in which the campaigns and movements reflected on speak back not only to sexual violence and its silencing, blaming and shaming of victims, but also in some cases correct the erasures of #MeToo as Ntokozo Yingwana and Nosipho Vidima argue:

The SWEAT #SayHerName campaign not only promotes the recognition of sex workers’ human rights (specifically the right to life and freedom from violence), but also serves as an important curative in the global feminist discourse on SGBV (in particular the #MeToo discussion), as it brings to the fore the all-too-often marginalised voices of female African sex workers. (p. 96)

In sum what this book shows so clearly and pays tribute to are the powerful and multiple agentic and activist voices and bodies of women, across intersecting injustices. Not that they have ever been absent, but often marginalised and misrepresented and easily written off in the public imaginary. Relatedly, what stands out also for me in the book is the emphasis on continuities rather than ruptures and how many of the chapters speak to pre-histories, post-histories and while notions of generation are explored, they are also destabilised. But I also found myself then wondering, why is #MeToo the marker? The editors conclude with the line: ‘It is to these new possibilities of feminist world-making that this volume, in the wake of #MeToo in India and South Africa, gestures’ (p. 18). Indeed, I think the book does more than gesture, it unravels and interrogates, it engages deeply with the complexities related to these new possibilities, particularly as they emerge in these two postcolonial contexts which share many things yet are different and can learn a lot from each other in scholarship as well as strategies of mobilisation and resistance. Yet it still begs the question – are these rich examples of movements to be studied in

the wake of #MeToo; why not #MeToo studied in the wake of these movements that were there before, during and after #MeToo?

While #MeToo is certainly deployed as a catalyst to open up conversation, for the most part it does not emerge as the major focus in most chapters. Rather what emerges far more are the local contexts of India and SA over different spaces and temporalities, the many and multi-layered activisms, often led by subaltern women and non-binary people, at the interface of class, raced, ethnic, caste inequalities, who refuse and resist epistemic and material violences against them.

Amanda Gouws in her chapter concludes incisively that 'Both #MeToo and the local SA #EndRapeCulture) caused a *crisis* of the present, where what has gone before could not be continued afterwards as "business as usual"' (p. 217, my emphasis). And her chapter indeed does a wonderful job of exploring the limitations of #MeToo and elaborating how these two movements contribute differently. I do however remain troubled by the centring of the #MeToo movement in thinking local activisms in the book (see Hussen, 2022; Hussen and Shefer, in press; Shefer and Hussen, 2020). In my own situatedness in South Africa as a feminist scholar, women's activism on the streets and online against sexual violence, decolonial feminist and queer voices, feminist killjoy protests and agencies, arguably appear far more powerfully in the South African imaginary, perhaps the global imaginary too, within this and other global Southern contexts of challenging the entangled histories and presents of Eurowestern colonial patriarchy.

On the other hand, notwithstanding continued concerns about the way in which #MeToo has been focused on or foregrounded, whether as accolade or critique, and what this intense optics might say about continued dominance of particular voices and probably something about which bodies matter too, it has shaken things up. It has brought debates and testimonials into homes and schools and marketplaces and opened up vibrant transnational dialogue, such as the dialogue across two global southern contexts that this book animates.

And in this respect, one of the further strengths of this book is articulated through a key locating sentence in the editorial which speaks to its efforts to *open up dialogue* rather than operate in the normative framework of the #MeToo movement itself. As the editors put it:

The kinds of questions being explored in this book can lead to a new set of interrogations, acting as an opening rather than offering straight forward answers and clear endings.

#MeToo has indeed stimulated fierce debates between feminists too and, not for the first time, illuminated 'precarious solidarities' as Shilpa Phadke puts it and also argues as a 'reassuring sign of a dynamic movement' (p. 175). And as Jaya Sharma points out 'the invitation is for us as feminists to focus our energies on transformation and justice, where messiness, changefulness and contradictions are not bad words but descriptions of life as it pulsates within and around us' (p. 305).

Shefer and Hussen (2020: 404-405) in turn argue that

Perhaps one of the most valuable opportunities that considering #MeToo ... opens up is the space to reflect on contemporary transnational feminisms, successes, failures and possibilities. We need to continue asking questions about the extent to which global efforts at solidarity remain troubled by geopolitical inequalities, material and discursive, and relationalities of patronage through privileging particular knowledges and particular bodies. We suggest that the challenge for a global movement would be to find ways of strategically mobilizing global, regional and local resistances to sexual violences and their intersecting possibilities, while resisting an erasure of differences in power and privilege at multiple levels.

There is a lot to be vigilant about as a feminist scholar-activist. As Louise du Toit (p. 152) in the volume cautions

Feminist activists have to weigh in on this war of interpretations, in particular by drawing attention back to all of the actual victims' lived experiences themselves. This is especially important in colonial and postcolonial contexts, where 'rape talk', thus the public ways in which rape is from time to time taken up as a matter of shared social concern, has mostly tended to serve racist colonial agendas.

In conclusion, reading this book, notwithstanding the many disturbing events documented here that highlight the continued excess of sexual violence, particularly subaltern, marginal and transgressive women and men, in the two geopolitical contexts focused on here, one still comes away surprisingly inspired and hopeful (critically hopeful). There are so many activisms, so many creative and affective and affecting engagements, movements, campaigns, installations documented or gestured to here – that resist, that say no, that call out, that disrupt, that transgress, and that make a difference towards everyday experiences and imaginaries of a world where violence against anyone, including other species, is unimaginable, surely, an impossibility.

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