stonecraft as "a forerunner to the Owenite-socialist feminists of the 1830s and '40s." This part of her argument did not change as she researched the book. What is new, she tells readers, is her finding that religion played a central part in Wollstonecraft's thought. Wollstonecraft held the belief that the revolutions of the 1770s and '90s were harbingers of that "glorious future," a future of uncompromising egalitarianism, foretold in scripture.

One of Wollstonecraft's central concerns was with sustaining her own independence. She had to make her own living, and she did so by writing. She frequently wrote to deadline. *The Collected Letters* provide a record of Wollstonecraft's personal commentary on the difficulties she faced: "In short," she wrote William Godwin in 1796, "I must reckon on doing some good, and getting the money I want, by my writings, or go to sleep forever." Taylor helps set Wollstonecraft's "reckon[ing]" on her writing in the context of her own time by writing at length about how Wollstonecraft's life and work fit in the context of British radicalism of her period. She was, Taylor writes, "first and foremost [a] hard-pressed self-employed worker," one in a community of radicals who made their living as authors: "rich ... in mind and energy, but as literary professional ... anything but fat of purse."

The two books complement one another. Wollstonecraft's letters return the reader to a "self dramatizing" (Todd) writer, and Taylor's book presents the author in the context of her time. In Wollstonecraft's letters much is left out. She is not interested, as Jane Austen and Fanny Burney were, in describing "muslin dresses and hats." Wollstonecraft did not like to cook, summarily dismissing the subject of dinner with a note to her husband, William Godwin, "I've ordered boiled mutton." There are relatively few references to the contents of the books she reviewed for a living. Instead Wollstonecraft's emphasis in letters was invariably on the drama of the self immersed in the adventure of "shift[ing] for [her] self." Her letters to Imlay remain painful to read. While in France during the revolutionary period, Imlay fathered Wollstonecraft's first child, Fanny, and then abandoned them both for foreign business interests and other women. The intensity of Wollstonecraft's letters to her errant lover is almost unnerving. She wrote to Imlay near the end of their relationship: "When I am sad I lament that all of my affections grow on me, till they become too strong for my peace." Her subsequent relationship was with the philosopher and reformer William Godwin, whom she married in March 1797, less than a year before her death. With Godwin, Todd writes that Wollstonecraft found "a literary relationship, whose intimacy was embodied in the communal bottle of ink." Writing was the central thing in Wollstonecraft's life. Her daily struggles make compelling reading. As Todd observes, when read together her letters to her extended family, to Imlay, and to Owen, "tell a story no biography can truly match."

"I have ... plans at heart which depend on my exertions" Wollstonecraft wrote to Godwin in 1797. In her "Epilogue" to *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, Barbara Taylor reviews the critical reception of Wollstonecraft by women writers into the present. She concludes that "icons are never allowed to rest easy." The turbulence of Wollstonecraft's life and the plans that she persisted in executing make her all the more vital in our own turbulent times.

CRITICAL CHATTER: WOMEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

Caroline Lambert, Sharon Pickering and Christine Alder.
Durham NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2003

REVIEWED BY ALISON G. AGGARWAL

> Words slipped and fell about when we did not have shared meanings built from shared histories—unable to grab the falling words.
> —Lambert, Pickering, Alder

> Women in their personal relations tend to speak of their obligations, as a result of which there is an erasure of identity. So to speak about our individual human rights, we first need to discover our identities.
> Eleanor, Philippines

This book is very much about understanding women's human rights in terms of women's words, women's shared meanings, and women's identities. I was fortunate to read this book at the 2004 World Social Forum in India, surrounded by many of the women who contributed to this publication. So as I read about the chatting, I was also part of the chatting—over tea and coffee, over dinner, while waiting for the toilet, while shopping. As Eleanor (all women quoted in the book are referred to only by their first names) says, "critical chatter" is "intimate sessions, candlelit, squatting on the floor, just being women."

This publication develops the notion that critical chatter between women activists is both a method and a theory for negotiating the strategic universalism of feminisms and

human rights and transforming the debates around them. It is a realistic look at the limitations of feminism and human rights as universal discourses, yet also identifies ways for reshaping the terrain of the debates to reaffirm feminism and human rights. The acts of talking and listening captured in the text give visibility to individual South East Asian women activists and the way they do their activism.

The "chattering" is portrayed as a source of solidarity and support among women activists. Critically, it is also a source for advancing the normative content and justiciability of human rights, at the local level, in communities, nationally, and internationally at the United Nations. In conveying this idea the authors centered South East Asian women's experiences within the text, with extensive use of long and detailed quotations, intermingled with a self-interrogation of the authors and their place within the text. The self-examination by the authors arises in the second chapter on methodology, and is woven into points throughout the book. But for me it was the voices of the women interviewed, through their direct quotations, that formed the backbone of this book. The analysis by Caroline Lambert, Sharon Pickering and Christine Alder, including the interrogation of their position as interviewers and authors, for me was the sinew that held the backbone together. This book will be appreciated most by those who recognize the effort made by the authors to reflect the spirits of the women, as well as to include the introspective analysis of "strategic universalism" and the ways in which women's chatter can negotiate and transform the boundaries of feminism, human rights, and activism.

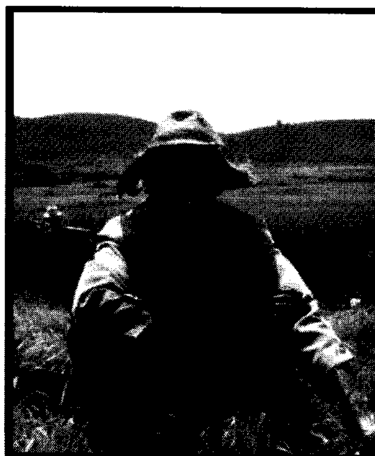
Radhika Coomarswamy, the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, tries to recognize the motivations behind the tensions between the universal and cultural relativist approaches to human rights. She argues that

> The situation is made more complex by the fact that women also identify with their culture and are offended by the arrogant gaze of outsiders who criticize their way of doing things... the issue of cultural relativism requires a measure of sensitivity. Women's rights must be vindicated but women should win those rights in a manner that allows them to be full participants in a community of their choosing.

This argument resonates strongly with the approach taken in *Critical Chatter*, where one of the critical tensions addressed is the movement towards and away from universalism, as reflected by the concept of "strategic universalisms" which forms the core framework of the book. Some women reflected on strategic universalisms as the tension between the personalizing and depersonalizing of feminism and human rights. For example, Tang in Thailand, working with Anjaree (a lesbian rights group), notes that the framework of human rights gave them the chance to speak about lesbian rights from a depersonalized perspective—she says, "we don't have to talk about what happens in the bedroom, can talk on the level of human rights..."—while for activists in the Philippines, the challenge was to make human rights extremely personal, so that women in the community could relate to human rights on an everyday level.

In reflecting on this tension, the authors return repeatedly to the notion, articulated by Slavoj Zizek, "of the universal as simultaneously impossible and necessary." On this basis, the authors conclude that where they perceived commonality in the deployment of universalistic practices, they termed it strategic universalism, as a way of understanding the multiple forms of engagement with discourses of feminism and human rights, adopted by a specific group of women.

Reducing the grandiosity of universalisms such as human rights to "chit chat" is an incredibly powerful tool for reclaiming—in terms of establishing a validity and authority for women's theory based on women's experiences and in terms of claiming a tool for working on human rights. On the final page, the authors conclude by describing "critical chatter" as "the sound of women leaving the building, the disapprobation of the women with whom we spoke, it is also the clamour of everyday voices of women which challenge the UN human rights system...." As I read this ending, I thought—turn up the volume! Let us hear more of this critical chatter everywhere and let us hear it louder!



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