

Review

Raja Ben Slama, Drucilla Cornell, Geneviève Fraisse, Li Xiao-Jiang, Seemanthini Niranjana, Linda Waldham (ed. Nadia Tazi), *Les Mots du monde/masculin-féminin. Pour un dialogue entre les cultures*. Paris: La Découverte, 2004.

This collection, entitled 'male-female', is part of a themed series whose aim is to initiate a 'dialogue between cultures' about a notion central to the human and social sciences, in the form of simultaneous publication in several languages.

Straight away we might wonder what the relevance is of placing the cultural areas selected side by side: Africa, India, Europe, USA, the Arab world, China. What are the authors who write for these diverse realities – realities that are problematic and presented as homogeneous – supposed to represent? Should they report on the definition and the issues raised by the question of male/female in those regions and present the debates going on there? Or are they producing new material that proposes from their own perspective, which is of necessity 'situated' (from Europe, the Arab world, Africa, China . . .), a certain vision of male/female that is peculiar to them? The project remains vague and the reader is often held up by these questions. The authors themselves are hesitant, which is demonstrated by the heterogeneous styles and approaches of the contributions. Far from being a problem of incomparability of 'cultural differences' or deafness between cultures on the subject of gender, the question is more one of editorial line or identity.

In this respect Linda Waldham's text, for Africa, seems very isolated from the other contributions, particularly with regard to the nature of the research presented – results from a piece of fieldwork – whereas the others are less empirical and consist rather of theoretical, historical and epistemological reflections on the notion of gender. Linda Waldham worked on Griquatown, a small country town in the north of Cape Province, South Africa. She shows how decisive the issue of Griqua origin and identity is for the organization of social relations between the sexes in the post-apartheid context, especially as regards exchange of women and the rituals around girls' entry into the women's social group or those to do with marriage ceremonies.

On the other hand the articles by Drucilla Cornell (USA) and Geneviève Fraisse (Europe) are concerned with the theoretical tools that have made it possible to analyse gender relations. Drucilla Cornell focuses largely on the concept of gender and its evolution in feminist studies and on gender in the US. As for Geneviève

Fraisse, she tackles the emergence of the concept in France by analysing from a philosophical angle the more general context of the history of the intellectual and political debate thrown up by 'sex difference'. Both these articles help us to understand the genealogy of the concept of gender and its roots in the English-speaking world: but does this mean it cannot be heuristic in other political and cultural contexts?

In her article Li Xiao-Jiang, who 'represents' China, stresses at length the difficulties raised by the translation of the English term 'gender' into Chinese, but also the category and semantic contortions that the signifiers of male/female already existing in Chinese are subjected to by the word's inclusion (*xingbie*, one of the expressions of *yin* and *yang*). So for the author, talking about 'gender' is a real trial not only because the word is hard to translate but because it does not designate, or only imperfectly, the reality of gender relations as they are socially and historically established in China. The author's first criticism regarding the concept of gender is levelled at a certain form of intellectual imperialism: importation and translation of technical terms or concepts to describe different realities. To say this is not unproblematic: it assumes that the author understands the word 'gender' as a descriptive category and that, since the category was developed to describe the reality of relations between men and women in the USA or Europe, it cannot describe what happens in China. According to Li Xiao-Jiang the difference is crystallized most particularly in the issue of relations with nature. Chinese culture has a relationship with nature that is not 'Cartesian', as it is for Americans or Europeans, but rather one where instead obedience to the natural order is integral to each individual: women are women, as nature bears witness. In the USA or Europe, contrary to eastern cosmogony, nature is continually being pushed back, physiological and biological features are erased, and being a woman is thought of as the pure product of a social order.

But in what respect are these considerations relevant to Chinese culture? A number of feminist thinkers around the world have defended a so-called 'naturalist' position in relation to gender. And obviously they were not all Chinese. So what is the meaning of the criticism formulated by Li Xiao-Jiang? As she herself says, for ideological and economic reasons the Communist Party in China employed a feminist rhetoric of no distinction between sexual characters, which was one of the instruments of women's oppression. The Party was also responsible for ecological disasters, and profoundly disturbed the natural environment. So the author uses the concept of 'gender' from a very critical standpoint: to a certain extent to defend the incomparability or natural complementarity of the sexes is to appeal to a certain natural order, one of the most symbolic expressions of a traditional ancestral Chinese cosmogony (*yin* and *yang*) as against the present social order, that is, the oppressive relations established and maintained by the dictatorship. Consequently the debate on gender in China raised issues that are eminently political (rich countries' intellectual imperialism, the dictatorship of the Chinese Communist Party) rather than questions of communicability between cultures.

Unlike her Chinese colleague, the Indian researcher Seemanthini Niranjana understands the concept of 'gender' as a relevant analytical tool and truly tests its theoretical user-friendliness. Starting from the materiality of bodies and the way the body functions as a 'medium' in social space rather than as a mere 'biological'

receptacle for gender identities, the author demonstrates how gender relations run through the body differently according to different societies, insofar as they are inscribed in a social fabric where, in the case of India for instance, regional, class and of course caste allegiances interact. According to the author gender relations are connected with what she calls a 'sexualization matrix', which exists in all cultures, but makes it possible to identify different bodily 'taxonomies' (attitudes, practices, expressions, movements) that literally give form to historically defined codes, identities and social norms. This idea allows the author to show that these bodily taxonomies are always variously experienced: so the very many practices, the action or 'agency' of 'embodied' subjects themselves prevent us from understanding gender relations as homogeneous relationships within one society or culture. In other words, although there is a 'sexualization matrix' that runs through the body in every culture, in return this produces modifications and a diversification in the way the process of sexualization comes about, functions, is reproduced and modified or fails.

In her article 'Plein genre' Raja Ben Slama constantly alerts us to the danger of isolating gender relations from other power relations or sedimenting gender and sexual identities, more so in societies where a 'theophallicentrism', in this instance an Islamic political and legal order, is tending to uphold the binary nature of gender relations (man/woman, male/female, strength/weakness, authority/submissiveness, autonomy/heteronomy, morality/debauchery, heterosexuality/homosexuality, nature/anti-nature, licit/illicit . . .) with the help of violence and banning. In a bright and clear-cut style Raja Ben Slama develops a very convincing argument. Tracing the history of sex, that is, sexual difference as it has been defined, represented and conceptualized in both the text of the Koran and ancient and medieval Arab medicine, the author shows how little by little a binary, bipolar gendered and sexual order was imposed that literally sacrificed all expressions of a sexually polymorphic eroticism, in particular all homosexual practices, but also all ambiguous bodies (hermaphrodites), hybrid bodies (effeminate men, sexually active or quite simply independent women), in short indeterminate bodies that blur the gender boundaries. 'The sexual morality of modern Arabs has gradually grown more negative with the adoption of disciplinary mechanisms and modes of subjection developed by the modern western state, and with the unleashing of waves of "Islamic consciousness"' (p. 15).

I would have liked the author to develop further this point about the weighty colonial legacy of the modern western state's modes of oppression. But she does give precise details of repressive legislation with regard to homosexuality, in Egypt for example, or affecting cases of intersex individuals. She notes that there are lesbian, gay, transsexual, bisexual, queer and feminist associations in Arab countries that are organizing and defending themselves for the freedom to take control of their own bodies, desires and sexuality. The action of 47 Saudi women on 6 November 1990, who demonstrated by driving their cars in defiance of the ban on women driving, which claims it is a freedom that encourages adultery and debauchery, is also emblematic.

Disparities between Arabic-speaking countries are deep and wide. But, rather than starting out from an underdetermined vague conception of the 'Arab World', the author defines precisely what creates the unity of that political and cultural area:

according to her it is the Islamic sources on which the law, and more precisely Shari'a law, the Muslim personal law, is based. Raja Ben Slama calls the legal system 'schizophrenic': while the principle of political and religious law is to a certain degree adaptation to social conditions here and now, as regards gender domination it is still completely congealed around a fantasy notion of the prophet's words. She gives the example of the veiled but active women living in wealthy cities in the Emirates, Saudi Arabia or Kuwait. Those women are active but their veil is a veritable 'gender marker': in this precise context it is much more a sign of gender than one with complex meanings. Women are clearly marked out, stigmatized, as 'women'. But the author shows that this attempt is contradictory: veiling or covering is always and at the same time a marker-pointer to the female body. If the political and moral authorities are trying to desexualize public space, defeminize it, de-eroticize the street scene, veiling in fact continually displays the female body, puts it on show. In this regard, we might ask ourselves – and ask the author – how far the veil has the same role as the harem in the sick imaginary of orientalists and colonizers: a site where women's bodies are at one and the same time cut off and hidden but ubiquitous, over-eroticized and insistent?

This collection may act as an initial introduction to gender theory and the range of problematic approaches to social relations between men and women. In the case of some of the texts it is also an opportunity to discover some extremely innovative work.

Elsa Dorlin

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell